### The Contract

**Summary**

After the War, a marriage law forces nineteen-year-old Hermione Granger to become engaged to Lucius Malfoy, and she turns to her former Potions Professor for help.
Chapter 1

Severus Snape was not a good man.

He had no illusions about that. But he did possess honor. At least, he liked to believe he did. And bedding a student was not something he had ever fantasized about. Ever.

Over the years, less frequently now but occasionally when he was a younger professor in his twenties, an older Slytherin girl would stay after class to ask him questions about the proper way to prepare lacewings while leaning a bit too far over his desk. Or he’d look up from his syllabus some afternoon to see a misguided Hufflepuff staring at him dreamily, one hand on her cheek. It didn’t take a skilled Legilimens to see through these foolish girls’ attempts to cast him as the lead character in their imbecilic teenage fantasies.

For the Slytherin girls, he was the ultimate catch; these were the girls who wanted to brag they’d been the first to get up close and personal with their mysterious Head of House, who, it was rumored, had been involved in the dark side of the First Wizarding War. They delighted in their attempts to seduce him, leaving a button unbuttoned here or folding their skirt up an extra inch there. And though the silly chits always failed, and in fact, the attempted seduction was never really permitted to get properly underway (Severus made quite sure of that), he was always pleased that they had at least tried to go after what they wanted.

Slytherin girls were always the first to lose their virginities and for the most part never regretted it, and Severus liked the idea of the young women of his House leaving Hogwarts knowing exactly what they wanted in bed. The idea of actually bedding any of the underage ninnies himself, though, was a notion he had always found completely absurd, revolting, and well beneath his dignity.

For the dreamy-eyed Hufflepuff twits, he knew they saw him as a sensitive, lonely soul in need of “fixing.” At this idea, Snape would always snort. No wizard ever needed a witch to “fix” him, and of course his own soul was beyond repair anyway. How horrified these sensitive little badgers would be if they had ever seen him in action at a Dark Revel, casting the Cruciatus upon begging Muggleborns over and over again until the poor sods went completely mad. No, he was no one’s Lord Byron.

Once there had even been a Ravenclaw girl who he was quite sure had developed an inappropriate crush on him. She had been sixteen at the time, and had excelled in Potions. He had been twenty-five and had been teaching for four years. Her passion for Potions and the intellectual stimulation it had given her had unfortunately transferred over to him. Once after class she had had so bold as to hug him. For that infraction, she had spent the next two months in detention, and he had personally been as cruel to her as possible until to his immense satisfaction she had dropped Potions entirely.

But Gryffindors? He had no experience with them. Though he was only thirty-eight and still relatively fit, he knew he looked a decade older and was not a particularly enchanting specimen. While he could understand the psychology of why a young Slytherin, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw could find him attractive, there was nothing about him that he believed would be appealing to a Gryffindor in any sense. And he had never even had so much as an inkling in the past twenty years of any Gryffindor finding him remotely desirable. No one since Lily, anyway. And she had never desired him in that way, he constantly reminded himself.

And yet. Two weeks ago a Gryffindor had stood at his desk, marriage contract in hand, begging him to marry her. And not just any Gryffindor.
Hermione Granger.
Chapter 2

The passing of the Marriage Law meant that all Muggleborns had to marry a Pureblood.

This was to ensure that there was peace following the war, that integration would continue quickly, and that the heinous racist ideology of Voldemort would never again gain popularity. Of course, not all Muggleborns would be immediately contracted.

Only Muggleborns over the age of eighteen were even eligible, and a draft system was instituted. Every six months one hundred names would be pulled, and each of those one hundred would be automatically betrothed to an unattached pureblood witch or wizard. The betrothed pair had two weeks to find other spouses more to their liking, or they would have to marry each other.

Hermione had been shocked that she had been selected in the very first draft.

In fact, she was the only girl at Hogwarts to have been selected. She had turned nineteen the month before, and so was certainly eligible, and actually a few months older than that due to her experiments with the time-turner, but since she was so busy focusing on her schoolwork and the post-War recovery efforts, it hadn’t even occurred to her that her name would come up.

The contract had arrived to her in the Great Hall, and the entire school had watched in shocked silence as the Ministry owl had brought it to… Hermione Granger, War Hero and Gryffindor Head Girl.

If anyone deserved some peace after the war, surely it was Hermione. Her boyfriend Ronald Weasley had been killed in the Final Battle protecting her, and his mausoleum stood on the Hogwarts grounds, not far from Hagrid’s cottage. The ceremony erecting it had been a beautiful tribute to him, and Harry and Hermione had both given moving speeches about the incredible friendship and bravery they had shared with the lionhearted redhead.

Hermione heard the students around her whispering and gossiping and she couldn’t take it anymore. She fled the Great Hall for her rooms.

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As she sat cross-legged on her canopy bed in the Head Girl’s bedroom in Gryffindor Tower, she could only stare at the scroll in her hands. She didn’t want to unfurl it. Didn’t want to read it. Didn’t want any of this to be real.

She and Ron should be enjoying the end of the war together. They should be finishing their final year at Hogwarts, snogging in broom closets, studying in the library. Even though she, Ron, and Harry were a year older than the other students now, it would have been wonderful for the three of them to share their final year at Hogwarts in peace and quiet.

She and Ron would have continued to deepen their relationship, and Hermione had fantasized about them moving in together and getting engaged after graduation. Perhaps they would have an apartment in London — Ron would start his Auror training and she would go to work at the Ministry or at St. Mungo’s. They would have a relatively short engagement, and she imagined their wedding day — two or three years later.

It would have been at an old kirk not far from Hogwarts. Everyone would have been there. Harry would have been Ron’s best man. Ginny would have been Hermione’s maid of honor. The wedding reception would have been on the grounds at Hogwarts. She and Ron would have danced the night
away under the Scottish stars, and perhaps a year or two later they would have started trying for a child. A little girl. Maybe she would have had Ron’s brilliant red hair?

Hermione shook her head, clearing the fantasy. *Don’t go there. Don’t go there again.* It was too painful. She didn’t want the familiar ache in her heart to surge up. She sighed. There was an entire lifetime she had planned for herself and Ron that now would never exist.

And now she would not even get the chance to mourn him properly, to be a “war widow,” as it were, because the bleeding Marriage Law had passed, and she was going to be one of its first victims.

She unfurled the scroll. Slowly. And there…on the contract in gleaming silver ink next to her name was the name of her betrothed:

*Lucius Abraxas Malfoy*

Ron’s murderer.
Chapter 3

No one else had borne direct witness to Ron’s death but Hermione.

In the midst of the battlefield chaos, only she had witnessed Lucius suddenly apperate behind him. Hermione had screamed to try to warn Ron, but she had been too far away. Ron had been running after a group of Death Eaters, trying to prevent them from circling back on Hermione. He’d been protecting her.

As Hermione had lifted her wand, Lucius had quickly disarmed her, before turning and casting the Avada Kedavra. It has all happened in less than thirty seconds. Ron had been struck by the terrible curse in the back and had flown several feet forward. He had never even seen his murderer’s face.

Hermione had run towards Ron’s body on the ground, shouting for help. She couldn’t have cared less what Lucius would do to her. But instead of lifting his wand a second time and casting the killing curse on her, he simply watched her run closer and closer. He had watched the agony across her face, smiled down at her as she collapsed to her knees and clutched Ron’s lifeless form to her chest. She had actually looked up at the sky and howled in grief. She thought that was something people only did in Muggle movies.

And before he had disapparated, Lucius had caught her eye. Through her tears, she had watched him standing above her as he greedily drunk in the sight of her grief. And he had smiled.

This was who the Ministry of Magic was forcing her to marry.

Hermione threw the scroll across the room and began pacing across the wooden floorboards of the Head Girl’s chamber. It was one injustice for her beloved’s murderer to get away with his war crimes scot-free (Lucius’s money and connections had seen to that), it was quite another to be forced to marry the sick son-of-a-bitch.

And why is he even eligible, anyway? And then Hermione remembered — Narcissa had divorced him after the war and taken Draco to live with her in Germany.

At least Lucius’s crimes in Voldemort’s Army had cost him that, Hermione had thought smugly.

Hermione was not going to marry Lucius-bloody-Malfoy.

That much was certain.

She had marched directly to Dumbledore’s office, interrupting a meeting with Snape. Neither had been particularly amused by the intrusion, but Dumbledore nonetheless offered her a lemon-drop. She had declined.

“You know what he did, Headmaster!” Hermione had sputtered.

“He is a former Death Easter, and a sadistic murderer. I can’t marry him. I won’t!”

“And how, pray-tell Miss Granger, do you plan to single-handedly circumvent the Laws of the Ministry?” Snape had sneered.

“I will find a way!” Hermione had spat back, holding her head high like the proud Gryffindor she was.
At this Snape had rolled his eyes and excused himself, leaving Hermione to Dumbledore. As soon as the door had closed, Hermione had slammed her palms on the desk.

“Please Headmaster, tell me there is a way to avoid this!”

Dumbledore had sighed. “I am afraid there is not, Hermione.”

He had sat in his large chair and reached out to hold her hand.

“You are the brightest witch of your age, and a War Hero. There is no female Muggleborn, no pureblood witch even, who did more for the side of good during the war. I believe that is the reason you were selected in this first draft, and why your intended is Lucius Malfoy.”

“Wha-what do you mean?” Hermione stammered. “I thought the drafts were random.”

“They are, or will be, I assume,” but the Ministry has a vested interest in these first matches succeeding in giving the Wizarding World the impression that past hurts have been healed and that the peace will be lasting. What better way to encapsulate that idea than having you marry Lord Malfoy? You represent two halves of this war, and if a Pureblood of Lucius Malfoy's rank and notoriety can be seen to have accepted a Muggleborn wife, then there will be a trickle-down effect among those of Pureblood ideology.”

“But he killed Ron!” shouted Hermione.

“I know, my dear, and it was a gross mishandling of justice that charges were not brought against him. He should be in Azkaban.”

“He should be in Hell!”

“Quite.”

Hermione had taken all this in. She wasn't going down without a fight. If Dumbledore couldn’t help her, then no one at Hogwarts could. There were only two ways to avoid marrying Lucius: she would have to find another Pureblood wizard to marry, or Lucius would have to find another Muggleborn witch to wed.

Hermione dismissed herself from Dumbledore’s office.

She had a plan. She grabbed her cloak from her room and headed out into the misty grounds of Hogwarts. She was a Gryffindor, and above all, she was not afraid of confrontation.

There was only one person who wanted this marriage even less than she did, and she would go speak with him directly.

At the apparition point, Hermione steeled herself. Was she really going to face this person? Hermione took a deep breath, and focused on her destination: Malfoy Manor.

Pop.
The next thing Hermione knew, she was standing at the front gates of Malfoy Manor.

She pushed the iron rails inwards and they began to open, magically sensing her presence. As she reached the front door it too opened automatically. She peered into the deserted entry hall and took a tentative step inside.

She took a big breath. You can do this. You are his equal.

“Hello? Mr. Malfoy…? It’s Hermione Granger. I have come to speak with you about the Marriage Law.”

Suddenly, there he was at the top of the stairs. Impeccably dressed in black and green. Fair hair shining and smooth. Eyes as cold and cruel as ever.

“Miss Granger, so nice to see you again,” he drawled, as if the were simply close friends who hadn’t seen one another for some time, rather than sworn enemies.

He descended the steps slowly, his eyes never leaving hers, and Hermione felt herself being pulled back to the last time she had seen him, the last time they had made eye contact. She shivered.

When he finally reached her, he took her hand and bent down low to gently kiss the back of it. Hermione was taken aback. This man who had called her “Mudblood” and believed her to be unclean was caressing her flesh like a lover? She frowned. It all felt exceptionally creepy and wrong, and she was already regretting her decision to come here.

Lucius swiftly turned on his heel and pointed towards the sitting room off the hall.

“Come.”

She followed him inside the luxurious room; it was lined with shelves holding books and expensive objets d’art. He might be a despicable bastard, but the Malfoys certainly had taste.

He motioned for her to sit across from him in a green velvet wingback chair. With a quick motion of his hand, a tea service appeared between them. He began to pour them each a cup as they sat.

“I have come to discuss how we may avoid settling our contract. We have two weeks to find you another single Muggleborn witch to wed, so I believe we should begin by drawing up a list of suitable names and then send owls out to schedule in-person interviews. I am happy to assist you in this process, but I suggest we get started quickly.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. If Hermione believed him capable of humor, she would guess he found her remarks amusing.

“I believe you are confused, my dear.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have no wish to find a different ‘Muggleborn witch’, as you put it, to take to wife.”

Hermione’s own eyebrows shot up. What on earth?

“I don’t understand. You hate me. You murdered Ron in front of me. You cannot want to marry me.
Just as I do not want to marry you.”

“That is all true, my dear. I do hate you. As I hate all filthy Mudbloods. But if I am going to be forced into marrying a Mudblood and polluting my pureblood heritage, I may as well be…”

Lucius clicked his tongue behind his teeth and leaned forward.

“…entertained in the process.”

“Entertained…?”

Hermione did not like where this was going. She set her teacup down. There was a glint of something dark and very dangerous in Lucius’s eyes as he watched her carefully. And though he sat across from her taking tea like a gentlemen, she knew suddenly that he had no intention, none whatsoever, of treating her like a lady.

“Your suffering on the battlefield was so…exquisite, Hermione. I must say I thought about it quite a lot afterwards. I had intended to kill you, but there was something about your pain. It gave me more pleasure than the idea of your corpse lying next to the ginger twit’s. I think we are going to have a lot of fun together.”

“Fun? How is that?”

Hermione most definitely did not want to know what his idea of fun was, but her incessant curiosity was getting the best of her.

“You hate me, and I will enjoy you hating me. I will make you suffer for my pleasure. And eventually…eventually…”

He leaned forward and whispered to her seductively, “…you will thank me for it.”

The hairs on the back of Hermione’s neck stood up. Suddenly, his meaning was very, very clear. He would hurt her. He would use their marriage as a way of trapping her inside Malfoy Manor. To torture her and do God-knows-what else. This was, what was the expression? War continued by other means.

The whole idea was completely sick. He was a psychopath. Hermione couldn’t stop herself from springing to her feet, completely enraged.

“I would never thank you for anything, you bloody disgusting Death-Eater!”

Lucius also rose. His facial expression became darker and harder as he stared down at her. Hermione’s heartbeat picked up. She had never realized how tall he was…how much larger than herself he was. She wanted to run, but she felt like a rabbit caught in a trap, her feet glued to the carpet.

He stared at her for a moment, then tilted his head, and with a quick motion threw his teacup at the wall above the fireplace. Hermione jumped as it shattered into a million tiny pieces. It was such an abruptly violent act, tossed off in such a casual manner, Hermione was caught completely by surprise.

Lucius began moving towards her, slowly. Hermione suddenly felt like she was being cornered, as if he would pounce on her if she made any sudden movements. She stepped backwards as he advanced.
“Oh, but you will thank me. And the process of breaking you will be so pleasurable for me. And when you do eventually give in, when you are finally my slave and I own you body and soul, it will be even more pleasurable for me to show you off to the world as my little broken Mudblood wife. It will be sweet to see you so lowered in the eyes of your former comrades.”

Hermione’s back bumped into a bookcase. There was no where else to go. Lucius stepped in even closer to her, his chest merely inches from hers. Hermione reached down quickly for her wand, but Lucius was faster. He *accio*-ed it and threw it across the room.

Hermione watched as it skittered across the brick stones by the fireplace. Hermione reached both her hands up and pushed them into his chest, trying to move herself away from him and towards the door.

“Get away from me!”

Lucius just smiled, cat-like, and leaned into her.

“I don’t know why you’re so nervous to be so close to me, my dear. In two weeks we will be much, much closer. In fact…” Lucius leaned into her right ear and whispered, “…we will be as close as a wizard and a witch can be.”

Hermione was instantly nauseous, her stomach revolted by him, and she was horrified by his cockiness and his complete lack of respect for her. She felt her abdominals contract at his loathsome proximity, and, fighting the nausea, she pressed even harder against his chest. He was solid and firm and though she pushed with all the muscles in her forearms and biceps, she couldn’t get him away. It was like trying to move a boulder.

Lucius merely chuckled into her ear, and then he leaned a few inches closer and Hermione felt hot breath on the right side of her neck.

“Tell me, did you let the Weasley pup *tumble* you before he died? Or will I get to break you in in *every* way?”

Lucius paused, then extended his tongue, and gave a long lick along Hermione’s neck. Hermione could not believe he was actually doing what he was doing. And if he would be so bold as to do this, the idea came to her that he could do anything. She was all alone with him in his house. There was no one to hear her scream. At this frightening thought, she squirmed and raised her left leg to kick him in the groin.

“Don’t! Get away from me. Don’t you *dare* touch me!”

Lucius reached down and grabbed her left knee, roughly curling it around his hip.

“Come now. You’re my unfinished business. I promised myself I would find a way to make you suffer, and the Ministry is giving me such a delightful opportunity.”

“Stop it! Let go!”

He stepped in even closer to her so their pelvises touched, his right hand pinning her squirming leg to his.

“So feisty. Oh yes, this *will* be a treat. When you fight me, it only makes it sweeter.”

At this, Lucius leaned in closer and closer, until Hermione saw his eyes flick down to her lips, and she realized what he intended to do. She tried to turn her face to the side, but he held her chin with a
rough jerk of his left hand, bent down, and kissed her.

His lips pushed down on hers roughly, sucking her bottom lip in between his own, then releasing. As she opened her lips to protest the assault, his tongue jammed its way into her mouth and he pushed his lips harder against hers again, moving them brutally, biting and sucking. She felt like he was almost chewing her up. His tongue delved deeply inside, stroking hers firmly.

Hermione was frozen. Her mind was racing and her body was sending a million signals all at once. She hadn’t had any physical contact with a member of the opposite sex since Ron’s death, and that was almost six months ago. To have a man’s warmth touching her now, to have lips moving across her lips, and a tongue stroking hers, even in this revolting manner felt…oddly good. It felt nice to be reminded she had a body, despite the fact that there was no tenderness to these touches.

But then she remembered who was kissing her, who was touching her, and how violent he was being, and she felt the bile rise. Lucius’s grip on her was so strong. It hurt.

He was grinding himself against her core now, and she was trapped against the bookshelves. She could feel something hard between her legs and it terrified her to know that he was aroused. He broke the kiss, only to bend down and start sucking on her neck. All Hermione could do was gasp for breath and beg. This wasn’t pleasurable. This was horrifying. He was like a vampire.

“Please, please don’t! Get off me! I-I don’t want this! Stop it! Get away from me!”

Lucius smiled into her neck.

“Oh, I think there is a part of you that does want this.”

“Why would I want to be touched by someone as utterly disgusting as you?!?”

The anger in her exclamation astonished both of them. Hermione had no idea she had such hatred bubbling just below the surface. But she did hate him. She felt it deep in her marrow. She was shaking with the intensity of it, and the way he was abusing her body now against her will had brought it bursting to the forefront.

She was angry about so many things — Ron’s death, the unfairness of the Marriage Law, and most of all her own powerlessness in front of this wizard.

Lucius dropped her left leg and stepped back from her. The amusement that had played across his face a minute ago completely dropped away as he narrowed his eyes at her. Hermione knew at once she was in very serious trouble.

Without any kind of verbal response, Lucius simply raised his right hand and slapped her hard across the face with the full force of his palm, sending her body careening to the floor.
Chapter 5

Hermione fell to the floor of Lucius Malfoy’s sitting room, her cheek stinging and her jaw aching.

Part of the slap had caught her ear so there was a faint ringing sound in her head.

She immediately turned to defend herself, throwing her arms up to block, but Lucius was too quick. He grabbed one of her forearms and hauled her up roughly until they were face-to-face again, throwing her back against the bookshelf once more.

“Let us make one thing very clear,” Lucius hissed.

“You are a filthy, disgusting, impure, diseased Mudblood. You are lucky that in two weeks’ time you will be able to call yourself ‘Lady Malfoy’, though you disgrace the name and title. As your husband, I can do whatever I want to your body. You will belong to me. You will be my property. And you will not refuse me!”

Lucius then backhanded her even more roughly than the previous slap, sending her down to the floor again. Hermione groaned, both sides of her face now aching from the blows. She was astonished at how powerful he was. With just his hands he could knock the wind out of her. She leaned over her forearms, head bent down, gasping for breathe. But still, her courage didn’t desert her.

“Is this why Narcissa left you?” she choked out, “Because you like to beat women?”

“You aren’t even a woman. You’re just a Mudblood girl who doesn’t know her station.”

“I’d rather be that than a cold-blooded murderer like you!”

Lucius reached down and grabbed Hermione by the hair, yanking her across the floor. “Owwww!” she screamed in pain. Lucius tossed her onto the carpet in the center of the room and circled her.

“You seem to want to be hurt. Keep talking, Miss Granger. Do you like pain? I am happy to fulfill all of your needs.”

Hermione stood carefully, slowly, as he circled her again. She opened her mouth to retort, but she feared another blow. She felt dizzy. Her head was still ringing. Her lips were sore from his brutal kiss, and her forearm ached from where he had grabbed her.

She wasn’t sure what to do next, so she closed her mouth to consider her next move. Lucius smiled.

“Already obeying me. How interesting.”

Suddenly Lucius stepped into her back and wrapped an arm around her waist. He brought his other hand up to her neck and wrapped his long fingers around her throat, stroking it softly. He leaned in closer, pulling her back even more tightly against his chest. She could feel his chest rising and falling rapidly against her. He whispered in her ear as he caressed the front of her throat.

“Do you know what this is, Mudblood? This is your hyoid bone. It’s such a tiny little thing, right here in your neck. All I would have to do is apply a little bit of pressure, and it would break. I’ve done it before. So delicate. It makes a delicious little noise when it snaps. And then I would have the pleasure of watching you suffocate. It’s so very tempting.”

He stroked her neck, gently. Pale fingers running along her own pale skin. The pads of his fingers
were surprisingly soft, almost feminine. Hermione’s legs began to shake involuntarily out of sheer terror.

She wanted to speak, to scream and shout at him, but the stone-cold fear in her bones had her frozen in place against Lucius’s warm frame.

“I know more about your body than you do, you see. But it doesn’t have to always be this way, Mudblood. If you do what I say and submit to me, I can be moved to generosity. If you show me obedience, I am willing to provide you with pleasure as well. On occasion.”

Lucius chuckled. Hermione felt his hand at her waist began to lift the fabric of her jumper and she suddenly felt his cool, soft fingers running across her stomach, moving gently back and forth over her skin.

Hermione didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry, but she couldn’t stop the tears from pricking in her eyes and slowly falling down her cheeks. Oh God, Oh dear God, why did I come here? I am going to be raped, she thought.

She swallowed against Lucius’s grip on her throat and found her voice. It came out strangled and hushed.

“Please, please don’t do this. Please don’t hurt me, Lucius. Please.”

The hand underneath her jumper had moved up to her bra, and Lucius paused, fingers absently flicking at the underwire beneath one of its cups. She knew he was deciding what to do next. She needed to offer him more, convince him to stop.

“I’ll marry you, Lucius! I will obey you. I promise. But please. Not like this. Please wait until we are man and wife. Please wait two weeks. Please. Not like this.”

Lucius gave the bottom part of her bra a squeeze and Hermione bit her lip.

“T’ll marry you, Lucius! I will obey you. I promise. But please. Not like this. Please wait until we are man and wife. Please wait two weeks. Please. Not like this.”

Lucius gave the bottom part of her bra a squeeze and Hermione bit her lip.

“Will you obey your lord and master, Hermione? Will you deny me nothing when we are wed?”

Hermione nodded emphatically. Anything, anything to get out of this house.

“Yes!”

“Yes…” Lucius prompted.

“Yes, Lucius.”

Lucius growled and squeezed her breast roughly. Hermione let out a squeak. It was painful how tightly he was gripping her. The underwire of her bra was digging into her soft flesh. What did he want? Then it came to her. He wanted her humiliation, her subjugation. Fine, then, she thought bitterly. Hermione took a deep breath. Another tear escaped from her right eye and rolled down her face. She stared straight ahead at a spot on the wall.

“Yes…Master.”

The hand on her breast suddenly released, then moved down and out from under her jumper. Lucius took his hand off her throat as well and spun her around. His blue eyes were gleaming in victory and, she noted with some degree of nausea, arousal.

“Very good, Hermione. I am glad you have understood the basic ground rules so quickly.”
He escorted her back to the hallway and across the entry foyer. Hermione’s legs hadn’t stopped shaking. Was he really just going to let her walk out of her after assaulting her? *Just make it outside. Just get out!*

As the front door magically opened, Lucius bent down again and kissed the back of her hand once more. How he could affect being a gentleman after the horror he had just put her through was beyond Hermione’s ken. He handed her wand back to her and watched as she stepped outside into the warm sunlight. She felt a small wave of relief course through her spine as she crossed the threshold.

“Miss Granger?” he called back.

She turned.

“It only took fifteen minutes before I had you calling me ‘Master.’”

He smiled smugly at her. That same sadistic snake-like smile he had given her when she had looked up at him, Ron’s corpse cradled in her arms.

The door between them closed.

Hermione turned and vomited into the bushes.
Hermione quickly wiped her mouth with the edge of her jumper, and turned to run.

She had to get outside Malfoy Manor so she could apparate and she didn’t trust Lucius not to change his mind and drag her back inside. His pleasure at her pain was absolutely terrifying. Hermione had heard of sociopaths and sadists, but she had never actually encountered one. It was like staring into the abyss — no empathy, no human warmth or connection. Just a terrifying, selfish emptiness.

She needed help. And there was only one person she could think of who knew Lucius Malfoy inside and out.

One person who could be her salvation from this nightmare.

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Severus Snape looked up in surprise from his potions corrections as Hermione Granger burst into his classroom without so much as giving a single knock and ran full-tilt up to his desk. She clutched her Marriage Law scroll in her right hand and tossed it down in front of him.

“You-you have to help me! Please, marry me, Professor! Marry me! I beg you!”

And before Snape could deduct the points for her intrusion, Hermione’s eyes rolled back and she sank to the floor in a dead faint, her world slowly going black.

Hermione woke exactly three minutes later on the hard ground where she had fallen. A small pillow had been placed under her head and a wet cloth on her forehead, no doubt both conjured by her Professor.

She smelled something pungent and citrus-y under her nose. Her eyes fluttered open and she saw Professor Snape dark form kneeling over her, holding a small blue vial to her nostrils.

“Miss Granger, I have a great deal of homework to correct, so I would appreciate it if you would see Madam Pomfrey about your injuries.”

Hermione sat up, slowly. Her body felt stiff and sore, but…injuries? Hermione stood and swiftly conjured a full-length mirror. She turned into it, and the reflection she saw in it caused her to gasp.

Her forearms had bruises where Lucius’s fingers had pressed into her, dark purple impressions where his fingertips had been, four of them, equally spaced apart. It disgusted her that he had marked her like this, even temporarily. A remembrance of how his disgusting hands had indented her white skin. It made her feel sick.

Her face was red and swollen and she had a black eye that was puffy with yellow-tinged rings underneath it. Her eyes were bloodshot and she still had dried tears on her cheeks. Her bottom lip had a small cut on it. She must have bitten it accidentally when she had been struck.

Severus watched her examine herself.

He had been alarmed when she had fainted and doubly-alarmed by her appearance, but a quick scan with his wand revealed no concussion or permanent damage, either internal or external. The bruises on her body and her black eye were relatively superficial and they made it clear she had been involved in some type of foolish scuffle.
Combined with her histrionic pleas before she had collapsed, he quickly deduced she had made the inane decision to visit her future husband-to-be and had fought with him.

Snape knew as well as anyone that her war record was impressive, but if she had assumed she could take on Lucius Malfoy in single combat, then her Gryffindor foolishness was even more deserving of criticism than he had previously thought. Hermione turned to Snape as she vanished the mirror.

“Please heal the bruises.”

Snape rolled his eyes. The sheer gall of this insolent child!

His potions stocks were not to be doled out to every student with a bump or a scrape, and only Miss Granger would fail to see how she was inconveniencing him when she clearly could have just as easily gone to the infirmary to be healed by Madam Pomfrey.

Yet there was something vulnerable in her large brown eyes looking pleadingly up at him, something he hadn’t seen in her before, and an overall expression of tension and neediness that was not at all typical of her. Whatever had happened with Malfoy, it had certainly deeply unnerved her.

Snape quickly strode over to a side table and picked up an orange-colored healing potion. He handed it to her and she drank it down. She looked down at her arms and watched as the flesh healed itself until the purple and black marks were fully gone. Only then did Hermione exhale in relief and turn back to him. Her face did indeed look much improved, too. The black eye and bruises were rapidly fading back into her usual healthy white and rosy coloring.

“Thank you, Professor.”

“Miss Granger, now that you are conscious, I ask that you not take up any more of my day. On your way.”

But instead of going, Hermione plunked herself down in front of his desk. She really was insufferable.

“Something awful happened…” she began.

“I’m well aware,” Snape replied. “You made the idiotic mistake of visiting your future husband at his place of residence. He hates intrusions even more than I do. What did you do? March in unannounced and start tossing off slicing hexes?”

Hermione felt herself grow angry. Why couldn’t he be just a little bit sympathetic? She had come in here with a black eye, after all. It should have been obvious that what had happened with Lucius Malfoy was more than an insignificant dust-up.

Hermione’s jaw tightened. How dare Snape be so dismissive of her injuries? She had looked horrific in that mirror. He could at least offer one word of sympathy.

“No, Sir,” she began sarcastically.

“I went there to offer to help him find a replacement Muggleborn wife so we could break the marriage contract, and he attacked me. In fact, he practically tried to rape me. But as you say, it was my own ‘idiotic mistake.’”

Hermione couldn’t stop herself from continuing. She was shaking again, this time in pure white-hot rage. Her hands had involuntarily curled into tight balls, and she glared at Snape’s obsidian eyes and pale, drawn features with no small amount of bitterness. He truly was devoid of all care and
Ron has been right to call him a greasy git. She tossed back her chestnut curls with a snort and let out a stream of sarcasm:

“In fact, Sir, I probably deserved to be assaulted. It was obviously my fault. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was probably asking for it. Perhaps my clothing was too tight? Thank you so much, Professor, for correcting me so...so assiduously. As always!”

With that she stood and strode towards the door, almost knocking her chair over in her flight.

She could feel the veins in her neck bulging and her fingernails were painfully digging into her palms. Her tears threatened to overwhelm her. She needed to get out of there. NOW. She needed to dive under the covers of her bed and never come out. Right now, she hated men. Especially these awful, sarcastic, former Death-Eaters. Bastards, the lot of them.

“Wait!” Snape called out commandingly.

Despite her anger, that deep, powerful voice made Hermione freeze. How was he able to do that? Without even casting a spell.

Snape debated what to do.

Was she being overly-dramatic? Exaggerating? Lucius was certainly capable of controlling behavior with women, and Lucius had enjoyed torturing Muggleborns at the Dark Revels as much as any of Voldemort's followers, but Lucius had always firmly detested actually touching them, and Severus could not picture Lucius willingly touching any ‘Mudblood.’

As far as Snape knew, Lucius had only ever touched a ‘Mudblood’ while wearing gloves, and even then only to toss them about in dungeons or in front of the Dark Lord. Sexually assaulting one seemed an absurd possibility for fastidious, disciplined Lucius.

Snape looked at Hermione’s back. She was trembling, looking at the floor, facing away from him. The girl did seem genuinely traumatized and her words had certainly been emphatic. There was something more to this.

“Miss Granger, please. Let us discuss.”

Hermione turned around slowly.

Tears were falling quietly down her face. She looked so lost, so sad. And though Severus knew he was a man of little empathy, he understood emotion well enough to know whether someone was using it to obfuscate, even without probing his or her mind.

Though he could barely believe it, Snape plainly saw from her weeping face and body language that Hermione was telling the truth. Lucius had actually assaulted her, with his prized pureblood hands.

The knowledge filled Severus with a sudden rush of possessive anger. Hermione was his student, under his protection, as all the Hogwarts’ students were.

That Lucius would attack one of his students so brazenly was unacceptable. It was one thing for the murderer to get away with killing Weasley on the battlefield, it was something else for him to openly commit more violent crimes outside the fog of war. Dumbledore would have to know about this, and Severus himself vowed to pay Lucius a visit.
But in the meantime, he needed to know the specifics.

“I’m not lying,” Hermione whispered as she slowly crossed the room and sat back down across from Snape’s desk. Her eyes were still on the floor, though her hands had unclenched.

“I know. I believe you,” Snape said quietly, taking his own seat and gazing thoughtfully at her with his inky black eyes.

Hermione looked up at him. His words had a powerful effect on her, almost as if they were part of a calming spell.

“I believe you,” he repeated.

She took a deep breath and exhaled, letting some of the tension go.

Snape may be a bastard, but she could see he was telling the truth. It felt so good to hear him say that. So good to be believed. That did happen. I’m not crazy. It all really and truly happened, she thought in amazement.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Miss Granger, you went to Malfoy Manor to discuss how to get out of your marriage contract with Lucius Malfoy and to offer assistance in finding him a replacement bride?”

“Yes.”

“And he…assaulted you?”

“Not at first. He invited me to sit and have tea. We started talking, but he got so angry so quickly. He…he cornered me.”

“He physically touched you? How?”

Snape seemed surprised this had occurred, but Hermione couldn’t understand why. Did Snape think she was so unattractive no man would even look at her in a sexual way? Was she too ugly to even assault?

My God, what a horrible thought, she considered. What is wrong with me that my brain went there?

Hermione was suddenly so embarrassed to be speaking about any of this with her Professor. She struggled to find a way to explain what had happened. Maybe if she tried to do it clinically.

Just state the facts, Hermione, she thought, you’re good at facts.

“He…he pushed himself against me and licked my neck. He kissed me on the mouth. And he…he put his hand under my jumper and grabbed my chest.”

Severus was floored. He couldn’t imagine Lucius kissing a Muggleborn, nevermind…. Hermione’s cheeks were pink with embarrassment.

Snape cleared his throat.

“I see. And did it…continue from there?”

Hermione took another deep breath, trying not to shake again at the memory. From her reaction, Snape surmised something had happened that she didn’t want to tell him. But he needed to hear all of
He gave a silent prayer Lucius had not inflicted too much more on the girl. Snape had witnessed the heinous crime of rape several times in his career as a Death-Eater and it had always haunted his dreams and tortured his mind for weeks afterwards, and that was merely as an observer.

“He…wanted to. But I…I convinced him not to keep going.”

*Thank Merlin for that*, Severus thought.

“How did you convince him?”

“I told him what he wanted to hear.”

“And what did he want to hear?”

Hermione paused.

She felt ashamed at her actions, thought she didn’t know precisely why. She would have said anything, given Lucius any words he wanted to hear to get out of his grasp and away from that dreadful house of horrors, and she did not believe there was anything wrong with that.

But she didn’t want to have to tell this part to Snape. Would he laugh at her? Use it against her at some point in the future? Call her weak? She hesitated, then decided to lay herself bare.

“I had to promise to obey him after our marriage and call him ‘Master.’ I think he wanted to humiliate me, Sir.”

“Indeed,” Snape nodded thoughtfully. It all made sense. Lucius didn’t desire the girl. He hadn’t suddenly developed a lust for Mudblood flesh, or reversed his prejudice. He wanted to humiliate her, and take out all of his anger and hatred upon her body.

“Please, Professor, I am begging you to marry me instead. Don’t let Lucius have me. I don’t know how I could marry him.”

Snape sighed.

“I will not marry you or anyone else, Miss Granger. I am sorry you have been promised to such a demon, but it is your responsibility to save yourself. There are plenty of single pureblooded wizards—”

“—oh, I know there are plenty of single pureblood wizards, but can you name one who could protect me from Lucius? How do you think he would take it if I broke our contract to marry George Weasley? Or Neville Longbottom? Do you think either of them could protect me from his rage?”

Snape tried to imagine Neville Longbottom valiantly trying to protect his bride Hermione Granger from Lucius Malfoy. It almost made him smile.

Hermione continued shaking her head.

“What I saw today…Lucius doesn’t just want to marry me, he wants to torture me, to destroy me. He called me his ‘unfinished business.’ I…I’ve never seen that kind of hatred from anyone before, except Bellatrix. And Lucius saw how much I hated him too. I think he…I think he got off on it.”

Snape nodded in agreement.
She wasn’t incorrect in her understanding of Lucius’s character and proclivities. Hermione closed her eyes, her voice dropping to a confessional whisper.

“I’m-I’m afraid, Professor. I’m afraid that no matter who I marry, or where I go to try to hide, he will find me. I need to ask you, since you have known him since you were both Hogwarts students, what do you think will happen to me if I break the contract with him?”

Snape didn’t want to frighten her.

Frightening his students was a tool he used to inspire rigor in classwork and attentiveness to the Hogwarts curfew. It was not, despite the widely-held belief amongst the student body, something he enjoyed. Unlike Lucius, he derived no pleasure from the pain of others. But he also saw no benefit in lying to the girl.

“Miss Granger…” he began, “If you marry Lucius, he will expect you to live in Malfoy Manor, and you will undoubtedly be under his control. If you break the contract and marry another, rest assured, Lucius will find you and your husband and he will be…most displeased.”

Hermione’s eyes grew wide. It was hard having her suspicions confirmed.

“What will he do when he finds us?”

“He will most certainly torture and kill the both of you.”

“But he would be sent to Azkaban for life!”

“I believe he would consider the pleasure he would obtain from your torture worth the repercussions. He has no one now. No purpose. No occupation. Only his hatred keeps him going. He would not kill you quickly. He might have a month or two with you before the Aurors found him, and at that point he would certainly kill you before you could be freed.”

Hermione looked into Snape’s black eyes and firmly set mouth.

She knew he had given her the brutal truth, which was what she had wanted. And she saw too that he was resolved not to marry her himself.

“I see. Lucius will not marry another Muggleborn, since it’s me he wants to torture.”

Hermione nervously dug a fingernail into her palm as she took this idea in. She furrowed her forehead in further consideration.

“And I couldn’t endanger George or Neville or anyone else by asking them to try to protect me, since their lives would be terribly threatened as well. And if you will not marry me, Sir,…then I believe I have no choice.”

Hermione stood up, slowly.

The decision was clear.

“I must marry Lucius Malfoy in two weeks.”
Dumbledore was not pleased.

Severus stood in his office, having just filled him in on the specific details of Hermione’s trip to Malfoy Manor as well as the conversation in the Potions classroom that followed.

Dumbledore shook his head, sadly.

“Poor girl. She is right. There is no one that can protect her if she breaks the contract. It’s noble and brave of her not to cause the needless death of another, but then that is the Hermione we know. I also know she feels deeply responsible for young Mr. Weasley’s death. For another young man to die trying to protect her from Malfoy would be too much guilt for her to bear, I suspect.”

“So, she must go to her fate quietly?” Snape sneered.

He hated this situation and hated that Dumbledore was not able to see a way out for Miss Granger that Snape himself had overlooked.

Dumbledore had always had a plan for every eventuality during the war, but with the Ministry’s growing ranks and consolidation of power afterwards, even Dumbledore it seemed was outmaneuvered.

More than hating what would happen to Hermione as Lucius’s wife, Snape hated that Lucius would get exactly what he wanted. Just as he always had. Though he had pretended to be Lucius’s ally and friend for the better part of two decades, Severus Snape had always considered Lucius Malfoy a pompous, spoiled sadist who wasn’t nearly as clever or powerful as he believed himself to be.

Snape had rejoiced when he had heard that Narcissa had finally abandoned Lucius, and Snape had gotten reports that his godson Draco was doing very well at Durmstrang, well-liked and succeeding academically, far away from the poisoning influence of his father.

“There is only one way to save her, and you know it, Severus.”

Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder, but Snape stepped away.

“I am done fighting. You cannot ask me to do this. I have earned the right to lay down my wand and rest.”

“You have, Severus, of course.” Dumbledore nodded. No one knew better than he the suffering that Severus Snape had endured as a double agent. His physical, emotional, and psychological anguish. It had gone on for years. A lesser wizard would have broken beyond repair, but somehow Severus had managed to stay strong enough to survive.

Though it was known he had been a spy and Snape was a bonafide War Hero now, Severus had rejected all attempts by Rita Skeeter to interview him about his work during the war. He requested that his name be left out of all interviews given by other Order members, and most respected his wishes.

Harry Potter had rather annoyingly gone on record in the Prophet as saying Snape was “one of the bravest wizards he had ever known” and then spent weeks trying to befriend him, but Snape had managed to keep the Potter boy at bay.
At any rate, he was pleased the boy now knew that he had always been on his side and that he had loved his mother Lily deeply, but he did not wish to take on the burden of a permanent friendship with Harry Potter now that the war was over and the danger passed. And if he could not manage a friendship with Potter, he certainly could not imagine enduring a life-long marital commitment to Miss Hermione Granger.

It wasn’t the girl herself, per se. Though still much too eager-to-please and headstrong, the war had tempered her foolishness and she had grown a good deal of wisdom from her experiences. The loss of Ron Weasley had dimmed her spirit, but her intelligence and academic prowess were as fierce as they had ever been, and she had more than earned her position as Head Girl of Gryffindor. She would graduate at the end of the term and no doubt have a bright professional career ahead of her.

Yet, the idea of marriage, and not only that but the idea of marrying a student, even a former student, was completely repugnant to him.

All Severus Snape wanted was peaceful, uncomplicated solitude for the rest of his days. His soul ached for it. Was it so much to ask?

And frankly, Gryffindors in general were simply intolerable, his least-favorite House. Their bravado and inability to “look before they leap” were simply anathema to the values of Slytherin he held dear. Slytherins were considered, thoughtful, and worked methodically for their long-term interests; those qualities had served Severus extraordinarily well during the war.

He understood that the girl was desperate, but she was sorely mistaken if she believed he would throw away his hard-earned freedom just to play babysitter and protector to a reckless Gryffindor wife for the next 50 years, or however long until Lucius expired. Or that they could ever be remotely compatible as lifelong companions.

Dumbledore shuffled back over to his desk.

“Perhaps you can help her…prepare for her marriage, at least?” he suggested.

“Prepare?” Severus wasn’t sure exactly what he was getting at, but he didn’t like what it implied.

“Lucius was your brother in blood. You took the Mark together. You have seen the worst of him and you know how he thinks. What pleases him, what angers him. Perhaps you can advise Hermione on how to be a…good wife to him.”

Snape frowned.

It was unlikely Lucius would ever be “pleased” with Hermione unless she was writhing on the floor in pain after a bout of Cruciatu or kissing the hem of his robes while covered in her own blood. But perhaps there were questions he could answer for her — some way of assisting her…integration into the Malfoy clan. He could offer her the one thing he had always offered her and all of his students — his knowledge.

“Very well, Albus. I shall attempt to advise her.”

“Thank you, Severus. She is lucky to have you as her Professor. You have always instructed her well.”
Chapter 8

Hermione sat on the steps of Ron’s memorial.

He was buried below the ground and directly above it a stunning marble slab had been overlaid. As part of the memorial, a beautiful gazebo-like structure with steps leading up to it on two sides had been constructed at one end. The First Years were especially fond of it. Hermione would smile when she saw them in groups of three or four sharing their lunches on its carved benches. Ron would have liked that.

She leaned back and laid her tense body on the cool marble. She hadn’t been here in over a week, the longest stretch since Ron’s funeral service six months ago. The first month after his passing she had come every day. She would talk to him for hours and cry. Sometimes she brought her schoolwork and read it aloud to him. She knew it was crazy, but it made her feel good to just “be” with him.

Harry didn’t try to dissuade her. She knew he came out here by himself often as well. She and Harry were united in their grief, their friendship stronger than ever. Besides Snape, Harry was the only other person she could think of who could protect her from Lucius.

But Harry and Ginny were already engaged and very much in love. The two of them spent almost every waking moment together now. Hermione hadn’t yet told Harry and Ginny about what had happened with Lucius, though she knew she would have to soon enough.

As Hermione glanced up at the setting sky, she considered how everything had changed in less than 24 hours. This morning she had discovered her betrothal, this afternoon she had been assaulted by her fiancé, and now she was trying to figure out how she was going to make a marriage to this would-be rapist functional.

But Hermione was practical if nothing else. And she would do whatever she could to minimize the hurt and suffering Lucius would cause her.

Perhaps if she played his games and pleased him, he would allow her to have a career? If she could work, get away from Malfoy Manor during the daytime — perhaps at the Ministry or St. Mungo’s, or even back at Hogwarts in some capacity — then maybe it would be possible for her to endure Lucius in the evenings. Surely he would allow her to eat and sleep. There were only those brief hours, between 6pm and when they would retire for bed, perhaps at 9pm or 10pm, that she wouldn’t be able to avoid him, and then of course the time they would spend with the lights out… She shuddered. She didn’t want to think of that. Then of course there would be extra time she’d have to share his company on the weekends, Saturdays and Sundays.

Hermione tried to do the math. How many hours a week of unavoidable-Malfoy was that? 30 hours? 40 hours? Would he really torture and rape her non-stop? How long until he tires of me? Hermione shivered again.

She remembered what he had said to her at his front door when he escorted her out, and it filled her with dread. It was true. She had called him “Master” after only fifteen minutes. It wouldn’t matter if he only had her for 10 hours a week. It would be enough to break her.

So engrossed in her worried thoughts, Hermione had barely noticed that a dark shadow had covered up the sunlight and was peering down at her. Hermione sat up.
“Miss Granger, I have discussed your situation with the Headmaster,” Snape began.

“Yes?” Hermione’s face lit up with hope. Perhaps Dumbledore had thought of a new idea or plan to prevent her marriage.

“He thought it best that I…”

_Here it comes_! Hermione thought, her brain leaping from idea to idea. _Of course Dumbledore wouldn’t just let Malfoy have me. He’ll make Snape marry me! Just as he almost made Snape kill him to fool the Dark Lord._

Snape continued, “…that I…instruct you in how to best handle Lucius.”

Hermione’s face fell. Snape couldn’t help but notice, but there was nothing to be done.

“I see.” Hermione nodded in grim acceptance. “In that case, I would be grateful for any insights you could provide, Sir.”

“Come to my office tomorrow evening after your classes. I will answer any questions then.”

Snape turned and left the girl.

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The next evening Hermione knocked on Professor Snape’s door, the small office just off the hall next to the Potions classroom. He opened it and she entered silently.

Snape noticed she was carrying several books; _A Pureblood Witch’s Guide to Proper Etiquette_ was one of them. With an arch of his brow he noticed another titled _The Marriage Bed: Pleasing Your Wizard._

Hermione noticed him looking at the titles under her arm. She felt herself flush a bit.

“I thought I might as well try to do a little…research.” She felt sheepish. Her instinct wasn’t wrong, but Snape suddenly realized he would have to correct her on certain…delicate topics, and that was absolutely not the kind of advice he had anticipated providing. In fact, the whole idea made him deeply uncomfortable.

“Miss Granger…”

“Please, call me Hermione. I’m nineteen years old, Professor. I’m not the bushy-haired child you knew so long ago. As long as we are discussing my upcoming marriage, I want to feel like we can be frank with one another, if that is amenable.”

“You may speak as freely as you wish, Miss Granger. However, it is inappropriate for me to refer to a student by his or her given name.”

“I am technically not your student anymore.”

It was true. Hermione had completed the Potions curriculum a year earlier and was no longer in Snape’s class.

Snape simply glared at her. She watched as his obsidian eyes bored into her soft brown ones.

_He seems a bit nervous_, Hermione noted with some relief. Thank God she wasn’t the only one. _But couldn’t he be at least a little accommodating? Would it really be so hard to call her “Hermione”?_
Snape pointed to the first book, and cleared his throat.

“Miss Granger, your etiquette is not going to matter to Lucius one way or another. He will not fly into a rage if you pick up the wrong fork at suppertime.”

“I see,” Hermione said. “I thought perhaps if I impressed him with my knowledge of Pureblood manners and rituals he would think I was making an effort to—”

“-Obey him?”

Hermione nodded. Snape sighed.

“One thing you have always failed to comprehend here at Hogwarts is that no Slytherin is ever going to be overawed with your rote-learning and fact regurgitation.”

“But isn’t tradition important to Purebloods?”

“Lucius has never really cared about tradition in that regard. He likes good food, fancy robes, expensive jewelry, because he enjoys attention and the way his displays of wealth create jealousy in others. Your book-learning about any of these topics, however, will not impress him, I regret to inform you.”

“Do you think I need to play dumb around him? Hide my intelligence?”

Snape wanted to roll his eyes. She really does think quite highly of herself! Yet, she wasn’t mistaken. She did possess a good brain, and it was a legitimate question.

“No. Narcissa never did. And if you play dumb he will sense it and that will infuriate him. You must not hide anything from him. He must believe you are an open book. Do not attempt occlumency with him.”

“Am I not going to be able to keep even my thoughts private?”

“He is not as skilled a Legilimens as myself, but he will almost certainly invade your mind if he believes you are hiding something and even if he believes you are not. My advice would be to be unfailingly honest with him.”

Hermione took out a scroll and quill. “Do you mind if I take notes?”

“If you must.”

Hermione jotted the point down, then paused, thoughtfully.

“What have his past relationships been like? Before Narcissa, I mean?”

“He had several female companions while at Hogwarts — a Ravenclaw named Isolde, a Slytherin named Reena, and… a… Hufflepuff named Melanie.”

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“A Hufflepuff?! Lucius Malfoy dated a Hufflepuff as a teenager?”

Snape regretted mentioning it, but she needed to know as much as possible about her intended.

“Yes, but the relationship was short lived.”
“What happened?”

“She died.”

Hermione sat with this for a moment, waiting for Snape to provide more details. She looked at him. His brow was furrowed as if remembering something painful. His eyes moved to the ceiling for a moment as he sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment, then continued.

“Lucius toyed with her affections. He promised her marriage, bedded her, then abandoned her. She fell pregnant and when he rejected her, she…hanged herself.”

“My God,” Hermione shuddered. It was more tragic than Moaning Myrtle.

“This was how he convinced Narcissa he was worthy of her. The girl, Melanie, had insulted Narcissa and she wanted revenge on her. She bet Lucius he couldn’t seduce her. He did, and then abandoned her to please Narcissa. They became engaged shortly thereafter.”

“I see. And were they…happy together?”

Snape hated the idea of speculating on the interpersonal affairs of others; he valued privacy above all and it felt lurid to share some of this, but he had known both Lucius and Narcissa a long time, and had witnessed many public and private interactions between them. He had also had to endure Lucius’s revolting boasts about his intimate life on more than one occasion.

“Lucius and Narcissa were, I believe, happy in the beginning. Lucius and Narcissa both have…dominating personalities, so I believe they…stimulated one another. However Narcissa changed after Draco was born. She feared Voldemort’s power over Lucius and begged him not to take the Mark. The Dark Lord brought out all the selfishness and cruelty in Lucius. Narcissa stayed loyal to him publicly, but it was widely known they stopped sharing a bed.”

“Did he have… other lovers?”

Hermione tried to keep the question straightforward, but this discussion of Lucius Malfoy’s more intimate life was starting to make her exceptionally nervous. She stared down at her quill, trying to pretend this was simply a private tutoring session. Just another lecture.

Snape coughed softly. He was also endeavoring to keep his tone as even as possible. He tried to rattle off the information the way he would a list of ingredients.

“He did. Lucius will not respect the vows he makes to you, Miss Granger. He will neither protect you, honor you, nor show you fidelity. But rest assured he will expect your complete fidelity.”

Hermione rose from her seat, agitated. Her face clouded over in anger. She began to pace in a manner Ginny would often teasingly describe as “Granger-style.”

“Unbelievable!” Hermione could not stop herself from exclaiming.

“He will expect to bed me whenever he likes, and then go out and bed any whore of his choosing, and then come back to me?”

Snape sat quietly and watched as the girl paced back and forth, working herself into a frenzy.

No doubt being raised in the Muggle-world had caused her to have unrealistic expectations about gender equality. It was annoying that she believed the laws and social mores of the Muggle-world should translate into the Wizarding one, and he saw no need to comment on her obviously rhetorical
Hermione turned back to Snape. How on Earth could he be so calm, so completely unconcerned about the unfairness of this insane situation? Was he truly and completely heartless? Did he see nothing wrong in the disparity she described? Surely as her teacher he could at least manage to be concerned about her physical well-being. She turned to face him.

“Professor, what about my health? He could have, or contract, all manner of sexually transmitted diseases! He could infect me with something horrible, or make me infertile!”

Snape almost smiled. *Such a naive Muggle-brain.*

“It is relatively easy to brew potions to ensure he does not…transmit anything to you. I will show you the recipes. But you must attempt to understand that in a Pureblood marriage men and women are not equal. This is not the Muggle world, Miss Granger, as well you know, and you would do well to leave foolish expectations behind. A witch’s fidelity is fully expected, while a Pureblood wizard may legally do as he pleases, and face no repercussions socially. It is simply how things are.”

Hermione was becoming red-faced with frustration.

“And is that what you believe? You’re a Pureblood wizard, after all.”

“I am simply explaining the law, the custom, and the tradition, Miss Granger. You are allowing your emotion to cloud your understanding.”

Snape shifted in his chair. This conversation was becoming more tedious by the minute. *Damn Dumbledore.* He did not feel like dealing with her temper-tantrum.

Hermione wheeled around. With a cry, she quickly snatched up her copy of *The Marriage Bed: Pleasing Your Wizard* and chucked it hard across the room. It landed with a “thud” on the opposite wall and fell open to the floor. Hermione let out a yell of frustration and stamped her foot, then put her hands to her forehead, running her fingers through her hair as she continued to pace.

Snape found himself surprised. Hermione’s anger was so much closer to the surface since the end of the War. Perhaps all of theirs was. It was to be expected. He continued to listen quietly as she continued her seemingly endless tirade.

“Here I am reading up on sex, thinking perhaps if I attempt to please Lucius in bed that he won’t rape me too often, and it doesn’t matter, because even if I’m dynamite in the sack he’d still cheat on me and treat me like dirt.”

As soon as she heard herself say, “dynamite in the sack” Hermione blushed. It was such a “Ronism,” she thought. Merlin, how she missed him! And what an embarrassing thing to say in front of Snape! She looked back at her Professor, but Snape’s facial expression hadn’t changed in the slightest. Inscrutable as always.

“If you are done railing against that which you cannot change, you may sit.”

Hermione did so.

“This kind of childish tantrum is exactly what Lucius will want from you, because then he can rise to the challenge of subduing you.”

“Then what should I do when I am angry or frustrated?”
"Express yourself verbally, but do so calmly. Don’t fight the emotion or obfuscate, but if you try to physically fight him…well, you are aware how much he enjoys that."

Hermione leaned back and considered this. Snape was right. And with her personality, she was going to find it very, very difficult to avoid taking a swing at Lucius Malfoy now and then.

“I’m not exactly the submissive type.” Hermione laughed bitterly.

“No, Miss Granger. You are not.” Snape nodded in uncomfortable agreement.

He’d never thought about what ‘type’ Miss Granger was, sexually or otherwise, beyond her penchant for flaunting her knowledge and her general smart-mouthed egotism, but as he stared into her fiery brown eyes it occurred to him she would only be happy in a marriage of equals. Perhaps that was what drew her to the Weasley boy.

Ronald had never seemed threatened by her superior intelligence, and his intense loyalty to her and, Snape had to admit, demonstrative bravery had clearly bolstered her confidence over the years.

_They would have been well-matched in marriage._ Snape surprised himself with the thought.

Lucius Malfoy, at least the man he was today, would be better paired with someone much less confrontational and demanding. Perhaps Luna Lovegood, or another more docile and less spacey creature. A marriage between Lucius and Hermione could only end very badly.

Hermione’s voice broke into Snape’s thoughts.

“Thank you, Sir. I know you’re right. I need to handle him carefully, especially with my… personality. I will take this into consideration."

“As for your fertility… I will provide you with a Contraceptive Charm. I believe it is very important that you avoid pregnancy. With Draco disinherited, Lucius has no heir, and he needs one to continue the Malfoy line. A Pureblood wizard cannot have a child born outside of wedlock as his heir, so despite your blood status, any child you have would inherit the Malfoy fortune. As long as Lucius is trying to get you with child, he will not injure your body irreparably. However, once you give birth, he may see no reason to keep you… undamaged.”

“After a few months, he will wonder why I’m not getting pregnant, won’t he?”

“One problem at a time. But for at least the first year of your marriage, I would suggest using contraception.”

“Trust me, I am not interested in bearing a Malfoy spawn. Nor am I ready yet to be a mother.”

Snape noticed her inclusion of ‘yet.’ Interesting that at nineteen years, the girl had already decided she wanted to be a mother someday. She was certainly bossy enough to run a household. Snape shifted in his seat. He was tired. The day had been long and he was getting no pleasure from being embroiled in the girl’s dilemma.

“It’s late, Miss Granger. I suggest you go back to your room.”

“But I have so many more questions about Lucius!”

“I am unsurprised.”

“May I come back after classes tomorrow?”
Hermione looked at him, those wide, pleading doe eyes imploring him to help her. Snape was usually immune to such feminine looks, but there was something there. He couldn’t shake how much her assault bothered him. The thought of Lucius kissing her, wrapping his arms around her as she struggled. Somewhere deep down, it offended his sense of right and wrong, and he was surprised to find he still had such a sense.

Snape nodded at her.

“Very well. I will see you here tomorrow night.”

Hermione stood and gathered up her books. She moved to the door and turned back. She was terrified to bring it up, but thought he deserved some advanced notice as to what her line of questioning would be.

“Tomorrow, I would like to ask your advice on…the wedding night. Surviving it with Lucius, I mean. I already know the violence he’s capable of, and I need to know how to protect myself from the worst of it. I need to understand his expectations for our…intimate relations.”

Snape froze.

It was all so unbelievable that he would be asked for advice on such a ridiculously personal matter. But he was tired and could not bring himself to respond negatively. He simply looked at her briefly and nodded again.

Hermione opened the door and slipped out.

As the door closed, Snape tilted his head back and groaned, raising two fingers to pinch the bridge of his nose.
Chapter 9

Hermione knocked promptly at his office door at the appointed time the following evening.

Snape opened it and Hermione entered. She carried a small stack of books and this time made no effort to hide them. She placed them on the desk and spun the titles towards him.

“What do you think?”

Snape tilted his head to read the three spines: *The Psychology of Sociopaths, BDSM for Beginners*, and *A Mediwitch’s Guide to Healing Sexual Trauma*.

He couldn’t say her choice of reading material was unnecessary, given the circumstances. She was clearly trying to arm herself as best she could, and Snape had to admire her resourcefulness. Some of these volumes he was quite sure did not come from the Hogwarts Library unless she had wormed her way into the Restricted Section for the nth time.

Hermione settled into her seat across from him and pulled out her scroll and quill from her bag.

“Professor, I don’t want you to sugarcoat anything. I know books aren’t the answer, but it’s all I know to do right now. I’ve been reading non-stop. And frankly, I’m terrified.”

Snape narrowed his dark eyes to stare across the desk at Hermione’s earnest face. He wanted to prepare her, but he was still simmering over the fact that this task had fallen to him. All day he had considered whether he should ask Dumbledore to refer Miss Granger to another teacher, and now he was regretting not having done it.

*Why did he always have to do the difficult, uncomfortable work no one else wanted to do? Why wasn’t Dumbledore doing this himself?*

At some point, a line had to be drawn. Severus Snape was a serious academic, a published researcher, and a renowned Master of Potions. War service aside, he deserved respect. *How many more years must I be the guard-dog for Harry Potter and his friends?* Voldemort had been vanquished. He should finally be permitted to have a quiet, scholastic life. He did not need complication or adventure.

But the brown eyes of Miss Hermione Granger would not be denied. No, Snape decided, he was not going to go down this lane with her. It was simply inappropriate.

“Miss Granger, I will tell you what I personally know of Lucius’s character and his… proclivities, but I have thought about your line of questioning and I believe when it comes to preparing yourself for your wedding night, Professor McGonagall would be best equipped to offer you counsel.”

“Why? Because she’s my Head of House or because she’s female?”

“Both.”

“I’m sorry, but Professor McGonagall is in her seventies!”

“I am aware of that.”

“You’re thirty-eight, Professor. I feel much more comfortable discussing this with someone closer to my age. Professor McGonagall hasn’t had a wedding night since…my goodness, has she ever been
Snape bristled. He was annoyed she knew his exact age. He liked to think of himself as a decade or two older. Inside, he felt like he was in his fifties, rather than a man approaching forty. How did she know his exact age?

What other facts about him had the girl been prying into? Had Dumbledore shared more personal information about his person with Potter, Hermione and their ilk? Snape scowled, his thin lips pressing firmly together in disapproval.

“It is profoundly unacceptable for students to speculate on the personal lives of their professors, Miss Granger! Continue down this path and you will be displeased by the number of points Gryffindor will lose.”

“Frankly, I don’t give a flying frig about points anymore, Sir, and please call me Hermione.”

Snape ignored her and continued.

“And furthermore, by that flawed logic I cannot advise you either as I have never had a so-called ‘wedding night.’”

“Perhaps not, but surely you have…”

Hermione suddenly went pink from embarrassment as Snape’s hooked nose twitched.

She had certainly not meant this conversation to go there! It had slipped out before she had meant it to — why couldn’t her tongue ever keep her brain’s counsel?

Snape felt his spine stiffen at the utter cheek of the girl! How dare she? Now she believed she was entitled to his full personal history as well?!

He hissed back at her, “This is exactly the kind of inappropriate speculation to which I was referring. Control your insolent tongue, girl.”

Snape stood, abruptly.

“Miss Granger, we are done. I have given you information on Lucius’s background as well as advised you to hide nothing from him and avoid direct physical disobedience. As you spend time with him, I am sure you will be able to apply knowledge from these books to better deal with the more demanding aspects of his personality. You are, after all, so good at books.”

Hermione stood as well but stepped closer to the desk. She felt the panic start to rise.

“No, please, Professor! Don’t kick me out. I’m not trying to be inappropriate, I just don’t understand what I can do to make Lucius hurt me less!”

“He will hurt you no matter what. As we have discussed, submit to him, don’t fight him, and it will mitigate his response. Good evening.”

Snape pointed to the door.

“Yes, but how?”

“Good evening, Miss Granger!”
black ones.

“But you are my mentor in this, and I am asking you for help!”

“I am not required to give you everything you ask for, Miss Granger! Stop acting like a spoiled little Gryffindor.”

Hermione was quaking now and Snape noted it wasn’t from fear, but from fury. Her face was red and her breath was coming fast and hard.

“Oh come on, Snape! Is that really all you’re going to give me? I certainly submitted to him last time, and I still got hurt, so I don’t think that’s going to cut it. Merlin, you of all people must know how important information is to winning a war. I need to know specifics. Do I wait and do what he says? Do I try to take initiative? Is there a position he prefers? Or do I just lay back and think of bloody old England!? I mean, my God, it’s my BODY!!! Don’t you understand?!! I’m bloody terrified!!”

Hermione didn’t realize she was screaming until she stopped, panting and sucking in oxygen. The echoes of her voice bounced around the small room.

(Luckily Snape had cast a *muffliato* around his office door, otherwise the student prefects completing their rounds would probably have been alerted.)

Snape folded his arms across his elbows and leaned back into his chair, his pale face analyzing her. He was surprised at her vigor. She was clearly still traumatized by what had happened to her at Malfoy Manor. The girl needed counseling, and he would suggest Dumbledore assign her several mandatory sessions at St. Mungo’s in the next few days.

Between this and the book-throwing of the previous evening, Hermione Granger’s temper was certainly on a much shorter fuse. She had been a logical child, never prone to violence or emotional outbursts unless her feelings were hurt. This was not a side of the girl he was familiar with, and as much as he wanted her out of his office and out of his life, no one besides himself and Dumbledore knew of her situation. She had ten days before she would become Mrs. Lucius Malfoy.

Severus sighed. He could clearly predict how this would go.

In ten days Lucius would marry her in a rushed ceremony at Hogwarts, and take her back with him to Malfoy Manor. He would rape her, probably more than once that evening before tiring. The next day he would likely offer her some scrap of kindness, lulling her into a false sense of security, before raping her again. And so it would go.

Eventually, Lucius would get bored with her and begin to invent new ways to inflict pain and suffering on her person, probably involving visits to the Dungeons beneath the Manor. How far Lucius would go with his physical and mental abuse, Severus could not say, and certainly did not want to think about it.

No, Severus decided reluctantly, he would not turn her away. He had nothing specific to offer her and he knew she could not avoid her fate. But if she had questions, he would answer them. He could do that for her, at least, no matter how inappropriate the questions were, or how uncomfortable they made him. He would not completely abandon her.

“Sit,” he commanded. Hermione did so.

“I…I apologize,” she stammered, shocked by her own loss of control. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”
“You have been traumatized.”

Hermione nodded, grateful at his understanding. Snape sighed in reluctance.

“I have no more advice for you, but if you have specific questions, I will answer them.”

Hermione had a million questions (as ever), but she knew that Professor Snape did not often grant a student an open line of questioning. Oddly, she felt deeply privileged he was offering her this. She took a deep breath and began.

“When we marry, will there be a ceremony?”

“No. Lucius won’t care. He will simply come and collect you, and you will likely have a simple ceremony here. The marriage contract will be automatically enacted upon a blood binding and the repetition of the vows by both parties.”

“A blood binding? What is that?”

“Your blood must be mixed as you recite a magical text.”

“So, no reception either? No witnesses even?”

“I think not. This will hardly be a social event, Miss Granger.”

“Do you think he will expect me to live at Malfoy Manor? Leave Hogwarts?”

“Almost certainly.”

“So I won’t be able to finish the term?”

“You can suggest adding that to the marriage contract, but you would have to make a concession in return.”

“What kind of concession?”

Snape thought about what Lucius would want from her, what would speak to the flaxen-haired wizard’s ego.

“I would suggest you offer to take his last name.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in horror.

“Become Hermione Malfoy?” she spat. “I’d rather die.”

“It will appeal to him, his sense of entitlement and ownership, and he will probably agree to let you graduate and sit your exams in exchange. Offer it. That type of thing matters to the older Pureblood families. It’s almost unheard of for a Pureblood wife to legally retain her maiden name.”

Hermione sighed. “Alright. Will I be able to take my things? My possessions?”

“Books and clothes, yes. Your familiar, no.”

“Crookshanks?” she cried, “But he’s mine.”

“Consider yourself lucky you can keep your books.”

Hermione’s thoughts turned again to the wedding night in ten days. She needed to walk him through
her thoughts on bedding Lucius Malfoy. Snape seemed more open now. He was answering her questions honestly with nary a sneer. Perhaps she could head down this road…

“I don’t mean to be indelicate, but will Lucius and I share a room?”

“Lucius and Narcissa had separate bedrooms with an adjoining sitting room. I am sure he will install you in her old suite.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this. The idea of sleeping in Narcissa Malfoy’s old bed was deeply disturbing. She wondered what the woman would think when she learned who her ex-husband had married. Narcissa may not have been as evil as Lucius, but she still turned her nose up at Muggleborns.

It hadn’t occurred to her before this moment, but Hermione found herself annoyed that she would be the second “Mrs. Lucius Malfoy.” She had always assumed that if she married that she would be her husband’s first (and only) wife. Coming in second-place was never something her ego could stand. Not academically, and certainly not in a relationship.

Her thoughts turned again to Lucius and this room of Narcissa’s where she would have to meet him ten evenings from now… Her hands smoothed the front of her skirt.

“And the first night, should I… wait for him in my bedroom?”

Snape knew where she was going with this and he did not like it, but he had promised after all to answer her interrogatories. He shifted a few inches backwards in his seat.

“It is what…he will expect.”

“I know the marriage must be consummated, but how should I act when he enters the room? How should I try to…manage him?”

Snape considered this for a moment. He had never really taken the time to think about Lucius’s deeper motivations, but as his thoughts drifted to what he knew of the man, he found him to be an easy read.

“He will expect and probably prefer you to be terrified, so I would suggest you be as plain-spoken and calm as possible. Just as you are now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said just now, ‘I know the marriage must be consummated.’ Simple. To the point. Say that to him. It will throw him off. He would like to see you crying and huddled in a corner, begging him not to take you. If he finds you calmly sitting on your bed, acquiescing, it may stroke his ego. He may think you are already giving in to your role.”

“I see.” Hermione wrote a few salient points down on her scroll and then looked back up.

“When he…” She cleared her throat. Merlin, this was hard! “When he… gets into bed with me, should I… feign interest?”

“No. He will know immediately. Lucius has bedded many women, as I mentioned. He knows you hate him. Don’t pretend you don’t. If he asks you what you are thinking, tell the truth.”

“I’ll probably be thinking, ‘I hope you don’t last long.’”
Hermione cracked a small smile hoping to relieve some of the awkwardness between them. Snape did not look amused. Hermione’s face fell. She leaned in.

“Oh no, he doesn’t have some sort of weird reputation, does he? Like, he can last for hours or what-not?”

Snape rolled his eyes.

“No, Miss Granger, he does not have any specific reputation in regards to his stamina.”

“Well, that’s a relief!”

Snape was tired. He was getting a headache from the Know-It-All’s incessant questions, and he wanted more than anything a tumbler of firewhisky and his soft bed. Hermione Granger’s peskiness was beginning to grate, and he was annoyed at having to offer any kind of “sex-education,” even to a thoughtful nineteen-year-old in a difficult circumstance.

“It is getting late.”

“Please, just one more question, Sir!”

“Go ahead.”

Hermione had been thinking of this question all day. She was absolutely mortified to be asking it of her male Professor, and she knew Snape would be less than comfortable, but he was the only person she could ask who was extremely skilled at wandless magic, and so far he had been very helpful. She would chance it.

“Will you teach me a lubrication charm that I can do wandlessly?”

If Snape had not been such a good spy, he would not have been able to mask his internal reaction to such a ridiculous question from Hermione Granger. She was asking him to help her physically prepare her genitals for sex with Lucius Malfoy. It was not to be believed. He was both furious and mortified. But on the outside, he did not so much as twitch. His face was as placid as a lake.

“Yes,” he agreed, “I will owl you the relevant incantation and pronunciation.”

Hermione looked extremely relieved. Her shoulders each dropped a full inch.

“Thank you, Sir. That should hopefully lessen the pain at least…”

She gathered the books from his desk and with another brief nod of thanks, opened the door.

This time as it closed, he shut his eyes and leaned forward, placing his hands over his face, elbows supporting the weight of his skull. Snape suddenly understood why she was so overly-concerned about the wedding night. It wasn’t just that Lucius Malfoy was a sadist.

Hermione Granger, member of the Golden Trio, War Hero, nineteen-year-old Head Girl, was a virgin.
Chapter 10

Hermione awoke to an owl knocking at her window.

She wasn’t expecting correspondence from anyone. Though she had discussed her upcoming marriage with Harry and Ginny, both of whom were equally horrified, she hadn’t revealed the news to anyone else in their wider circle. She needed a few more days to figure things out for herself.

As she let the owl in and took its package, she glanced over at the magical calendar above her desk. *Nine days.* Nine days until she effectively became Lucius Malfoy’s property. She cringed. Looking down, she opened the small package the owl had left. Inside was a small green leather box and a delicate scroll hooked under the ribbon. She opened the scroll.

*Hermione,*

*Forgive my lack of communication since our meeting. I have been making preparations at the Manor for your arrival. I will be at Hogwarts this afternoon on a tour with the Board of Directors. I would very much like for us to have dinner together. Please wear this.*

*Regards,*

*Lucius*

Well, Hermione thought, *at least he is treating me like a human being.* He asked for her forgiveness and even used the word “please.” Could it be he regretted his treatment of her at the Manor? *Not bloody likely.*

She opened the green leather box, and gasped. Inside was the most stunningly beautiful ring she had ever seen. It was clearly an antique with delicate gold filigree surrounding a glittering and absurdly large square-cut diamond.

Lifting it closer to her eyes, she noticed the filigree was carved into the shape of snakes and each snake had a tiny emerald chip for eyes. As she turned it this way and that, holding it up to the sunlight, its gold and green band reflected beautifully through the diamond, creating a stunning prism effect on the wall near her bed. The piece was clearly something that had been in the Malfoy family for several generations. She wondered who had last worn it.

All of a sudden, Hermione was struck by just *who* had presented her with this gift. In her appreciation of its beauty and craft, she had somehow forgotten for several seconds that *Ron’s murderer* had just sent her a *present.* And the worst part was, she had *liked* it.

What the hell is wrong with me? No one had ever given her something so valuable or beautiful. She understood now how Lucius was able to avoid being prosecuted for Ron’s death and how he had come out of the war with few consequences. *Wealth like this has more magic to dazzle than some advanced spells I could name.*

Hermione leaned back on her headboard and contemplated whether to wear the ring.

If she did, would she be allowing herself to be “purchased”? Would Ginny and Harry accuse her of selling herself? Would she be betraying Ron’s memory by agreeing to wear the ring of his slayer? She knew the answer to all of these questions was a probable yes. She could not choose to refuse Lucius as her husband, but she could certainly choose not to wear his ring.
She switched her mind over to the other side. Back when she had been attending a Muggle elementary school, before her Hogwarts letter came, she had loved Speech & Debate class. She was always good at seeing both sides of an issue.

If she had dinner with Lucius and she was not wearing the ring, he would certainly ask her why, and then what would she say? He would probably be furious that she had rejected it, rejected him. Would he lash out at her? Hurt her? Perhaps if she wore it he would take it as a sign of her…what did Snape say? “Acquiescence.” Her willingness to be his “slave.”

If she was calm and gave into him, just a little, perhaps they could negotiate a marriage that didn’t involve her physical suffering. Anyway, she didn’t want to anger him. Tonight would be the beginning of a lifelong negotiation. And he was at Hogwarts, after all. Her turf.

With a shiver, she slid the diamond onto her left ring finger.

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Later that day, as Hermione walked to the private dining room Lucius had booked for their dinner in the administrative wing, she smoothed the simple Muggle-style sheath dress she was wearing. She hoped Lucius would be pleased that she had made an effort…well, pleased was not really the word. She hoped it wouldn’t encourage his violent side.

She had chosen an emerald-green sleeveless frock to match the snake-eyes on the band of the ring, and also as a nod to House Slytherin. The dress went down to her knees, demure and elegant, and she paired it with simple black ballet flats. She did not want him to think she was trying to be overly alluring. Perhaps he would take her efforts as a sign of deference. She was going to have to handle this dinner exceptionally well to avoid a repeat of their last horrific encounter. She tapped her left hand against the dress. She was nervous.

At the last minute, Hermione had considered asking Professor McGonagall to chaperone. The woman no doubt would have if Hermione had told her what had happened at Malfoy Manor, and Hermione was certain Lucius would attempt no harm upon her person under McGonagall’s watchful gaze, yet Hermione had stopped herself out front of her Head of House’s office door.

No, she had decided. It was humiliating enough to have Snape involved. She didn’t need to bring McGonagall into this. Who next? Professor Lupin? Professor Flitwick? Filch? She could fight her own battles. That much had already been proven in the War.

As she walked, her flats padding quietly along the stone floors, she thought of Ron. What would he be doing now if he were here? He’d be marrying me to avoid all of this, she thought bitterly. She tried to picture herself sitting across a table, laughing and eating and drinking with Lucius Malfoy, Ron’s cold-blooded murderer. How on earth could she sup with him? She felt sick inside.

She wondered, was this how Snape felt during his long years as a spy? Is this what that kind of life does to you? Makes you twist your insides into a ball and force your face to hide the thoughts inside your head?

What Hermione wanted to do was run to the prefects’ bathroom and throw up, or turn and sprint screaming out into the night and throw herself on Ron’s marble memorial, begging his ghost’s forgiveness.

Instead, she reached a hand up to the side of her hair, which had been elegantly rolled into a French twist with a beauty spell Ginny had showed her, and nervously patted it smooth. Perhaps she could have been a spy, in another life. But this was her life, and she had to find out how she was going to
bear it. She nervously rubbed the diamond ring shimmering on her left hand as she walked.

Lucius smiled as he heard the knock at the door. He opened it and Hermione entered. He watched her face as she took in the room. Lucius had transfigured it into the style of the court of the French Muggle-King Louis XIV. A beautiful round walnut table was laid out with a feast in the center of the room. In the ceiling a stunning fresco of cherubs and angels looked over it. Gilt mirrors lined the walls, a roaring fireplace illuminated the gold leaf in the wainscoting, and everything was lit by soft candles in gold candelabra and glittering wall sconces. It was a stunning re-creation.

Hermione tried not to show that she was impressed, but she was. This had obviously taken him some time to prepare. What was Lucius playing at? The ring? The sumptuous dinner? She knew it was all part of some grander manipulation, but to what end she wasn’t sure. It certainly could not be for her benefit.

“Hermione, my dear, you look ravishing.” Lucius bent down and kissed the back of her hand, smiling when he saw the ring was upon it. Hermione tried not to shudder as his lips pressed into the little veins above her knuckles, his icy aquamarine eyes staring up into hers.

He indicated one of the seats at the table, pulling the chair out for her. As she sat, Hermione heard a click as the door was sealed and warded. Lucius took the seat across the table from her, smiling wickedly, as he tucked his wand back into his robe.

“I wouldn’t want us to be…interrupted.”

Hermione looked into his pale blue eyes and mustered all the courage she could.

“No, of course not. We have much to discuss. Shall we begin with the terms of our marriage contract?”

“Let’s.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Warning: torture ahead. Please mind the story tags. And let me know at any point if I should change the overall rating on this story from "M" to "E" as it gets darker.

Finally, thank you all for the kudos and reviews! They made me write this so quickly! :)

Hermione took a deep breath.

Lucius’s blue eyes were staring at her with such intensity, she found it difficult to look away, much less form a sentence. They were absolutely stunning. *Too bad they belong to a monster.*

“I would like to complete my education…after our marriage. I want to finish my last term at Hogwarts. I have two months and then I can sit my NEWTs, and I would like to do them to the best of my ability and graduate.”

“Two months…” Lucius trilled back at her.

“Yes. I am almost done my coursework and I have gotten dispensation to take them earlier as I am older than most in my year. But I will need to attend my classes five days a week for the next 8 weeks and study intensively to prepare. Once I have taken them, I will move to Malfoy Manor permanently.”

“And what if I wish you to move to the Manor now?”

“I do not see how that is possible. I will need access to the Hogwarts Library and the office-hours of the Professors. I will need to be here.”

“I do not agree to a ‘part-time’ wife.”

Lucius was trying not to frighten her, at least not for the moment, but these terms were obscene.

“I understand, Lord Malfoy.”

“Lucius.”

“Yes,” she swallowed. “Of course. Lucius. I do not mean to be…unaccommodating, but my education is all I have. It is incredibly important to me to complete it.”

“I can see that,” Lucius clucked, tongue against his teeth.

“So you can see why I will need the first few weeks of our marriage to remain at Hogwarts.”

Lucius smiled thoughtfully. “I am also not unwilling to be…accommodating, Miss Granger. I will permit you to remain at Hogwarts for the first eight weeks of our marriage and sit your NEWTs if you agree to spend your evenings and weekends at Malfoy Manor. We will connect the floo network between your bedroom at the Manor and your Head Girl room here. I do have…quite a lot planned for us.”
Hermione nodded. It was as Snape had warned her.

“I will expect you at the Manor every evening by sundown.”

“Thank you. I am also willing to change my name, to take the surname of “Malfoy.” If…that is what you wish.”

Lucius bit the inside of his cheek. Part of him wanted to jump up and slap her across the face for implying she was even worthy to carry the name of Malfoy. The other part of him was slightly pleased she would desire to take his last name.

The dirty Mudblood would be marked as his. How painful for her. He smiled.

“Oh course you will become Mrs. Lucius Malfoy. How amusing it will be to everyone to see a filthy Mudblood rise to such heights. I am assuming you have been practicing in the mirror, calling yourself “Hermione Malfoy” over and over again like a silly girl. Or perhaps writing it in your notebooks during class, drawing hearts around it?”

Hermione felt sudden waves of anger rush through her, but she refused to give in to it. As Snape had mentioned, her outward displays would only bring Malfoy pleasure and give him an excuse to do what he wanted to do anyway. She would play his game better than he could. She looked up at him and smiled widely.

“I know that I am not worthy of your name in the eyes of many traditional Pureblood families, but perhaps my renown as a member of the Golden Trio will cause some jealousy amongst them and allow your sullied reputation to repair itself?”

As soon as she said it, she knew that last bit had been a bit much. Lucius was not going to like that she had pointed out his fall from grace. And she had just made the second mistake of reminding him that she believed herself to be morally above him. She knew things were beginning to unravel.

Lucius stood quickly, glowering down at her. His forehead creased as his jaw tightened.

“I…I apologize,” Hermione quickly stammered. “I only meant your reputation from the war. You know there are those on the winning side who do not look at you…with admiration.”

Lucius put his hands on the table and leaned forward.

“And what about you, my dear, do you look at me with…admiration?”

*Don’t lie, Hermione thought to herself, don’t lie. Snape said not to lie.*

But Hermione was terrified. The last time she had told him what a monster she thought he was he had attacked her. She couldn’t escalate things. She had to keep him calm, keep things even-keeled. Avoid being passive-aggressive or sarcastic. *Tell the truth. Just be honest. But wind him down.*

“I admire your…I admire your magical ability, and your strength to continue on after the war… I suppose I admire your…devotion to your beliefs, even if I don’t agree with them. At all.”

Lucius’s lip curled slightly. Hermione felt a slight burning sensation on her hand, the one with the ring on it. She looked down at it on her lap, but nothing seemed amiss. When she looked back up, Lucius’s eyes continued to bore into her’s.

“Tell me more, Hermione. What else about me do you admire?”
Hermione didn’t want to continue, but her mouth opened of its own accord, and words kept spilling out.

“I admire your…taste. This room, for example. Your attention to detail. I admire your appreciation for fine things.”

What was she saying? The ring on her hand was growing hotter. She moved her other hand to touch it in her lap, but drew it back quickly. The touch of it was scorchingly hot. Hermione’s eyes widened. She lifted her hand above the table to examine it.

“What…w-why is it burning?”

Lucius smiled.

“That is a very special ring, my dear. It allows only truth between the wizard who gives it and the witch who wears it. My ancestors found it very useful to maintain a harmonious marriage.”

“No!” Hermione gasped as the temperature of the ring shot up several more degrees. It was painful now, so painful. She knew she would likely have a blister around the finger. She tried to remove it, but the fingers on her other hand were red and tender from the heat.

“Please, it hurts!”

“I’d like for you to continue to tell me, Hermione, about your admiration for me. I’d like to know more.”

There is no more, Hermione thought. She opened her mouth to say it, but the words wouldn’t come out. Because they were a lie. There was more that she admired about him. But she could not say it.

“You admire my character?” Lucius prompted.


Lucius threw back his head and laughed. Hermione winced. The burning hurt so much.

“Please, Lucius, let me take it off. It hurts! It’s burning my finger!”

“Then I suggest you make a full confession, Hermione. The sooner you tell me everything you admire about me, the sooner I can release you.”

“I don’t admire you that much!”

“No, but there must be more, otherwise the ring would let you go. It’s interesting to me that everything you have mentioned has to do with my appreciation of aesthetic beauty and adherence to my beliefs. Tell me, do you admire anything about me…physically?”

Hermione sucked in a breath. She tried to rise from the table, but the burning heat from the ring was traveling up her left arm now, past her knuckles, past her wrist, snaking its way along the nerve-endings inside her forearm. When she moved, the pain seemed to double. She leaned back in the chair.
Lucius lifted his shoulders and tossed his long blonde hair back, smirking at the look of pain and horror in her eyes. He slowly moved around the walnut table, blue eyes twinkling in the candlelight.

Hermione watched him approach, appraising his physical body. He moved like a wild animal stalking its prey, like a cat. There was something vibrantly feral and masculine about his form.

“The way... you... move…” she trembled.

He approached and slowly knelt down beside her. Her palms were planted on the tablecloth, her entire body was desperately trying to remain calm, remain still. The burning had moved into her shoulder now and was spreading across her chest. It hurt so much.

She couldn't make eye contact with him. She was too embarrassed and too achy. She stared straight ahead at the candles on the table, watching as the flames danced about the wax.

It was how her body felt right now. Her skin covered in flames like the yellowed wax. She could feel his eyes on her. He wasn’t touching her, he was just staring at her intently. Watching her pain. Soaking up every tremble of her body and the desperate look of physical pain in her eyes.

“How charming. And what about how I move do you admire?”

Hermione swallowed. “You move… gracefully. I find it…sort of…a little…”

Oh God no, she couldn’t go there. She couldn’t say this. *Don’t make me say this,* her brain screamed.

“…alluring.”

She flicked her eyes over to the right as her cheeks glowed bright red. She wasn’t sure if it was from the burning spell or her mortification. They caught his blue ones, blazing in triumph.

He sneered as her, tilting his head to one side and letting his eyes flick up and down her body. Her breathing was labored, the girl was trying so hard not to move, not to let the pain consume her.

“Hmmmm, ‘alluring’? In what way, my pretty Hermione?” he teased.

He knew *exactly* what she meant, but he could see she was breaking, her humiliation so close. It thrilled him. He felt a warm tingling moving down his spine, into his lower abdomen. He could feel himself begin to get excited.

Hermione’s brown eyes begged his blue ones. She whispered to him. “Please, Lucius, please stop it. Please!”

“I cannot stop it. Only you can stop it.”

He reached a hand out and lightly brushed an index finger along her jawline. Her throat swallowed.

Hermione bit down on her lower lip. The pain was so bad now. She was trying so hard to be still but it was impossible. Even the smallest tremble of her spine was like a burst of flame. The burning was everywhere — her chest, her legs, her back. She felt like she was being burned at the stake, like in those muggle stories of witches of yore.

Tears began to spring into her eyes. She turned her eyes away from his and back to the candles on the table. They blurred as the tears began to fall slowly down her cheeks. Even the movement of the tears slowly trickling down her cheeks hurt. Each droplet felt like a rough piece of sandpaper. This
could not go on. She opened her mouth.

“...sexually...” she faintly whispered.

Lucius moved a hand to her arm and began to slowly move his index finger down, from collarbone to wrist and back up, tracing the lines of her veins and making circles here and there. It was so delicious how embarrassed she was, and how much she was burning up from the ring’s curse.

He wanted her shame. He knew she was almost there. Her small flinches told him the feel of his finger on her skin was only adding to her burning pain. Yes.

“Tell me, have you thought about what I will do to you in my bed?”

“Yes.”

“And what are your feelings about our... coupling?”

“Afraid...”

Lucius smiled. “Is that all?”

Hermione’s tears were dripping off her face now, landing on her chest. The wetness did nothing to cool her. She could see black spots dancing in her field of vision. She knew she was going to overheat; she felt so close already to passing out.

Once again, she knew the only way to make any of it stop was to give Lucius her full humiliation. She felt so ashamed, it was like her heart was breaking.

“Nervous...” she stammered.

“And?”

“Disgusted!” she bit her lip and let out a moan. The pain was so bad!

He leaned closer to her and whispered. “I give you permission to take the ring off, Hermione, if that is all. If there is no more you may take the ring off right now.”

Hermione shifted to reach for the ring with her hand, then screamed as the burning pain shot through her. *Merlin, it wasn’t all.*

Lucius’s expression opened with boyish delight. She couldn’t remove it, because there *was* more. *Goody.*

“There are no secrets between husbands and wives, Hermione, especially those of the intimate variety. I will know everything eventually, so you may as well tell me quickly. Your suffering is so great right now. I would not want this fever to damage that clever brain of yours.”

He curled a lock of her hair around his fingertip. Beads of sweat were pouring down her neck and temple. He leaned in and licked one. A great wracking sob shook through her as he touched her. He wasn’t wrong about the fever. The pain was so intense, not quite *Cruciatus*, but her nerve endings were ablaze with agony. Would it make her brain dead? Could it be damaging her neural pathways? She feared if they continued she would become some type of vegetable.

Her entire skull felt like it was being *cooked.*

“I will ask you again...how did you imagine me? In *bed*?” he whispered silkily.
“Rough…” she admitted as another tear shook free. Her voice had retreated down into her throat. She could only whisper and whimper like a small child.

“What else…?”

“Frightening…cruel…brutal…hateful…”

He could sense her retreating from something.

“Say it, Hermione,” he whispered as his fingertips caressed her throat.

“…m-maybe…s-s-satisfying…” she admitted. She closed her eyes. A hot rush of humiliation flooding her.

Lucius chuckled. The filthy Mudblood really was filthy. She had been imagining him satisfying her. How terribly embarrassing for her, how much she would be ashamed of herself tomorrow. He would have to remind her of how much he enjoyed killing the Weasley again. That would be fun.

“How did you imagine me satisfying you?” Lucius inquired, almost casually.

“Plea-pleasure…” the girl whispered, her head drooping down on her chest in defeat. “I…I thought you might give me pleasure….because of what you said…”

“Do you mean orgasm?” Lucius drew out the last word on purpose. He felt her twitch in shame as she heard it.

“Y-yes.”

“Tell me, have you touched yourself thinking about me?”

Hermione’s face fell in complete and total horror and humiliation.

Because the truth was, she had.
Chapter 12

Hermione’s mind flashed back to her lunch-hour the previous day.

She had been in her room, reading *BDSM for Beginners* on her bed. She had been trying to get through as much research as possible before her second meeting with Professor Snape. She had just finished a chapter called “Safewords” and she had flipped to the next chapter.

It had been titled, “Spanking,” and the first page had a large picture. It was one of those wizarding pictures that moved, and Hermione could not believe what she was looking at. A witch was bent over across the lap of a wizard, and her skirts were bunched around her waist. The man was spanking her on one cheek then the other, making her count each hit. The woman moaned after each smack, her face a mixture of pain and intense pleasure. The man looked down on her with naked lust and adoration.

It had immediately stirred something in Hermione. She had never really thought of herself as particularly stimulated by sensual imagery, but this picture was having a significant effect on her. She had bitten down on her lower lip, as she had felt her nipples tingle inside her bra. She had shifted her hips slightly, and felt a tiny shudder of pleasure as they pushed into the pillow she had been sitting on.

She knew what BDSM was, and she knew men and women participated in it, but she certainly hadn’t heard of anyone she knew involved in it, nor had she ever sought out and read any romance novels that featured it, such as those some of the other Gryffindor girls passed around. She had tried reading one once, but it was so poorly written she had chucked it in the bin after three chapters. Too much silliness about “inner goddesses.”

Without thinking about it too much, Hermione had taken her socks and skirt off and shimmied down under the covers in her shirt and underwear, taking the book with her. As she read the chapter lying on her side, she had allowed her other hand to move between her legs, softly stroking herself absent-mindedly.

She had never really been one for masturbation, and though she had always had a healthy fantasy life, and did enjoy the heavy petting she and Ron had engaged in, she had never found the touch of her own hand exciting…enough.

It felt good of course, and she could work herself up quite a bit rubbing against her mattress or her hand, but she would get bored after awhile, and no matter how she varied up her touches and indulged her inner fantasy life, she could never quite bring herself far enough along to experience completion. Sometimes the feel of her own wetness and her inner muscles made her self-conscious and would start to feel icky to her. Sometimes she would approach what felt like an orgasm and suddenly it would slip away or she would feel a strong urge to stop.

She had never told Ron. It made her feel embarrassed, like something might be wrong with her.

She would smile and nod when the older Gryffindor girls would giggle and whisper about how much they enjoyed sex with their boyfriends or made a joke about self-pleasure, but inside she felt awful. Left out. Why couldn’t she make herself feel that?

She had hoped that it would be something Ron could help her with, something they could discover together. She had gotten close twice with him when Ron touched her with his fingers, stolen moments in the tent when Harry was away, his hand up her skirt, but she had never told Ron about
her…problem…and now, she reminded herself, now she would never have that experience with him.

But with the BDSM book open on its side and her hand between her legs, Hermione had found the person who popped into her fantasy as the spanker wasn’t Ron. It was Lucius!

It had horrified her, but she had allowed her brain to imagine him doing to her what the wizard was doing to the witch in the picture. She pictured herself bent over Lucius’s lap, himspanking her hard as she rubbed against his thighs.

*Perhaps it would be good to try something like this? A way of compromising that could bring both of us pleasure?* Lucius liked hurting her, but the witch in the picture seemed to be enjoying being struck. Maybe Lucius could be the one to give her her first orgasm. *He certainly had enough experience with women…he would definitely know what to do…*

She had shuddered a little, and then been completely horrified by her thoughts and her response. The fact that it was so wrong had added a little to her excitement, she realized, and she began to feel closer and closer…moving her palm to press down harder….Unfortunately, the bell had rung, and she had leapt out of bed and grabbed her clothes, dressing and rushing in a flurry, then flying out the door so as not to be late to Advanced Transfiguration.

Lucius’s voice, silky and demanding, brought her back into the private dining room.

“Tell me, Hermione, have you touched yourself thinking of me?”

Hermione wanted to die. She hoped the burning spell would completely incinerate her.

This was the most horrifying and most embarrassing moment of her life. Lucius was Ron’s murderer and her sworn enemy. If she admitted this to him, was Lucius going to think she was gagging for him?? It was awful. Sweat and tears continued to pour off her.

It wouldn’t be over until Lucius knew everything, and she realized that tonight he had been planning all along to humiliate her, not by attacking her body, but by twisting her sexuality in her mind.

*He’s good at this,* Hermione thought, as she felt herself cave in. *The torture won’t end unless it’s on his terms.*

“I…I have,” she admitted in a whisper.

“And did thoughts of me make you…orgasm?”

“No.”

“And why is that?” Lucius arched an eyebrow. He wasn’t sure he liked that response.

“Because I’ve never had an orgasm.”

There. He knew. He had that from her. *Please be enough,* she thought.

“Oh, Hermione,” Lucius groaned, deeply.

He was moved with intense satisfaction at her revelation. He could feel how hard he was in his pants. Such an admission! He had never dreamed he could humiliate her like this.

He thought he might get some embarrassing details about her snogging sessions with the Weasley whelp tonight, but *this.* Oh, this was pleasure beyond compare! Poor little Hermione Granger, unable
to make herself come!

If he wasn’t so turned on, he would have thrown back his head and laughed.

“I release you,” Lucius whispered.

Hermione felt herself flung forward onto the table, as the burning sensation whooshed out of her body. She felt a rush of coolness well up from the ring, soothing and cooling her as it worked over her in waves, up and down her spine. She put her forehead down on the table and moaned in sweet delight as wave after wave of icy relief washed over her, evaporating her sweat, and restoring her internal temperature.

The magical coolness flicked away her tears and dried the sweat off her dress. Within seconds she looked as she had when she had first entered the room — clothing, make-up, and hair pristine. Hermione turned her head to the right, pressing her cheek down to rest on the table.

She felt exhausted.

Lucius stood, eyes roving all over her body. “Do you want to take the ring off?”

“Yes, please,” she whimpered.

“I will give you a choice. If you go back to your room tonight and touch yourself, the ring will allow you to remove it. If you refuse, the ring will stay on and we will have another similar meeting next time.”

Hermione gulped in some cool air. Lucius was truly twisted.

“Why? Why do you care whether I touch myself…you know I don’t…I haven’t…” she trailed off. She didn’t want him to think he had completely defeated her, but she had hardly any defiance left.

Lucius wrapped a hand around her waist and hauled her up against him. He pressed her hips into his, letting her feel his hardness through his trousers. He pressed into her until she was leaning back on the table, her hands moving down behind her to support her balance. He gave her a wicked grin.

“Oh, I don’t care, Mudblood. But you see I want you to be in your little bed tonight, all alone, thinking about how I killed your beloved and how I tortured you until you cried and begged this evening. I want you to think about your humiliation and how much you hate me, and then I want you to touch yourself.”

Hermione grimaced.

“And the best part is…” Lucius pressed even closer to her and leaned his face down to her ear.

“…you’ll lie there, poor thing, touching yourself unsatisfactorily and you will be thinking of me, knowing that however much you hate me, I could be giving you orgasm after shattering orgasm… making you come so hard you’d beg me for more…and you’ll hate yourself for it.”

Hermione wanted to burst into tears. She couldn’t take this; she couldn’t handle Lucius. His way of torturing her was so insidious. This was only their second encounter. How could she stand a lifetime of this?

She could sense he would pull every detail from her, everything from her past that was remotely embarrassing and humiliating, and put it under a microscope before twisting it around and implanting it somewhere dark in her psyche.
Who on earth would she become at the end of this? She was already feeling like a shell.

“You choose, Mudblood. Shall we have more of these sessions?”

“No,” she gave in. She turned her face away from his, looking down at the table, the beautiful feast that they were never even meant to eat.

“Excellent. I am so pleased to know that you desire me, Hermione.”

Hermione continued to stare down at the table.

“Say it, girl.”

“I desire you.”

He stepped back, smirking, and adjusted himself. “And it seems I do you. What fun it will be to torment you. Off you go. I don’t think either of us have much of an appetite for food anymore.”

He waved his hand and Hermione heard a click as the wards dropped and the door creaked opened. She straightened, looking up at him. His blue eyes were ablaze with lust and triumph. It was revolting.

Hermione turned and made for the door.

“Remember your little homework assignment,” Lucius called to her. Hermione paused. “If you don’t complete it, the ring will not release you. And I will know.”

Hermione opened the door and slipped out without looking back. She walked on unsteady feet to her rooms, and made her way to her bathroom. She dry-heaved into the toilet — she’d had no lunch and no dinner and there was nothing to come up.

She sat on the cold tile floor and leaned against the wall. She wanted to rage, to scream, to cry, but her entire body felt cold and dead. She felt detached. The coolness of the tile felt good on her skin after the burning spell. She thought about disobeying Lucius, but she knew it was foolish. He wanted to be obeyed.

He must be obeyed, she thought. God, what is wrong with me? I sound like I’m being brainwashed.

You are, another voice in her mind said.

Hermione kicked her shoes off and hung up her green dress. She slipped on a cotton nightgown and pulled the covers back on her four-poster. She slipped in and lay there. She couldn’t feel any less sexy, and the evening with Lucius hadn’t inspired any kind of lust in her at all.

How on earth had she considered him alluring? He was an emotional terrorist. His beautiful blue eyes were horrifyingly cold, and his powerful body was an instrument of her own madness. She sighed and looked at the ring. It glowed faintly in the dark. I know what I have to do.

Oh, Ron, she thought, forgive me. She closed her eyes and thought of Lucius’s hands. They had been relatively gentle tonight as they had touched her arm. She could use that. She thought of the pads of his fingertips. They were soft, not calloused. Yes, soft fingertips, she thought, that is good.

She allowed her own hand to slide down between her legs and she touched herself gently, imagining her fingertips were Lucius’s. She did the best she could, but the tears began to swell in her eyes, and as she stoked the pleasure in her body, she could not bear to imagine what Ron’s ghost would think of her.
You’re trash, she thought. You are weak, weak, weak, she thought. You’re thinking of those hands, how soft they are, how they would feel against your folds…Soft…practiced…soft…experienced hands…a man’s hands…hands that know what they are doing…those hands that killed Ron….

After a few minutes, she could no longer continue. She was too disgusted with herself. She had managed to arouse herself to some degree, and she could feel some wetness between her legs, but it brought her no joy.

She felt like she was more broken than ever. Perhaps this is what Lucius wanted, she thought, to make her permanently broken. As she leaned back on her pillow, she hoped it had been enough.

The next morning Hermione woke to see the green and gold ring had slipped off her finger in the middle of the night. It sat next to her on the pillow, the eyes of the engraved snakes on it glittering back at her.

Lucius would know she had done his bidding.

She took the ring and after putting it back it its box. She cast a locking spell on it, then threw the blasted thing into the bottom of her trunk, vowing never to put it on again or take it out.

She knew now that her meetings with Snape had been for nothing. There was no preparation she could do to be safe as Lucius’s wife. There was only giving in to Lucius’s torture.

She had learnt her lesson.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

The reviews and kudos are much appreciated as always. I cannot believe I have written this so quickly!! I hope you are all enjoying it, and are not finding anyone too OOC. This is my first fic, so I appreciate being welcomed and encouraged by all of you.

Hermione was late for the Advanced Potions seminar.

Snape had agreed to do a private review session for a dozen or so students to help them prepare for the NEWTS and Hermione had signed up for it.

*It is very unusual for Hermione to be late*, Professor Snape thought. The Know-It-All was *never* late. For anything. One of her more annoying habits was to turn up fifteen minutes early. She was the only student he had ever taught who was even early for detention. So when she failed to appear for the seminar until twenty minutes had elapsed, he was surprised to find himself genuinely concerned.

She had pushed her head in and looked apologetically at him, before moving quietly to take a seat in the back corner. She did not raise her hand once and simply went about her work, taking notes as he lectured, summarizing the findings of a recent breakthrough in Healing Potions. When the bell rang, Snape watched as she gathered her things quietly.

“Miss Granger? A word.”

She approached his desk, eyes downcast. The other students filtered out and Snape quickly warded the door after them. He sat in his chair as she came up to his desk, folding his hands on top of some papers.

“Miss Granger, what do you have to say for yourself? I volunteered my time for this seminar at your own request, and you dare to insult me and your fellow students by being tardy? Haven’t you been telling me how important your Potions NEWT is to you and your fellow over-achievers? My time is finite.”

“I apologize for my tardiness, Sir. I will accept whatever punishment you choose.”

Snape examined her. There was something very un-Miss-Granger about her today. She had dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was barely brushed, her clothing a little sloppy. But it was her demeanor that was most concerning. There was nothing of the bossy spitfire about her. She looked defeated, submissive. He brushed a lock of black hair from his face and raised an eyebrow.

“What happened at your dinner with Lucius?”

Hermione lifted her face a little, but kept her eyes down. It always amazed her how Severus Snape knew almost everything about what went on within the walls of Hogwarts. A master spy, indeed! Yet, there were things he could not know, things she could not tell him.

“It was…unpleasant.”

Snape’s eyes searched her face. If Lucius had tried to physically assault her again, he had no doubt
Hermione would have revealed that to him, raging away as she had before. His eyes flicked up and down her body. There were no bruises on any of her exposed skin. No, Lucius had somehow invaded her mind, cracked her self-confidence. He was chipping away at her very soul. *Already.* Snape sighed.

“I had thought you had more strength of will than this sad-sack display, Miss Granger.”

“Perhaps I don’t,” she admitted quietly.

Snape did not like this one bit. If this is how quickly she could be broken, there was no way she would be able to be finish her education.

“Have you discussed your NEWTs with Lucius?”

“Yes.”

“And he was open to it?”

“Yes. I will live at Malfoy Manor, but he will let me floo here during the daytime to finish my classes and then I shall sit my exams in two month's time.”

“That is good news, then.”

Severus was not good at lifting anyone’s spirits, but was attempting to revive her, at least a little, if only so he could extract more information.

“Yes,” she merely responded quietly.

“Miss Granger, please look at me.”

Hermione lifted her eyes to his. Snape was very tempted to enter her mind and witness the entire scene from her dinner with Lucius firsthand, but he could see that Hermione needed to keep her secrets. For now, at least. And he did not want the intrusion in her mind to make her suffer any additional violations.

“If you would like to meet in my office again this evening, I can make myself available.”

The girl stared back at him with sad eyes and shook her head.

“No, thank you, Professor.”

*There really was absolutely nothing he could do to help her now,* Hermione realized, and she shuddered at the thought of giving him the blow-by-blow of her dinner with Lucius. The ring, the burning spell, the lurid line of questioning, and her confused, embarrassing admissions.

No, she had to keep all of this from Snape. She didn’t want him to see her as some sad, confused, broken little doll. She wanted him to see her as the intelligent Know-It-All — to remember her courage and spark, the woman who fought bravely in the War. Right now, that person felt so far away.

“May I go now, Professor?”

“You may.”

Snape dropped the wards and unlocked the door with a wave of his hand, and watched as she took her leave. He did not like this at all.
Something was very wrong, and it was about time he paid Lucius Malfoy a visit. Severus sent
Lucius a brief message via owl as soon as Hermione left his classroom.

Lucius,

We should speak about the girl. I do not wish to interfere, but as you know I have an
unfortunate duty of care for all of my students. I will come tonight at 8 o’clock.

S.S.

Lucius had snorted at the “duty of care” bit.

Severus had always been such a stickler for his self-righteous “duty,” whether it was to Lord
Voldemort or Headmaster Dumbledore. It annoyed him the way Snape was now seen by the
Wizarding World as some great war hero, when he had committed as many atrocities over the years
as Lucius had himself. Well, maybe not quite so many, Lucius chuckled.

****

Snape stepped from the fireplace in Lucius’s study at Malfoy Manor at precisely 8 o’clock to find
Malfoy waiting for him, two firewhiskies laid out. The men sat across from one another warily, as
they had many times in the past. Severus lifted his drink and sipped it quietly, glaring at the fair-
haired wizard sitting opposite him.

After a few thoughtful moments he spoke.

“Is it your intention to completely destroy her mind, or do you merely intend to bring her to heel?”

Lucius smiled. “Never one for subtlety, Severus.”

Severus looked coldly at him, impassive, unreadable.

“In eight days you are going to be her husband, and as you know one of the duties of a pureblood
wizard is to offer his wife ‘protection.’ It is part of the marriage law and the vows.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you intend to protect Miss Granger?”

“I believe the law decrees I protect her from ‘all others who might wish to harm her.’”

“I see you have actually read your vows. Impressive.” Snape sneered.

“Yes, in between the many, many pleasures of my youth, I did manage to squeeze in literacy,”

Lucius retorted, his upper lip curling in a smirk.

Severus took another sip of his drink. Lucius continued.

“One interesting thing, though, Severus, and you must admit, this is a bit open-ended. The law states
protection from “all others”, not protection from myself, her husband. Just others who would wish
her harm. A charming loophole, as loopholes go, is it not?”

Severus frowned. Lucius continued.

“To answer your question, I haven’t decided. Her mind is so delightful that I don’t know if I wish to
completely destroy it. She will certainly be brought to heel, that is guaranteed, but how much further
Lucius clicked his tongue against his teeth and continued, “Well, that is really a question of Hermione’s ability to **endure**.”

“I have no desire to be involved in your personal affairs, Lucius, so I will keep this brief. Miss Granger is damaged from the war. Her loss and suffering have been great. She does not have the ability to...bounce back the way she formerly had. If you push her too far, as I believe you are already doing, you will soon be married to a ghost.”

Lucius laughed, his blue eyes crinkling up as his shoulders shook in amusement.

“Oh, Severus, it is too funny. You defending another little Gryffindor. It’s like Lily all over again.”

Severus rose in anger. He was done. He didn’t need to stay and have Lucius drag the past up. Hermione and Lily could not be more different. Hermione was merely a **student** of his, an annoying young chit who nevertheless asked for his guidance. Lily was...she was his **soul**. She was perfection.

Severus stepped into the fireplace and turned back to Lucius who was still sitting in his armchair, smiling madly.

“You’ve always played too roughly with your toys, Lucius, but I will remind you again that Miss Granger is a Hogwarts student, for another two months at least. Until she graduates, I will be watching her, and you, very closely. Don’t break her.”

With that, Severus departed. Lucius leaned back and took a sip of his whiskey. *Oh my dear Severus,* he thought.

*I have already begun.*
Hermione blinked her eyes open as the sunlight filtered in from her Tower window.

One week. She had one week left before her marriage. Could she just stay in her cozy bed all day? She pulled her comforter over her head and slid further down. She had no desire to get up, no desire to go to her classes and review seminars.

*Get yourself together!* She chastised herself. Her over-achieving brain knew that she was being absurd — to allow two encounters with Lucius Malfoy to completely devastate her emotionally. She was stronger than this.

But she was tired, too. Ron’s death, her grief, the entire past six months had weighed so heavily on her heart. There was something tempting about simply giving in to Lucius. Becoming his slave, letting someone else dictate her life. She was so tired. So tired of fighting. Of *thinking.*

Hermione pulled herself upright, the covers slipping down. She yawned and stretched. Why was she being so ridiculous? One moment she felt like her old self, and the next moment she felt like curling up into a ball and sobbing uncontrollably.

She missed who she used to be — confident, unfailingly productive, bold, and certain. So much had been taken from her. And not just Ron. Her innocent, sunny outlook on life was gone for good. What it would be replaced with long-term she couldn’t say.

All she wanted was to finish her academic career at Hogwarts. If she could make it through the next 8 weeks — 7 of them as the new Mrs. Lucius Malfoy, she could endure anything that came after. She was fairly certain.

She flung the curtains of her bed aside and hopped out of bed. Best to keep going as well as she could, head held high.

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At lunchtime, she sat with Harry at Ron’s memorial and ate sandwiches. She had finally confessed most of the sordid business to him, detailed specifics on the physical assault and sexual manipulation left out, of course; he was nonetheless horrified.

“How on Earth are you going to make this marriage work? It’s a nightmare, Hermione!” he exclaimed. “Lucius Malfoy is our enemy. Always has been.”

“I don’t know, Harry. I can be at Hogwarts at least during the daytime and finish the NEWTs. After that…I don’t know.”

Harry placed a hand on hers. “Gin and I love you, Hermione. You’re like a sister to us both. You can always come and live with us. We will protect you from Lucius. Always.”

Hermione had smiled and nodded, but inside she knew that she would singly endure anything Lucius chose to inflict upon her. She would suffer *anything* to allow Ginny and Harry to be untroubled, carefree, happy. She loved them more than anyone in the whole world besides her poor, obliviated parents in Australia.

Harry and Ginny were her best friends and she vowed to keep the worst of it from them, now and forever. She would not complicate their lives needlessly. Harry especially had been though an
incredible amount of anguish — almost as much as Snape. And Ginny’s experience with Riddle and the diary had left her with her own emotional scars.

No, Hermione decided, it is all up to me now. She would take the full brunt of Malfoy’s desire for revenge if that is what it took for Harry and Ginny to live happy, peaceful lives.

No Dumbledore, no Snape, no Harry, no Ginny. She would hide her suffering and endure it all on her own.

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That night, she returned to her Head Girl rooms to find a message had been delivered by owl. It lay on her windowsill wrapped in green velvet ribbon. Hermione unfurled it.

Hermione,

Did you have a pleasant evening last night? I do hope so. I’d like to give you a proper tour of Malfoy Manor tomorrow as it will be your home soon enough. The floo network has been connected. I will see you tomorrow at 7 o’clock in the evening. Do be on time.

Regards,

Lucius

Hermione looked over at the fireplace across the room. There was no escaping Malfoy now. He was closer than ever. No point in rejecting this meeting, this “tour.” What Lucius wanted to happen, however horrific, would happen no matter what.

All she could do was attempt to quell the panic.

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The next afternoon, Hermione was trudging along an empty corridor of Hogwarts, clutching her Advanced Charms textbook tightly and looking at the stone floor deep in thought.

Six days, six days, six days, her brain counted down. Today was a Tuesday and on Sunday she would become Mrs. Lucius Malfoy. Was it truly inevitable? Was there nothing she could do?

Every spare moment she had outside of class she was turning the situation over and over in her mind. She had read the Marriage Law no less than fourteen times just today. Suddenly, she rounded a corner and found herself face-to-face with none other than Severus Snape.

“Going somewhere, Miss Granger?”

She had already endured so much excessive brutality from Malfoy, but still it somewhat amazed her that she felt no dread, no intimidation from Snape whatsoever. In fact, Snape’s presence was actually comforting in its familiar coldness. If she wasn’t so preoccupied, she would have laughed. Her younger self would have never dreamt his presence could bring her anything other than sheer terror. But he felt…familiar now, she realized.

He was still pretty much completely and utterly unkind and chilly on the outside, but she truly trusted him and now that she understood the depravity of his fellow former Death-Eaters and had
experienced it first-hand, Snape held no real terror for her. He was just a git.  

A git, but an ally now, she realized. Even one who was curmudgeonly and rude in the extreme.  

“I have one last NEWT review seminar today. Apologies for the rush,” she stammered. She attempted to push past him, but Snape held up a palm to stop her.  

He looked the girl up and down. Her appearance was marginally improved from the last time he had seen her, but her face was still drawn and tight, and he did not like the look of those ever-present dark circles under her eyes. Had Lucius been in communication with her? Was he backing off a little, or continuing his abusive manipulation?  

Snape had tried not to wonder…but the last 24 hours had been challenging as he found his thoughts often turning to Miss Granger’s situation. It had continued to bother him. Gotten under his skin. Was it the injustice of it? He knew all about injustice. His life was an injustice and he had certainly propagated injustice. But just why was he so unsettled by this upcoming marriage?  

He had finally come to the conclusion that it was simply the squandering of magical potential. As much as her personality had grated on him and made his careful watch over Potter more difficult the past eight years, he knew she was without a doubt the most intelligent and naturally-gifted witch Hogwarts had seen in at least two decades.  

It was why he had always been so hard on her, and as a direct result of his severe criticisms, he had been pleased to witness, she had pushed herself relentlessly and her Potions skills had excelled far beyond any other student’s.  

That her potential and her intelligence would be squandered for Lucius Malfoy’s disgusting amusement enraged him. Academia and intellectual curiosity had been his own saving grace, his reason for living after Lily’s death. Without his own probing, curious mind, he wasn’t sure he would have been able to distract himself enough to endure the wait for Potter’s maturing.  

And Severus most especially did not like the idea of prejudiced, relatively under-achieving Lucius Malfoy having a say in such a talented witch’s future accomplishments, or lack thereof. A student such as Hermione Granger actually made his teaching career somewhat worthwhile, Severus realized. Only one or two intermittent geniuses in a sea full of dunderheads. Not that he had ever truly enjoyed teaching, he reminded himself.  

Snape settled his eyes back on Hermione’s slight form. Best to cut to the chase.  

“Miss Granger…may I inquire whether your future husband has been in communication with you?”  

Hermione wanted to tell him the truth. She looked up at Snape’s dark eyes and pale face — he appeared as accommodating as he was capable of looking. His brow was slightly furrowed in…what was that? Possible genuine concern?  

Hermione swallowed hard and shoved down deep inside her the strong impulse to confide in him. After all, what could she explain?  

That Lucius had forced her to masturbate while wearing his ring? That she had confessed to him that she had never had an orgasm, never had sex? These were her deepest, most personal secrets. There is no way she would ever reveal them to Severus Snape. Never.  

There was no way to be detached, academic, and impersonal about such information. She would not allow Lucius to strip away what little dignity she had earned in the eyes of such an accomplished wizard as Snape. She did have some pride, yet. And Snape could still possibly use these facts against
her. She could not endure more scorn from him. Ron’s death had left her with such a thin skin.

“No,” she lied, looking directly into Snape’s raven eyes. “Perhaps I will speak with him later this week. After all, our wedding is not until Sunday.”

Hermione thought she had done a fairly decent job obfuscating, but Snape sensed immediately her pathetic attempt at deception. Even without invading her mind, her physical tells were pronounced—a small quiver of the left-side of her upper lid, a brief tapping of her right pointer finger against her textbook, a marginally over-emphatic nod. The question was, why was she lying?

Two days ago she had placed him as her confidante and advisor in this affair, and now she was retreating. Pretending all was well. Attempting to deal with Lucius entirely on her own.

Snape considered her for a long moment. Was she truly resigned to the marriage, as she had stated? He wondered. After a moment, he simply nodded and pushed past her.

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Hermione spent the next 24 hours completely focused on her NEWTs. If Lucius was going to take her life from her, then she would at least close out her academic career to the best of her ability.

She had only slept four hours the night before, and though she was pleased with the progress she was making in her studies, she often found her thoughts mulling over Lucius’s words.

Sometimes her brain would start composing sarcastic speeches full of vulgar epithets to an imaginary Lucius. Things she wished she had said, things she would have said if she had just had more courage. Inner monologues that usually ended with her pacing and angrily mumbling at the wall.

She was actively avoiding Snape now. Since their last encounter she stayed as far from the Potions Classroom and the entrance to the Dungeons as possible, often taking circuitous routes around the halls to make it less likely she would run into him.

She had to meet Lucius in a couple hours, and she wasn’t up to staring into Snape’s black all-seeing eyes again and telling another bald-faced lie.

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At 7 o’clock in the evening, Hermione finally put down her books and stepped into her fireplace.

She had made no effort with her appearance this time, and was wearing simple Muggle clothes—jeans and a jumper. She couldn’t bring herself to worry about it, and “making an effort” for Lucius had certainly not helped her the last time they had come face to face.

Best not to worry about that which you cannot control, she thought, as she picked up the powder and activated the floo. Let’s get this nightmare over with.

Hermione was greeted at the other end by a stunning bedroom, decorated in the late-Victorian style, all cream and yellow. It was feminine yet elegant. Narcissa’s touch? Hermione wondered. Directly opposite the fireplace from which she stepped out was a large four-poster King-sized bed. It was massive and almost looked like it needed steps to ascend. This will be my room, Hermione thought, amazed. As her eyes gazed over the beautiful yellow and gold brocaded curtains, she shuddered at the thought of what would soon be happening in that bed.

Hermione moved to the door and was about to reach for the knob when it swung open. Standing in the doorway in elegant dress-robies was the tall figure of Lucius Malfoy. His hair was neatly tied
He glanced down at her, disapprovingly.

“Muggle-clothes?” he said, turning up his nose.

“Yes,” Hermione answered, more than a little defiantly. Whatever horrid game he wanted to play tonight, she would at least start strong.

“Let me be clear, you will never wear Muggle-clothes in Malfoy Manor, Hermione, after we are wed. It profoundly disrespects this ancient estate.”

He pointed to the wardrobe.

“Choose something from there. I will see you down in the dining room in fifteen minutes. You will not like it if you keep me waiting.”

He spun around and exited.

What a prat, Hermione thought. Snape had been right. Lucius was far too obsessed with material wealth and outward displays of status. Why should it matter what she wore to eat dinner and walk around the manor in? It would only be the two of them. But playing Lucius’s games was par for the course at this point.

Hermione moved to the wardrobe, opened it, and gasped.

Inside was no fewer than thirty exquisite gowns. To Hermione they looked almost like ballgowns. The skirts of all of them were long and full. The bodices tapered and elegant. Some of them looked like something from the 1890’s. Others only slightly more recent in style.

In fact, all of Malfoy Manor looked as if it had been frozen in time for the past hundred years. It had amazed Hermione when she had first learned about the magical world that it seemed to somehow belong to the past and the future at the same time. Sorcery and style, both eternal and ever-advancing.

But seriously, did Malfoy expect her to live in a bloody corset as his wife? At certain traditions, she had to balk. Hermione chose a simple Edwardian-style blue tea dress with minimal affectation and changed into it, carefully folding her jeans and jumper on the bed. She was definitely not going to deal with a corset right now. She glanced at herself in the mirror and was surprised that the gown fit her perfectly.

Hermione descended the stairs and turned her head. To the right, the door to the sitting room was closed. The room in which Lucius had first attacked her, first made his dark intentions clear. She felt a shiver along her spine. She turned to the left. Through an archway, Lucius sat in the dining room at a large table — big enough for 12 people. It was laid out with an elaborate meal, just as the private room at Hogwarts had been two nights ago.

Lucius stood up and in his customary manner, pulled the chair next to her out and motioned for her to sit. She would have preferred to take the seat across from him, all the way at the far end of the table, but it was clear Lucius wanted her at his right-hand. God help me, what does he intend? Hermione wondered.

She sat.

Lucius poured her some bordeaux from a red bottle on the table. Hermione picked the glass up and
eyed it suspiciously. Lucius poured some wine into his own glass, reset the bottle, and sat. His eyes flicked over her body, over the pale blue tea-gown she was wearing.

“You look very fetching in that dress, Hermione.”

“Thank you. It fits perfectly.”

“They will all fit you. I had them custom-made to your size.”

Hermione was more than a little unnerved by this information. How did he know her measurements? And had he really ordered a few dozen dresses for her in the past two days? The sheer labor involved would have been prohibitively expensive.

There was so much she didn’t understand about Pureblood marriages. Why would a husband need to provide his wife with a large, formal wardrobe? Hermione never wore anything but practical Muggle clothing, her Hogwarts uniform, or plain everyday robes.

Each time she had crossed paths with Narcissa, the witch always worn an elegant dress of some kind, but Hermione had always assumed she wore less formal clothes in private. Was this not the case? Did all pureblood wives dress so formally in their day-to-day lives? Hermione could tell Lucius was waiting for her to thank him.

She swallowed and looked up and him.

“Thank you. They are all beautiful.”

Lucius took a sip of the wine and observed her befuddled expression with amusement. Hermione turned and stared down into her own goblet, hesitantly.

“It’s not poisoned, you know,” he trilled.

“You’ll forgive me if I do not trust you.”

“Here.”

With a roll of his eyes, Lucius took the glass from her hand and drank from it, then handed it back to her.

“The only thing you’ll get from this, girl, is an education. Chateau Margaux 1986. Sample it.”

Hermione took a sip of the deep red liquid. She had limited experience with alcohol, other than the odd glass of wine with her parents while on vacation, the terrible spiked punch at the Yule Ball that had once made her sick, or the time she, Ron, and Harry had gotten a bit giddy on champagne in their tent last New Years’ Eve, but this, she had to admit, was undeniably incredible.

“We have an extensive cellar here. The Malfoy’s have always been patrons of the best winemakers.”

“Isn’t this…Muggle-wine?” Hermione ventured, cautiously.

Surprisingly, Lucius threw back his head and laughed softly, then turned back to her.

“No muggle could make something this good, my dear. It’s owned by an ancient Wizarding family. What the muggles are sold is the worst batch each year, and the morons are grateful for it. I will show you the cellar downstairs later, if you like.”

Hermione glanced over at him. He seemed more relaxed, more amiable than she had ever seen him.
Perhaps he had been drinking for awhile before she arrived. If alcohol made Lucius less angry and intense, then Hermione would personally see to it he was perpetually intoxicated.

“I would like that.”

She tried to smile at him, but all she could manage was a tight grimace. Lucius studied her carefully, and raised one eyebrow in amused curiosity.

“Have you ever been intoxicated, Hermione?”

“No.”

She cast a warning look at him, “And I don’t intend to be, tonight.”

“Forced intoxication is not on the agenda.”

“Forgive me, but ‘forced’ seems to be a recurring theme in our…interactions.”

Lucius leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes briefly. Why did she have to make everything unpleasant? He opened them and leaned forward. With a wave of his hand the food in the chafing dishes began to serve itself onto each of their plates.

“I will admit that things got a little…carried away in our last meeting.”

“Did you intend to be so carried away, tonight?”

“Not unless you force me to be. ‘Forced’ goes both ways.”

Is he trying to get me to think I am forcing him to hurt me by being willful? What a pathetic attempt at manipulation, Hermione thought.

“I see.”

Hermione picked up her fork and started picking at the chicken on her plate.

“You are not wearing the ring.”

Hermione paused mid-bite. A rush of fear came over her. She looked over at Lucius again, but his eyes were still dancing and playful.

“I am teasing, Hermione. I can understand why you left it off.”

Her cheeks reddened. “I…did what you asked of me and it came off by itself.”

Lucius leaned forward and whispered seductively. “I know.”

Hermione took a bite and then another big gulp of wine. Lucius’s eyes continued to twinkle at her, dangerously.

“I intend tonight to be your reward, for the pleasure you gave me from your revelations and for being such a good girl and following my instructions. If you behave yourself, we will have no…ugliness between us this evening. I promise you.”

“Why should I believe you?”

Malfoy paused for a moment and examined her. Then he pulled out his wand and placed a hand
above it.

“I swear on my honor as a wizard that no physical harm will come to you tonight by my hand.”

The tip of the wand faintly glowed green for a moment and then returned to its wooden shine. Lucius replaced the wand and took a sip of his wine.

“Do you believe me now?”

Hermione knew pureblood wizards took wand oaths seriously, and she had to admit she did feel slightly reassured by his promise. She exhaled.

“I do.”

“Excellent.”

“Now, tell me all about your NEWTs.”

Lucius listened as she prattled on for several minutes. She knew he couldn’t be remotely interested in her academic career, but the fact that he was actually listening to her with civility made her yammer on. It was almost a stalling tactic. As long as he was listening to her, he wasn’t assaulting her.

Eventually, she realized she had been talking non-stop for almost five minutes, nervously stammering.

“I’m—I’m sorry…I’m sure this is not very interesting to you.”

“As a general rule, I find academia boring. But I find you…surprisingly stimulating.”

He slid a hand across the table and placed it on top of hers, his fingertips lightly skimming her own.

Hermione thought back to the last time she had considered his fingertips, and felt a redness spread across her face. She looked at his face and saw a self-satisfied gleam in his eye and a knowing smirk playing across his lips.

She gasped.

“You…you know!”

“Know what?” he asked, mock innocently.

“You know… what I was thinking when I…you knew my thoughts!”

“It is a side effect of the ring’s activation. It only lasts for a couple hours before it wears off, but it was…long enough. I enjoyed hearing what you think of my…soft fingertips.”

She turned away from him, her embarrassment running hot. Furious, she whipped her head back to face him.

“Do you just want to shame me? Do you want me to feel shame that I was able to feel some sort of physical desire for you? I’m 19-years-old, Lucius. It’s not unnatural I would have physical desires, or have an attraction to an older wizard. Many young women my age do.”

Lucius continued to gently rub their fingers together. Confused, Hermione realized his actions were almost…soothing in nature.
“I was merely gathering information. You were the one who thought you had something shameful to reveal.”

“Well, it isn’t shameful. We can’t always control who or what we desire. For Merlin’s sake, I once had a crush on Gilderoy Lockhart!”

“Yes, but Gilderoy Lockhart didn’t murder your true love.”

Hermione pulled her hand away from his and stood up, furious.

“You promised not to harm me tonight!”

“I promised no physical harm. You are so tightly wound, Hermione, it is remarkably easy to offend you.”

“You are Ron’s killer and a pathetic manipulator. You will always offend me.”

“Sit. Down. Girl.”

The tone in his voice had grown suddenly much harder and staccato.

Hermione gulped some more air, nervously, and sat. Lucius reached over and took her hand in his again. This time stroking his fingertips along the inside of her palm and wrist. He breathed out a long sigh.

“That was war, Hermione. This is peace. I used the ring to discover truths about you — truths perhaps you didn’t even understand. In order to control you perfectly. As your husband and master, I must know everything about what brings you pleasure. And pain.”

“I don’t want to be controlled,” she murmured, looking down at her plate of food, unhappily.

“But I want to control you. And you promised to obey me, didn’t you?”

Hermione’s thoughts drifted back again to when they had last been together in the sitting room across the hall.

“I…did,” she admitted. Under threat of rape, you bastard, she thought.

“Hermione, I must tell you something—“

But Lucius was interrupted. The loud sound of the door of the Manor swinging open made Hermione jump. She could hear the wind from outside whistling as it whooshed in through the front door and swirled about the entry hall.

Hermione and Lucius both stood as they heard footsteps clack their way across the entry hall. Who on earth would be coming here? Hermione wondered. Snape?

But the figure that crossed into the archway and stepped across the threshold into the dining room was certainly not that of a man’s. Thick, dark hair, long eyelashes and heavily hooded eyes, the evident madness in them flickering between Lucius and Hermione.

“Hope I’m in time for dessert!” she gleefully exclaimed.

Hermione felt like all the air had been sucked out of the room. She was standing less than ten feet away from a witch she had assumed was dead. Whose corpse she had seen. But here she was. Very much alive.
The woman who had tortured her and disfigured her by carving ‘MUDBLOOD’ into her flesh.

_Bellatrix Lestrange._
Chapter 15

Hermione stared in open-mouthed disbelief as Bellatrix Lestrange strode across the carpet towards her; the dark witch looked as she always had — beautiful, ethereal, and mad as a chair.

Suddenly, Hermione came back to herself, her body reacting to the presence of her former torturer. Hermione shrieked and flung herself backwards, tripping over her own legs and falling to the floor. She pulled out her wand from her sleeve on the way down. “Stupefy!”

Bellatrix quickly deflected with an elaborate yawn. “Protego. Expelliarmus!”

Hermione’s wand flew out of her hand and bounced off the opposing wall. Bellatrix cackled as she approached and was soon standing above Hermione’s prostrate form, dark eyes glittering down at her. One long elegant hand reached down. Hermione was about to fling her arms up in defense, but Bellatrix simply clasped her hand around one of Hermione’s wrists and helped her to her feet.

Stunned, Hermione stood up, slowly. Bellatrix turned to Lucius, and inquired with mock-hurt, “Did you not tell the dirty Mudblood I was coming?”

Lucius inhaled slowly and faced her. “I did not have the opportunity, Bella.”

Bellatrix turned back to Hermione and burst into laughter, prancing around her in a circle. “Oh, your face! Absolutely priceless, Muddy!”

“How are you…alive?” Hermione wondered, sputtering the words. We saw you were dead. Molly Weasley had killed you.

“That is for me to know and you…not to find out,” Bellatrix replied in her sing-song tone. “Besides, how embarrassing if I’d let a Weasley snuff me out. No, we kill Weasleys. Not vice-versa.”

Bellatrix reached out and took a lock of Hermione’s hair in her hand, leaned in, and sniffed it. “Speaking of, so sorry to hear about that little ginger boyfriend of yours…what was his name? Donald?”

Hermione stiffened and almost wanted to roll her eyes, but decided it would only give Bellatrix more pleasure. She remained silent. The woman was exceptionally dangerous and decidedly less in control of herself than Lucius. Hermione felt one of her knees tremble with fear. She had to play this very, very carefully.

“Well,” Bellatrix continued, “No matter. I hear you traded up! Very much up.”

She leaned in even closer to whisper in Hermione’s ear, “I will be watching you, you sneaky Mudblood. You had better please my Lucius. He is like a brother to me, after all. Well, more than that.”

Bellatrix chuckled and leaned back. She put her hands on her hips and turned from Hermione to Lucius.

“Well, Lucius, I would stay for more girl talk, but I am simply exhausted from murdering muggles. I’m retiring to my chambers. Have fun with your little pet.”
“Goodnight, Bella.”

Lucius gave a small bow to her and with one last sinister, seductive smile at Hermione, Bellatrix turned on her heels and flounced out of the room. Hermione watched her go, frozen in confusion, rage, and fear.

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The door to Lucius Malfoy’s sitting room flung open.

Hermione stormed in, followed by Lucius. He closed the door behind them. There had been no point in continuing their meal after Bellatrix’s interruption. Hermione was too worked up to eat, and she had insisted they remove themselves somewhere more private to discuss the situation.

Hermione strode over the the fireplace and lit it with a tap of her wand. Lucius was pleased to note she was already taking command over certain aspects of the Manor — making it respond to her as if it were already her home. *Good, she is accepting things,* he thought.

He leaned against an armchair and watched as Hermione stared into the flames, one hand on the mantle. Her face was still awash in anger and fear.

“Is this part of your manipulation, Lucius? You *know* what she did to me. Are you asking me to live under the same roof as her so I will be in a constant state of fear? Tell me the truth. I know you want to torture me, and sharing a home with Bellatrix might be the best idea you’ve had so far!”

Hermione gave a small, uncomfortable laugh. *Lucius really was a master of manipulation. To force her to live with Bellatrix!* She couldn’t stop herself from continuing.

“Do you know I had *nightmares* about her for weeks after she tortured me here? I had to see a therapist. To this day, I haven’t been able to remove the scar. Not completely.”

Hermione waved her wand over her arm and lifted it towards Lucius. Her glamour spell fell away, and he could make out the word ‘MUDBLOOD’ engraved permanently on her skin.

“I know you derive pleasure from my pain, and you desire to control me. I will be honest with you, Lucius. I *cannot* live in the Manor if Bellatrix makes her home here. I will run away from here, from you. I will not be able to obey you if she is in this house. If you want to have your sick pleasures from me, you cannot allow her to stay here. I will not be able to endure it. I will…I will *hurt myself* rather than be here with her. I can…I can accept you as my husband. I think. If we can negotiate somewhat… But I *cannot* accept her. It is too much! I won’t do it!”

Hermione was trembling. She folded her arms and collapsed down into one of the chairs by the fire. She had been honest with Lucius, as Snape had suggested. At this point, she *was* able to accept Lucius’s tortures. *But Bellatrix on top of that? No,* she shuddered, *it would not be possible.* She would rather die.

Lucius watched her carefully. Perhaps he *had* pushed her too hard? He knew it would come as a shock when she learnt that Bella was not only alive but living at the Manor, but he thought it would be another tool he could employ to subdue her. Instead, it appeared to be a hard limit. *Interesting.*

Lucius moved to a cabinet and opened it. Her removed two small glasses and poured each of them a small sherry.

Hermione lifted her head as he moved towards her. He handed her the drink and sat across from her. They sat close to one another, their knees nearly touching. The firelight dancing on the wall and
across their faces.

Hermione couldn’t read his expression. He looked like he was deeply considering how to respond, though there was something somewhat frightening, inscrutable, and…she had to admit, more than a little handsome about his face. She sighed. Why couldn’t they just have all the cards on the table?

“Lucius…” she began quietly. “How long do you plan to keep me? I know you won’t let me live as your wife forever. How long until you… dispose of me?”

He looked across at the young, wide-eyed witch. Her warm, caramel-brown eyes bored into his, desperately earnest. The truth, he thought. Why not?

“I hadn’t decided. I need an heir. So I think at least a year, maybe two.”

“And what will you do then?”

“I anticipated that Mrs. Lucius Malfoy would meet with an unfortunate accident some time after the birth of our child.”

Hermione leaned back into the chair. As horrifying as his admission was, at least it was an admission. At least they had broken through into a new level of honesty. She hoped.

“I can stop myself from carrying a pregnancy to term. There are all sorts of ways.”

Lucius clenched his jaw and sat forward.

“You would dare to destroy a child of mine! You! A Mudblood who would be lucky to carry my seed.”

“If my life is no longer worth living, I will not endure it simply to carry our child to term.”

Lucius sat back. Hermione gave a small smile, sensing she had a modicum of power here, after all.

“You would be lucky to have your child become the heir of this estate. Of any pureblood estate. You have no idea what it means to pollute a thousand years of history with impure blood. That is should come to this…”

“Yes, I have heard it all before. But I will not have a child if it means my own death.”

Lucius took a sip of his sherry and beckoned her to do the same.

“Hermione, we shall lay our cards on the table, as it were. You will find I am not unreasonable in my terms. Submit to me, allow me to do what I will with your body and mind for my pleasure, then give me an heir. Do this, and after a period of two years I will strongly consider releasing you from our marriage.”

“Consider! Two days ago you were informing me that you would use our marriage as an excuse to break me. Now you are suggesting our arrangement may only be temporary? Forgive me. Your negotiation changes as it suits you, Lucius. I don’t trust you.”

Lucius sprang up and leaned over her. Hermione gripped the armrests, but tried to do everything in her power not to jump up and challenge him.

“You really have no idea, do you, of how a Pureblood marriage works? I will inform you of the terms, Hermione. I have brought you to my home, provided you with a lavish suite, wardrobe, trousseau. I will fulfill every obligation of a Pureblood husband. But you must play the Pureblood
wife, even though your blood is filthy. I would not react to you in this way if you knew your place! But you are almost impossible to discipline."

“And why should you waste time in attempting to discipline me? Clearly, you have Bellatrix to provide for all your pathetic needs? Your ex-wife’s sister, living under your roof? If it were known she is alive, think what The Daily Prophet would report? You pretend to adhere to traditional pureblood values, but you are corrupt, Malfoy. You’re disgusting!”

“You do not know that of which you speak!”

“You must be sharing Bellatrix’s bed, otherwise why would you live with such an utter lunatic? I wonder if Narcissa knows. Perhaps someone should tell her.”

At this, Lucius pursed his lips, his blue eyes aflame in rage. He stiffened, raised his hand and slapped Hermione full across the cheek.

As soon as he physically struck her, a powerful green light emanated from the impact point and bounced back on Lucius. His wand-oath perjured, he writhed as the pain from his blow radiated back on himself. Hermione stood up, alarmed, as Lucius fell backwards into his chair, stunned.

Lucius picked himself up and rubbed his cheek, glaring at her with intense fury. He stood and took another step towards Hermione.

“I wasn’t goading you!” she protested.

“You were!”

“I didn’t mean—I didn’t realize you would take the blow!”

“At least you will believe me now when I say I will not physically harm you tonight.”

Hermione nodded at him. They eyed each other warily. Slowly, they each sat back down in the armchairs.

Hermione took a sip of her sherry and eyed Lucius nervously. He leaned back against the velvet, and was staring at her intently. His gaze was no longer playful, but its intensity would not be accompanied by an attack, at least. He can’t grab me. It will be okay. We can just talk, Hermione thought.

After a few seconds of silence, Lucius glanced down into the fire.

“I am not, nor have I ever, shared a bed with Bellatrix Black.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. “She implied…”

“I know what she implied. She may be unstable, but she is family. Narcissa abandoned both of us after the War. Bellatrix was so close to death. It took her many months to heal. I gave her the East Wing to stay in. She cannot be seen in the Wizarding World. She takes her pleasures in the Muggle one in the evenings, and then finds a haven here in the daytime. I had intended to inform you of this before she entered. Given the…history between the two of you, I thought you should know.”

“I meant what I said…I cannot live here with her.”

“You must.”

“I won’t.”
“I will make sure she does not harm you.”

“But you like to see me hurt.”

“I like...to see you in pain. Yes. It gives me pleasure to put you in your proper place. To teach you how a Mudblood should be. I do want to lower you, Hermione. I confess it.”

Lucius’s eyes looked over at her, all lit up. “But I like to be the one providing the pain. I would take no pleasure in Bellatrix’s domination over you.”

Hermione was uncertain whether she could believe him.

“Let me make you understand. Besides, I promised you a tour.”

Lucius stood, downed the last of his sherry, and proffered his arm. Hermione stood and took it, gingerly, placing her hand on his sleeve. His robe was soft and made of velour. The feel of it under her palm generated a tiny twinge of electricity. God, it’s so embarrassing the way I respond, Hermione thought. What is my problem?

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Lucius guided her down a long, elegant corridor to a set of carved oak doors. He stood behind her and leaned in, his lips almost brushing her ear.

“Close your eyes.”

Hermione obeyed as Lucius slid his hands down her shoulders and biceps, lightly gliding down her forearms to her hands. He lifted her hands up by the wrists and pushed them forwards until her palms were flat against the door.

“Give it a push.”

Hermione did, bracing for some sort of blow or punishment. Instead, the oak doors easily swung inwards. Hermione felt Lucius nudge her from behind. She took several steps, her hands searching through the air in front of her.

A smell filtered into her nostrils, powerful and enticing. It was a smell she knew well, and one that always had delighted her — old book smell. Leather and glue, ancient parchment and fresh ink. This was similar to the aroma of the Hogwarts Library but more powerful, somehow.

“Open your eyes.”

Hermione did, and she was greeted by the most stunning library she had ever seen. She gasped in amazement.

The room was three stories tall, with a large glass stained-glass dome in its center ceiling. A metal circular staircase connected the levels on two sides, and each level had a balcony that wrapped around the entire room. The room was partitioned with row after row of mahogany bookcases with numerous desks, armchairs, Tiffany lamps, and enticing nooks and crannies. A large bay window was filled with a red love-seat, the cushions set up so the occupant would look out over the Malfoy fountains and gardens.

That would be a wonderful spot to read, Hermione thought.

"How many...?" Hermione trailed off, her mouth agape.
"About 50,000 volumes. More in storage."

Hermione took a step forward and turned her body 360 degrees, her eyes eagerly drinking in the sight. The books themselves were almost all leather-bound or rolled up in scrolls. As her eyes danced along one shelf she noticed they were first-editions, many of them hundreds of years old, she estimated.

Lucius drank in her pleasure. *Excellent.*

“You see, I told you you would have a reward tonight, and so you shall. You may borrow any of these books you feel would assist you in your NEWTs.”

Hermione turned to face him, her forehead narrowing. *Surely, there was some sort of trick up his sleeve.* She took a step away from him.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I don’t believe you would offer me anything without wanting something in return.”

“That would be the Slytherin way, wouldn’t it? Come, I want to show you something else.”

Lucius guided her up the spiral staircase on the right to the second floor. She followed him around the catwalk to a bookcase partially obscured by a curtain. Lucius pulled it aside and pulled a weighty tome down from the top shelf. He placed it on a small table and motioned for Hermione to step towards it. She bit her lip and eyed him suspiciously. He held up his hands in mock-surrender.

“No physical harm, remember?”

Hermione sighed. She knew there was no way to trust him, but felt like there was nothing to be done.

She leaned over slightly. The book’s title in gold embossed letters was simply *Submission.* Hermione had finished *BDSM for Beginners,* so she was fairly certain what the book that lay before her contained. She shriveled up her nose and turned to Lucius.

“You wanted to show me a dirty book? Is this your idea of seduction?”

Lucius’s upper lip curled in a smile. “Are you well-versed in dirty books, Mudblood?”

“I…no, of course not.”

“When you were touching yourself, I heard in your head the references you made to some pathetic little manual about BDSM. I think you should begin to understand what I expect from you, Hermione.”

Hermione gulped nervously, and turned back to the book. *Submission.*

“Open it,” Lucius whispered.
“I don’t want to, Lucius.”

Hermione turned to face him, her back pressed against the table. Her face defiant but calm. The book, *Submission*, lay unopened on the desk behind her.

His large form was merely inches from hers. His hot breath on her face made the hairs on her own neck stand on end. She looked up into his blue eyes. This was not what she wanted. Not the kind of relationship she wanted with her future husband.

But would he become angry? At least he couldn’t physically assault her, thanks to the wand-oath. His eyes were still curious, slightly playful. *I can deal with this version of him.*

“Why? I thought you were *endlessly* curious. Severus used to refer to you as The Know-It-All.”

Hermione looked down, pensively.

“I suppose I am, but…I want to *discover* things between my husband and myself. I don’t want to fill my brain with unrealistic ideas and depictions. Before.”

Lucius smirked. “Some of them might not be as unrealistic as you think.”

“Nevertheless, it seems like there is always a big gap between what really happens between men and women in bed and our imaginations. I guess I always assumed I would discover what I like and what my husband wants…together.”

Lucius was struck by this. He made a *humph* noise, shaking it off.

“Then why read your tragic little BDSM guide?”

“I was trying to get into *your* head. To see what *you* might be thinking. I didn’t want to go further than that. It’s not that certain things in it weren’t…interesting. I could have looked into a dozen more books after that if I had wanted to, but I—”

“—What?”

“I thought that if that is what *you* prefer, how you are, I would rather just learn it from *you*. I…when Ron and I…”

Hermione felt a lump in her throat. She couldn’t discuss how she had hoped things would be with Ron. Lucius wouldn’t understand anyway.

“I always wanted to please my future husband. But I…I just…this is not how I thought it would be…It’s so *fake*. There is no tenderness between us and there never can be. And I don’t want this! I want a *real* marriage. I want to marry a wizard who can love me.”

Hermione caught herself. She could feel her emotions rising up to the surface. Her anger over the unfairness of the situation. Why she should be forced to marry Ron’s murderer? Her dreams of pleasing Ron so far away — ripped from her. She breathed in deeply and suppressed a sob.

She *did* want to be a wife, a good wife. Loving. Tender. But how could it occur in this situation? How could it happen with a *murderer*? She was mourning her own idea of wifehood, she realized. Never to be the help-meet she had imagined, never to have a husband she could worship and respect.
Ugh! She was so furious at her powerlessness. So sick of having to do this God-awful dance with the sadistic blond wizard before her.

She was about to look up and ask Lucius if she could leave and return to Hogwarts when surprisingly, Lucius leaned in to her…and wrapped his arms around her!

Hermione was too stunned to move. His palms were gently pressing into her back. He pulled her closer and moved her body closer to his. Hermione found herself pressing her chin against his shoulder, her breasts against his firm chest, a look of confusion crossing her face. *Is he hugging me? Am I being hugged by Lucius Malfoy?? Merlin, what is happening?*

She felt him inhale deeply into the side of her neck. His breath made a little shiver go down her spine. She had an impulse to wrap her own arms around him, to bury her face in his neck and let the tears fall. Not that he would comfort her or wipe them away. In fact, he would probably laugh, but Hermione couldn’t remember the last time she had been held.

The room was beginning to feel a little warm — the lace collar of her gown tight on her décolletage. Why did Lucius have this effect on her?

“**I am…touched, Hermione, that you want my love. Tell me, are you saving yourself for me?**” He whispered into her ear.

Hermione paused. He was misunderstanding her. *Probably on purpose.* And she was a little embarrassed, but considering everything else she had revealed to him, her confirmation seemed inconsequential. She sighed.

“If you are asking if I am a virgin, Lucius, the answer is yes. I told you before, you won’t make me ashamed of myself, of my experience, or lack thereof.”

Lucius released her from his strong embrace and looked down at her. His hands grasping her triceps. His blue eyes twinkling with some dark mischief.

“I don’t want you to be ashamed, girl. I want you to consider the possibilities.”

Lucius raised a hand to her neck and began to stroke it.

“Close your eyes.”

Hermione was more than a little suspicious, but she allowed her eyelids to drop. His voice filled the small vestibule, reverberating off her ears. He leaned in and was almost whispering.

“You have no idea what your body is capable of, Hermione. The pleasure I give you will bind you to me. You will allow me to control you in exchange for such pleasure. Our marriage does not have to be purely about your pain, though I will make you suffer.”

“You already have,” Hermione whispered.

She was trembling slightly now, and she could feel Lucius running his hands along her arms. He moved them down to her waist. She inhaled sharply. It felt nice to feel his strong hands splayed across her hips. Ron’s hands has been…smaller, more tentative. Lucius grasped her firmly and pressed her hips to his.

“You look the part of Lady Malfoy tonight,” he whispered.

“But I am not Lady Malfoy yet…”
“No, and you will never be a true Lady Malfoy, but…”

He leaned in and suddenly Hermione felt him press his lips to her neck. _It feels…good. What is happening?_ She thought. _Why am I enjoying his touches so much?_

“…we can pretend,” he whispered against her.

He kissed her softly again, his lips pressing along her pulse point, moving slowly down to her clavicle. Hermione bit her lip, keeping her eyes tightly closed. She didn’t want him to do this. Wanted him to stop. But…it felt _so_ good. His smell — masculine, earthy. His voice’s low, seductive tone. His strength in the way he held her body to his. _What am I doing?_

“I did say I would reward you,” he murmured against her skin.

Hermione could feel her heartbeat increasing rapidly. She merely stood, arms at her sides, allowing Lucius to kiss her neck, allowing his hands to wander around her waist, up and down her ribcage. She could feel tiny twinges of pleasure between her legs. She suddenly had an urge to take his hand and move it to her breast. _What am I doing? Why does it feel so, _so_ good? This is Lucius bleeding Malfoy!

Her right hand moved upwards, almost against her will, and she found it slowly stroking Lucius’s hair. His fine blonde strands were amazingly soft, almost like a woman’s hair. Lucius gave a small moan into her neck. He was…_enjoying_ her touch.

Hermione felt one of his hands slide down from her waist along her hip, gathering up her skirt, exposing her calf, her knee, then her thigh. She wanted to pull away, to push his hand from her, but she was exhilarated by it. His body, his touches were so different from Ron’s. _A man,_ she thought. _He is a man, who knows what a woman wants._ She bit back a moan.

_No! I have to stop this. Something is wrong. Something is very wrong,_ Hermione thought. _I’m enjoying this._ _He is enjoying this. Why??_

“No, stop!” she exclaimed, pushing him away from herself breathlessly, opening her eyes. She stepped back and Lucius’s hand fell away, her blue dress falling back down to her ankles.

All at once, Hermione realized.

“You…put something…in the food!” she stammered.

Lucius smiled seductively.

“Not in the food, in the sherry. A very small amount of aphrodisiac sprinkled in.”

“You…_drugged_ me?!” Hermione exclaimed.

Lucius was surprised at how pleased he was that she had figured it out. She really was remarkably bright. _How unusual. How…unnerving. Call a spade a spade. That was the communication she likes, what she responds to._ He smiled again.

“You hate me because I killed the Weasley. I hate you because you’re a revolting Mudblood. This will make things… _easier_ for both of us tonight. It is a courtesy.”

Lucius moved a step closer and slid a powerful hand around her waist again. Hermione pushed his hand away and glared up at him, her brown eyes flashing.
“I have no intention of giving in to you tonight, Malfoy. We aren’t even married! What, could you not wait a few more days?”

“My intention was to try to ease our way into this abominable union, but you make it impossible at every turn, girl!”

“I make it impossible! You tried to drug me and rape me!”

“I was doing you a kindness. Do you think I have ever bothered to give a lust-potion to a Mudblood before? I have given you more respect than you deserve and yet you remain utterly ungrateful for it. You have already been given Narcissa’s suite, a wardrobe, full access to the manor, and yet you act like a brat. Do you not see that I do not want this marriage either? But I will take my pleasure from it one way or another. If that pleasure is to be derived solely from your pain and suffering, then so be it. I was attempting a great kindness tonight, Mudblood. You should be grateful.”

“Should I have gratitude you manipulated my body to feel desire for you?”

“Oh, you would feel desire for me regardless, Hermione. Of that I am sure, considering our recent chats. You are drawn to me, sexually. A lust potion cannot activate unless there is something there to begin with. I simply tried to ease the way.”

Hermione snorted in contempt. Lucius scowled at her.

“Do you know why you have never had sex, never had an orgasm? You’re so afraid, Hermione. You’re a terrified little girl who lives inside her head. And you have suddenly found yourself all grown up, with a woman’s body, and you haven’t the faintest idea what to do with it.”

Hermione stiffened. Was he right? She didn’t know. But she would not allow him to win in any kind of argument. He was a horrible hypocrite, a sadist, Ron's murderer, and still her sworn enemy. She clenched her jaw.

“And what about you? Dousing yourself with a potion so you wouldn’t feel guilt when you touch a Mudblood? You desire me, Lucius. I can see it on your face. You want to torture me, but you also want to…”

She trailed off. His eyebrow arched, defiantly.

“No, say it, you Mudblood whore.”

“You also want… to make love to me.”

Lucius’s eyes grew colder than Hermione had ever seen.

She knew immediately she had made a terrible mistake.

She had sensed this truth. Beneath Lucius the torturer, Lucius the pureblood supremacist, it was also clear he was profoundly damaged. Narcissa leaving him had broken him. Draco refuting his namesake had broken him. He had retreated into his darker nature, but he…wanted something else.

Otherwise, why would he be spending so much time on her? Trying to cajole, inflict, manipulate, abuse? He needed to have someone to fixate on, to hurt. And it was she he wanted to devote his energies to — even if those energies were hateful. Snape had been so accurate. Lucius was floating, purposeless. Only his hatred keeping him going. But it was clear he needed to please and be pleased. And he used the lust potion to hide his vulnerability.
Hermione wanted to smile. She felt like she had finally figured this powerful wizard out. He might hate her and destroy her, hurt her body and mind, but she knew exactly why he operated the way he did. However now was not the time to gloat. She opened her mouth to apologize, but before she could, Lucius raised his hand.

Despite knowing the consequences, Lucius slapped her brutally. He endured the pain as it reflected back on him and he staggered backwards. Hermione’s cheek only felt a dull hum, but it was enough to cause her to panic. There was nothing else that could come from staying in his presence tonight.

Hermione turned and ran along the catwalk. *Get away! Get to the floo!* She reached the spiral staircase and flew down it, two steps at a time. Almost to the bottom, she rounded the center post and tripped, falling forwards several steps and landing on the wooden hardwood floor on her hands and knees.

From above she heard Lucius shout. “Don’t you dare run from me! I will dismiss you as I see fit!”

Hermione was about to scramble to her feet and make for her bedroom, Narcissa’s bedroom, she corrected herself, when she saw the pointed boots and ruffled skirts cross the floor towards her. Still on her hands and knees, Hermione looked up to see Bellatrix Lestrange striding towards her.

“Couldn’t sleep, Mudblood, and thought I’d grab a bookie. Couldn’t help overhearing your lover’s tiff.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in terror. *Oh, God, not her. Not her.* Lucius called down from the railing.

“It is no concern of yours, Bella.”

“Oh, I think it is.”

The dark witch stared down at Hermione in anticipation and licked her lips.
Chapter 17

Two minutes later, Lucius had descended the staircase and was now standing over Hermione, still lying sprawled on the floor. Bellatrix was watching from the staircase, leaning against the railing, complaining.

“Just let me punish the insolent little Mudblood, Lucius. They only respond to fear. Your kindness is wasted on her.”

Lucius paced back and forth in front of Hermione. He had imagined Hermione giving in to him tonight, taking her to her bedroom, the two of them doused in the lust-potion. Him finally forgetting Narcissa. Her forgetting the Weasley. The two of them just enjoying each other’s bodies — the first step in making Hermione his slave, initiating her into physical pleasure. Yes, of course he was only doing it to get power over her. It wasn’t that he actually wanted her. That would be absurd.

But it had all been ruined now. Hermione was insolent, unappreciative, and as argumentative as ever. She had no idea the lengths he had gone to. Did she not understand that she could have been betrothed to Pettigrew? Or Dolohov? He would make love to her properly. Why was she so ungrateful?

He had even given her access to the Malfoy Library — even though his ancestors would have been horrified by the idea of a Mudblood touching their rare, hand-picked collection.

Lucius stopped pacing and glared down at her. No, she needed to be taught a lesson. There would be no way to endure her for a year or two unless she could be brought down. If cajoling and seduction didn’t work, he would simply continue in the manner she expected.

Hermione looked over at Bellatrix. She was perched near the staircase. She had said little, but was clearly delighted to see that Hermione had displeased Lucius. She was here for the show, and would take every opportunity to urge Lucius towards violence.

Lucius wheeled around finally, and faced Hermione. He had made a mistake, thinking her intelligence and innocence would separate her from other Mudbloods. She was what she was.

He cleared his throat and began, his hatred boiling over.

“I was honest with you when I said I would reward you tonight. I gave you the choice between pleasure and pain. And it seems you have chosen pain.”

“No!”

“Why don’t you leave the Mudblood with me? She and I can have a little girl-talk,” Bellatrix purred.

“No, please!”

Hermione grabbed for him, panicking, but Lucius shook her off and stepped back. She began to crawl towards him.

Lucius’s upper lip curled in cruelty. She was just like every other Mudblood, he thought. She wasn’t special after all. Certainly not deserving of the undue consideration he had shown her. Dresses, meals, lust potions. It was more than he had ever done in the past. And she had rejected him so thoroughly. She would suffer for it. If his bloody wand-oath were not in effect, he would drag her to the Dungeons right now. He stared down at her face, now covered in wet tears.
“Beg me.”

“Please, don’t leave me alone with her!”

“I am not convinced.”

“Lucius, I am begging you, please! Please! As your wife. Protect me. You said you would not allow her to harm me. You said that an hour ago!”

“But we are not married yet.”

“Fine, don’t protect me as your wife. As your… submissive, your… pet, whatever it is you want to call me. As your stupid filthy Mudblood. I don’t care what you call me! I’m sorry! I know you were trying to have a nice evening… in your way, and I ruined it. I am so sorry. I will make it up to you, Lucius.”

“Kiss my robes.”

You’ve got to be kidding me, Hermione thought. But she knew she had to get away from Bellatrix. Lucius couldn’t hurt her, but he could instruct Bellatrix to do whatever he wanted. Hermione bent down and kissed the edge of his robe, lifting the velvet to her lips and looking up at him through her tears.

“You deserve to be punished.”

“I know! Please forgive me.”

Lucius looked down at her. Hermione saw a slight softening in his eyes. He’s considering it. He’s relenting, she thought with some hope. She buried her face in his robes and sobbed. Make him believe it. Give him the display he wants, she thought.

“I know! I deserve whatever punishment you decide. But not this. Please. I am yours, Lucius. Only yours. Do not give me to her. I swear I am yours. You can take me to bed tonight.”

Hermione felt a hand gently land on the back of her head and slide into her chestnut curls. She paused, the tears from her face wetting his clothing. I hope he believes me. God, let it be enough.

“You’re a clever girl, Hermione. And you’re… almost there.”

She looked up at him. He slid the hand down and alongside her cheek, cupping her jaw. His blue eyes flashing down at her.

“Such a smart Mudblood. And I see your panic. It’s breathtaking. But there is a difference between words and reality. You are saying these things because you think I want to hear them, and you think they will prevent your punishment.”

God, Hermione thought, was she laying it on too thick? But this was what he wanted after all? He wanted her to say these things, didn’t he?

“No! No, I mean it!” Hermione protested.

“No?” Lucius cocked his head to the side, his eyes widening slightly in anger.

_Snape said not to lie to him. Snape said not to lie him. What have I done?_

Hermione leaned back slightly on her heels and sniffled. She took a deep inhale, trying to steady
herself. She lowered her eyes in shame, opened her mouth and let the truth come out in barely a whisper.

“Yes…I am telling you what you want to hear, Lucius. I’m sorry. I am…so afraid.”

Lucius smiled. “Oh, poor Mudblood. I know you are. It is right that you fear your betters. It pleases me.”

“I want to please you,” Hermione whispered, still staring down at the ground.

At this point, she didn’t even know if she meant it or not. If pleasing him meant no more torture, then she was all for it. If a lie allowed her to escape this room, she would tell it.

Lucius smiled and continued to gently massage her face, his fingers gliding back and forth across her cheek, up to her ear, and then back down to the corner of her lips. Gently moving his fingernails along her skin on the upstroke, then bending his wrist and caressing her with the pads of his fingers on the downstroke.

*Her skin really is lovely. So untouched. An English rose.*

Her shoulders had stopped heaving and she was trembling quietly now, awaiting her fate.

“You really would do anything, wouldn’t you? For me to send Bella away?”

Hermione glanced over at the mad witch in the corner, watching Lucius, her eyes wild with anticipation. She turned back to stare down at Lucius’s boots. She nodded.

“Show me.”

Hermione lifted her head to look up at him. Her facial expression turned to one of utter shock. *What does he want? He can’t mean…he can’t want…* Suddenly, she was all too aware of their physical proximity and relative positions. He, standing tall and haughty above her. She on her knees, her face only inches from the apex of his legs. *No…no!*

Lucius stared down at her, completely stone-faced. She couldn’t get a read on him. He made no motion, his eyes gave no command. He simply…waited to see what she would do.

Hermione’s eyes flicked to his robes, hanging down over his mid-section. Should she…move them aside? Reach for his…*oh God. I can’t. I just can’t.*

“Please no,” she whimpered, quietly. Lucius simply continued to stroke her face.

“Your words will not be enough to save you this time. I require…a gesture.”

Hermione swallowed. In the corner, Bellatrix gave a mad chuckle. “Oh, Lucius, she probably doesn’t even know how.”

Lucius didn’t take his eyes off Hermione, completely ignoring Bellatrix.

“Well…?”

“I…can’t,” Hermione whispered. She felt tears fall again. She leaned her head into Lucius’s touch. “Please, Master, don’t make me.”

Lucius smiled. “Oh, but I am not your master yet, am I? Still, you resist.”
“I can’t…in front of…not when she’s here. Take me to the bedroom, then.”

“This is your doing, Hermione. So many lies. So much running from the truth of things. Of what you are.”

“I don’t understand…”

“Outside you are Hermione Granger. Hogwarts’ student. Such a good girl. Everyone’s good girl. But inside…”

Lucius bent down to her right ear. Hermione trembled at his nearness. His hand tightened slightly on her jaw.

“…inside, there is a part of you that wants to be my perfect little Mudblood whore. I am not assaulting you, my dear. I am releasing you. I want to see the real you.”

Hermione shuddered slightly, a brief feeling of pleasure passing through her. How could it be that she felt anything but disgust at his words? It must be the lust potion.

She was shaking like a leaf. *Am I still under the potion’s influence? Or do I actually want him? What is wrong with me? Oh God. Someone help me!*

Lucius stood up again.

“Time is running out. Last chance, Hermione. Show me your devotion. No more play-acting. I want to see the real you.”

Hermione shut her eyes, several more tears softly falling from them. She couldn’t do what he wanted. No way. Never. And never in front of Bellatrix. It was too much. Too depraved. But maybe there was something else? *What can I do? What would he want me to do? Hermione’s mind raced for a solution, her panic rising. Then, a small voice popped up in the back of her head.*

_Breathe. Take a breath. Imagine Bellatrix isn’t here. It’s just him. It’s just you and him. No lies, no deception. He wants the real me. The real me… Snape said not to lie. What would I do if he was just my husband and I was his wife and I actually cared for him? What do I want to do? What would I desire?*

Hermione took another deep breath, her mind filling with a million possibilities. She felt the room grow still. All she could hear was Lucius’s breathing and her own. Rhythmic. In and out.

She opened her eyes slowly.

Lucius was glaring down at her, his stunning aquamarine eyes full of impatient frustration. *They are beautiful, though,* she thought. His hand was still on her jaw. *He is a monster, but a beautiful monster.* Looking at his handsome face, he reminded her of the character Dorian Gray in one of her favorite Muggle books. Perhaps she *could* find something…real…in the midst of this horror. *No more pretend,* she thought. *Give in to how the potion is making me feel.*

Slowly Hermione reached up with her left hand. She gently, softly caressed the back of his right hand, feeling the ridges of his veins, the smoothness of his white alabaster skin. Her index and middle finger lightly ghosted across his knuckles. As she touched him, she gazed up at him, trying to telegraph her thoughts. *This is real. This is real. This is real.*

Lucius arched an eyebrow. He had expected her to make some pathetic attempt to grope him through his robes, as other Mudbloods he had tortured at the Dark Revels had done. He had never *allowed*
any of them to take him into their mouths, of course, that would have been beneath his dignity, but he enjoyed it when they became so desperate they would resort to offering *that*.

It was delicious confirmation of what he always believed: Mudblood women wanted Pureblood men. They needed it. *Craved* it. And as soon as they were backed into a corner, they would almost immediately offer up their bodies. As if any Pureblood male could truly be satisfied by Mudblood flesh.

But this…was different. *What is she doing?* Lucius wondered. His curiosity peaked, he watched her quietly glide her hand along his. There didn’t appear to be any artifice in it.

She simply touched his hand. It was tentative…sensual…almost, *sweet*. He looked for any deception in her brown eyes. There was none. They simply gazed up at him. Sad, fearful, but also…desirous? Lucius swallowed. For the first time this evening, he felt a strong feeling of desire in his own belly, felt himself start to grow between his legs.

This was…*intimate*. He didn’t like it. She was the one on her knees but he felt like the power had shifted.

Her eyes never leaving his, Hermione began to move his hand down her jaw. *This is what I want,* Hermione thought. *Intimacy. Care. Real devotion. This is my true desire.*

*He thinks it’s about power. But this is what it is.* She gave a soft sigh as she moved his hand. *I like his hands. His hands, his eyes, his face.* She blushed as she realized this was the truth, even without the lust potion. *I like his fingers.*

He is just another damaged wizard, desperately damaged from his upbringing and the War. Perhaps he had never know any kind of real intimacy. *Turn the tables, Hermione, find a way to think about him,* she thought. *He is just a man… a man who has needs… and I need to forget for a moment. Think about how nice his hand is…comfort him. These soft fingertips against me. They feel so good.*

Lucius watched as she moved his fingers to her pink lips and gently pursed them together, pressing oh-so-carefully against his skin. She paused for a micro-second, then cautiously kissed the tips of his fingers slowly in earnest, with tenderness and an almost spiritual devotion.

He swallowed, and felt something small well up in his chest. The lust potion? No. *What game is this? What is she doing?*

But before he could consider further, Hermione opened her mouth and gently licked the pad of his middle finger. Lucius inhaled sharply, feeling a rush of heat to his groin. *God, such a small thing!* Her small pink tongue merely flicking across his finger. And he felt ragged, almost undone already.

And her eyes. She had stopped crying and was looking up at him with…was that *true* devotion? Exactly as he had asked. There was no fakery here, no manipulation. She…she wanted to taste him. Her warm brown eyes staring up at him.

He groaned slightly as Hermione’s mouth enveloped his index and middle fingers, drawing them into her mouth. Her mouth was warm and wet and she was softly massaging his knuckle with her tongue. It wasn’t obscene. She wasn’t trying to mimic fellatio. She was… *reverent* in her movements. It was sweet and real.

Her innocent sensuality was breathtaking. He felt his knees go weak, felt something begin to flutter again inside his chest. She was *too real.* Too…*Merlin, he had no word for it!* But he could not endure it. *No,* he thought. *Stop this!* Lucius cleared his throat and roughly pushed her back, pulling
his fingers away.

“That’s enough of your…measly attempt at seduction, girl!”

His hand out of her mouth, he took another step back, trying to regain control. *No, that was…all a manipulation. It must have been.* She had been trying to get under his skin. To take power over him, over the situation. But it had made him feel…

*No!* Lucius shook his head. He would make damn certain that no *Mudblood whore* ever had power over him.

“You think *that* is what I want? Pathetic. I forget how little experience you have, you diseased Mudblood slave. You have no idea how to please a man. It’s so tiresome!”

Bellatrix cackled off to the side. “I’ve seen *toads* with better oral skills, Muddy. Gods, Lucius, will you just give the little whore to me already?”

Lucius took another step backwards, straightening his shoulders and breaking eye contact with Hermione. He had allowed his mask to fall, for just a moment. He didn’t understand what had just happened, but he was aware she had won something over him. The manipulative little Mudblood. *How dare she! The impertinence! She would suffer for it.*

“If I could strike you right now, Hermione, I surely would. You have completely wasted my time this evening. I tried to treat you as a Pureblood wife, and you have rejected all civility. Rejected me. You will be punished like the disgusting, pathetic Mudblood whore you *insist* on being.”

Lucius straightened his robes and turned towards the oak double-doors. Hermione tried to crawl after him. She could feel the panic rising again.

“Forgive me, Lucius! Oh God, please! I *tried*…I *am* trying! Please, *forgive* me. I will do *anything.*”

He rounded back on her.

“Oh, I *know* you will do anything. But I don’t *want* it. Even your groveling is tedious to me, girl. Perhaps Bella can get some pleasure out of you tonight? For surely, I have had none.”

With that he turned again. With a scream, Hermione lurched forward, desperately clutching for his velvet robes. But Bellatrix was already behind her, dragging her backwards across the floor by her ankle.

Hermione screamed and kicked, clawing at the slippery hardwood floor with her fingernails, trying to fend the dark witch off; Bellatrix merely purred, like a cat playing with a half-dead mouse.

At the doorway, Lucius turned back one last time.

He wasn’t sure why, but he needed to look at her. Hermione was sprawled on the library floor on her side. Her arms extended towards him. Her face, covered in tears, raised a few inches off the floor. A stream of pleading words spilling from her lips. Bellatrix had a hand on each of her ankles, pinning her down to the hardwood.

Hermione reached with all her might towards the blonde wizard in the doorway. If she could just *reach* him. Get him back to the place they were at earlier in the evening. *Connect.*

“Please! Lucius! She will *kill* me.”
“I very much doubt that, my dear. But I suspect you will wish you were dead.”

With that, Lucius pushed the oak doors open and strode out, slamming them behind him.

As he walked down the hallway, he could hear it begin.

Bellatrix’s voice shouting, “Crucio!” And Hermione’s screams.

“Lucius!” he heard her call out in her agony. His name.

"Lucius! Lucius!"

He stopped for a moment at the top of the stairwell, and realized he had an unusual impulse to turn and go back. Just a small twinge of it. What was? Guilt? Of course not. Lucius brushed it off. The lust potion was clouding his thinking, forcing some sort of sympathetic connection between them. It had been a mistake on his part. It would wear off soon enough.

No, she will break. She must break. It is her destiny. He had never intended to allow Bellatrix to torture her, but Hermione had brought this on herself.

As he heard another distant “Crucio!” he continued to move down the hallway. His boots thudded along the carpet as he headed to his bedroom.

Away from the sounds of Hermione’s screams.
Chapter 18

Hermione awoke on the floor of the private bathroom in her Head Girl room in Gryffindor Tower. The first thing she felt was cool tile against her cheek. Her eyes fluttered open slowly, and she shifted slightly, adjusting to her surroundings. She groaned. Her body ached everywhere. What had happened? Then she remembered.

Bellatrix. The library at Malfoy Manor. It had gone on for hours.

At some point she had stopped fighting the dark witch; her muscles and nerves had simply collapsed. Her body unable to do anything but lay there. It was only then that Bellatrix had finally gotten bored and ceased the rounds of *Cruciatus*. How many rounds had there been? Hermione had lost count after six. The searing, slicing, burning pain had been endless.

Hermione had never experienced such physical agony before. It was so much worse than the previous time Bellatrix had tortured her. Eventually her mind had almost gone all-white with the pain — her consciousness almost drifting outside of her physical being.

She had hoped Lucius would come back; she had screamed out for him, begged for him to come back until her throat had gone dry and hoarse and she could no longer make sounds with it. But he hadn’t returned.

Hermione slowly lifted herself to seated position on the white bathroom tile. She winced as a sharp pain shot down her side. She looked down. The white tile was covered in sticky blood. *My blood*, she realized. Small droplets and puddles all around her. Her wand lay next to her. *At least Bellatrix hadn’t snapped it in two or destroyed it,* Hermione thought.

She was still wearing the blue tea-dress but it had been reduced to bloody rags now, sliced up into ribbons from various curses. Through a large tear on the side, Hermione could see a huge raised bruise covering most of her left ribcage. She winced again. Probably some of her ribs were cracked.

She dragged herself over to the wall and used it to steady herself as she ever so slowly lifted herself up to her feet. Every inch was painful. Her joints were sore and stiff, especially in her knees and hips. A dull, throbbing headache pounded in her skull. Her calves were sore, as if she had run a marathon, and she felt more than a little dizzy.

She was remembering more.

Bellatrix kicking her in the stomach. Bellatrix slapping her face. Bellatrix whispering horrible things into her ear, saying that she wanted to blind her, cut out her tongue, slice off her nose, and that only the upcoming wedding to Lucius was preventing it. At some point, Bellatrix had bitten her shoulder and drawn blood, then spat it out, insisting she could taste how filthy and contaminated it was.

Hermione felt numb, remembering all of this. She looked down at her hand on the wall. It was trembling slightly.

She knew about PTSD from the therapist at St. Mungo’s she had seen after Bellatrix had tortured her before. Ms. Merrybrook. But this was *so* much worse. It was like her body had somehow lost all of its stability, its strength. She placed her right hand over her left to steady it. She took a deep breath in and exhaled. The tremor finally stopped. *It’s okay, I’m okay. I’m still here. I’m alive. I made it. I’m alive.*
As she gingerly made her way over to the sink, wincing with each step, she flashed on how she had gotten here.

When Bellatrix had finally left her, bruised, broken, and bleeding, Hermione had lost consciousness. She had awoken sometime in the night. The library had turned pitch black. The manor had been quiet, peaceful. *Would Bellatrix come back if she tried to escape?* The moonlight was streaming into the library’s bay windows, lightly illuminating the books around her. *I can’t lie here. I can’t be here in the morning.* Hermione had thought. *I have to get out!*

She had dragged herself to the library door on her stomach before her arms had given out. After resting there for some time, listening for any footsteps in the hall, she had opened the oak doors tentatively and with all the strength she could muster had crawled along on all fours to Narcissa’s bedroom. Her palms could barely support her weight. Her knees ached with each shuffle.

With her last ounce of reserve, she had managed to crawl across the bedroom to the fireplace, floo back to her Head Girl’s room at Hogwarts, and collapse on her bathroom floor.

Hermione made it over to her ivory, porcelain sink at last and turned to look at herself in the mirror. As soon as she saw herself, she screamed.

Yellow bruises, purple welts, some of her hair ripped out, cuts criss-crossing her chest, her neck. Some of them still bleeding. Bite marks around her lips where she had sunk her own teeth into herself. Both eyes were black. Part of her earlobe was torn. Scratch marks all over her face from Bellatrix’s fingernails. It was like nothing she had ever seen. Surely that could not be *herself* in the mirror — that poor bloody creature!

Hermione gasped for breath, sucking in oxygen as she gripped the edges of the porcelain sink. She had never seen herself so injured. She looked like a ghoul. *Don’t panic. Calm down. You can heal this. It’s okay. You can heal yourself. It will be okay.*

She leaned down as a sob wrenched itself from her chest. It hurt her ribs, but she couldn’t stop another then another sob from coming out. Her throat scratched against itself painfully as the sounds escaped her chest cavity, “Huhhhhhhh.”

She cried for several minutes, hunched over the sink, before she finally was able to pull herself together enough to reach for her wand.

Still weak as a kitten, it took her several minutes to heal her ribs, stop the bleeding, and scour the blood from her skin. She cast just about every healing spell she knew until she was exhausted from the effort. Finally, she looked back in the mirror. Thank Merlin, her face was significantly improved, and the black eyes were gone, though there was still some tender yellow skin here and there. With a quick glamour spell she was able to hide that which still needed time to heal.

Then she turned her focus to cleaning herself up. She peeled the shredded remains of the blue dress off herself, took off her underwear and what was left of her bra and stepped into her shower. The hot water stung her freshly healed skin, but she needed this feeling. It felt cleansing to wash away the previous night. The hot water washed the rest of the dried blood from her. She watched it swirl down the drain. *Make it all go away,* she thought. She twitched slightly as some of the after-effects of the *Cruciatus* squeezed her cramped muscles.

After several minutes of just standing with her eyes closed under the hot spray, she finally stepped out of the shower and wrapped a large fluffy white towel around her torso. *There. I just need to take care of myself now. I survived. I am going to be alright,* she thought.
She passed the mirror above the sink again as she moved to the door, and that’s when she saw it.

The blue dress had covered her arms, so she hadn’t paid them much attention to them when she was casting the healing spells. But now, both of her arms were uncovered, and the marks on them were laid bare before her.

Hermione’s mouth fell open in horror.

On her left arm was the “MUDBLOOD” scar that had always been there, though it had faded considerably. She hadn’t glamoured it yet. But on her right arm. Oh, Gods, no. No!

On her right forearm, carved by the same hand. Fresh and red. One word.

WHORE.

Hermione screamed and stumbled backwards away from the mirror. No! No! It can’t be!

Somehow she had forgotten. Her brain had locked this memory up and thrown away the key. Protecting her. It couldn’t be real. It wasn’t real. No, no, no, no, no!

She stumbled backwards out the bathroom and ran to her full-length mirror across from her closet. She rotated her arm outwards to examine the flesh of her forearm.

It was still there.

Inflamed and crimson.

WHORE.

****

Hermione was running now.

She had thrown on a simple long-sleeve dress, and over that a plain robe that covered her from neck to mid-calf, tucked her wand in its sleeve, and fled her rooms as quickly as possible.

She raced down the Hogwarts’ corridors, flashes of memory coming back to her in waves.

Bellatrix taunting her, her dark mad eyes glaring down at her like two fathomless black holes.

“I don’t want you to forget, Muddy. A Marriage Law can legally make you a wife, but we both know what you really are.”

Hermione had twisted and writhed, trying to get her arm away from the dark witch’s grasp.

“Please, no!” she had whimpered.

Bellatrix’s twisted smile. The witch’s breath in her ear.

“Say what you are, and I’ll let you go.”

“I’m…I’m a Mudblood whore.”

“That’s right.”

And then the pain. Agonizing, searing. A blade slicing apart her flesh. The wet feeling of blood
“It will all be over soon, Muddy.”

Somehow, Hermione had summoned all her magical energy, gritted her teeth, and broken through the curse just enough to lift her left arm and yank at the dark witch’s hair.

For that infraction, she had endured yet another round of *Cruciatus* before Bellatrix had finished her mutilation.

Hermione had lain there convulsing as Bellatrix skipped around her broken body in triumph, clapping her hands as if Hermione had just given her an award-winning performance.

“Oh yes! Perfect! Now you will *always* remember.”

A few minutes afterwards, Bellatrix had finally become bored. Hermione was staring into space, broken, half-outside her body.

Bellatrix had leaned down and whispered, “Oh…and in case you were wondering, I’ve gotten better at this particular hat-trick. Afraid you won’t be able to cover this one with a glamour, Muddy. It’s here to stay.”

Bellatrix had leaned in and kissed Hermione on the cheek.

“How wait until I see you again! Perhaps we’ll play more tomorrow night. *Au revoir, Mudblood!*”

And then with a final cackle, Bellatrix had paraded out of the library. Hermione had been left splayed out on her back. Her right arm horribly cut, her blood soaking into the wooden floor.

Shaking her head at the horror of the memory, Hermione rounded the corner and almost bumped into Harry and Ginny.

“‘Mione, where are you going?” Ginny exclaimed. The redhead looked concerned.

“You weren’t in any classes today,” Harry asked, “Is everything ok?”

But Hermione just barreled past them. She couldn’t have a conversation now. Couldn’t begin to explain what had happened, or attempt to obfuscate.

She had to get what she needed.

Without glancing back, she skidded around one corner and took the stairs to the next floor, leaping from step to step. She was close. Maybe if she could make it in time, get what she needed, she could fix this. *I have to try,* she thought. *I can’t live with it.*

Hermione arrived at the Potions Classroom and flung the door open. It was empty, classes done for the day. No Snape or students in sight. *Thank Merlin!*

She breathed a sigh of relief and marched her way to the back of the room. She knew the Potions Storeroom well. She had taken more than one ingredient from it without asking in her Hogwarts’ career, and she had also been tasked with arranging, sorting, and labelling almost every bottle, jar, and basket in there thanks to Snape’s fondness for handing out detentions over the years.

She approached the small door and saw the lock on it. She pointed her wand. “*Alohomora!*” It clicked open.
She entered. The room was dark. “*Lumos!*”

She moved to the back-right wall and set her wand on a small worktable. She pulled a small step-ladder out from under it and set it against a tall cabinet. Flinging the doors open, she moved the step-ladder in place and climbed two steps up until she was staring at the shelf that contained all of Snape’s Healing potions ingredients.

Hermione began ripping through them, reading labels, tossing some aside, pulling others into her arms. She knew she was creating a disorganized mess, but she didn’t care. She had a horrible feeling, as if time was somehow running out.

*If I can’t make it go away now, it will be there forever. Forever. FOREVER. It can’t be glamoured. What if it never goes away? Never fades? No! I must heal it.*

She had half a dozen bottles in her left arm and was rifling around with her right hand in the way back of the shelf, when two of them slipped and fell crashing about her. She barely noticed. Kept digging. Fingers flying across the labels. Yanking them down frantically.


 Anything and everything she thought could help.

Finally, she saw what she wanted most. A bottle of dark brown liquid labelled “Essence of Dittany.” She grabbed it.

Hermione leapt down and tossed the dozen or so bottles and jars onto the work-table. She pulled the stopper out of the Dittany bottle and rolled up the right sleeve of her dress.

There it was. Red and angry. Starting to scab over at the edges.

WHORE.

Hermione’s chest expanded frantically as she willed herself to breathe. *Come on, come on!*

She lifted the Essence of Dittany over the wound, and splashed the brown elixir all over that awful word. She waited a moment, watching carefully, and saw the red marks begin to fade!

It was working! *Thank, Merlin!* The dittany did its job, and within ten seconds the carving had almost completely faded. Hermione tilted her head back for a moment in sheer relief.

But when she lifted her head again and looked back down, the wound was already reappearing. The markings going from light pink to dark red, returning to what it had been just seconds before.

“Noooooo!” Hermione heard herself shout. “No! Why isn’t it working?”

In frustration, she slammed the bottle back down on the work-table, splashing the precious potion everywhere. She didn’t care if she was wasting it. It was worthless to her now.

*Can’t give up. Don’t give up!*

She moved quickly, popping corks off the other bottles, laying out ingredients. She pulled a mortar and pestle from the corner, and set up a small cauldron over a burner. Something here had to work! She would try them all if she had to.

*I can find a way. I can heal it. I must!*
So embroiled in her frantic preparations she did not notice the dark figure that entered the Storeroom behind her until it spoke.

“Miss Granger! Just what do you think you are doing?!!”

She wheeled around, dropping a bottle of liquidized kava root as she yanked her sleeve down to cover her mauld flesh. The bottle shattered, coating the floor in sticky goo, mingling with the other ingredients she had already dropped, creating a gentle hissing sound as they mixed and bubbled on the floor.

Snape stood before her. Blocking the doorway. His tall, black shape looming a foot above her. His teeth were gritted in rage. His eyes fathomless black.

“How dare you!? Break into my storeroom, not for the first time may I add, and proceed to destroy my valuable ingredients! Have you gone mad, girl? Answer me! I could have you expelled for this! Your career would be over before it has even begun!”

Hermione looked up at his dark, furious eyes. His pale white face was trembling in anger. He reminded her of Lucius. She blanched at the sight of him. She couldn't handle this. She felt like her throat was closing up, like she was going light-headed. Was it from the loss of blood? Perhaps she should have stolen some Blood-Replenishing potion.

It was like she was being assaulted again. She felt imaginary hands on her waist. Imaginary lips in her ear. Imaginary knives cutting into her flesh. Even though Snape was ten feet away she felt like she was being attacked.

She opened her mouth to explain, but only a loud weird cry of rage and frustration emerged. “Uhhhhhhhh!”

Her hands moved to cover her own ears. The sound of her own scream was unbearable. She moved her hands from her ears to her eyes, blocking out the sight of Snape, until she was finally able to take a deep breath. I can't let him stop me!

She turned to the work-table, and reached for the ingredients. She grabbed one bottle and brought it to her lips, sucking down a bitter liquid. She tossed it down and reached for another bottle, bringing it to her lips.

“Accio, potion!” Snape commanded. The bottle quickly flew from Hermione's hand to his.

“Merlin’s beard, just what are you doing?” Snape demanded, half in utter shock, half in disgust, setting the bottle on a nearby shelf with a wave of his wand.

Hermione just shook her head, trembling now from head to toe.

“I...I need them! Let me have them, Professor!”

“You have no idea of the dangerous consequences of mixing and ingesting so many raw ingredients!"

“I...I do...,” she stammered. She really did. She knew this was a hopeless endeavor, and damned dangerous, but she had to try. She couldn’t give in. Couldn’t just accept that what Bellatrix had done to her was permanent. I have to do something!

Snape furrowed his brow. “Why are you doing this, Miss Granger? Answer me!”
Hermione Granger, despite her past thievery, was about as straight-and-narrow as witches came. *None of this made sense,* Snape thought. She had stolen ingredients before, but this display was... *bizarre,* erratic.

Something exceptionally unusual was happening, and the girl looked more than a little unhinged.

Hermione turned and collapsed on the work-table, inhaling violently. There wasn’t enough air in such a small room. She felt pressure on her bronchial tubes — it was hard to breathe. Was she in real trouble— having an asthmatic reaction to the ingredients— or was she just panicking?

She pushed herself up. “I—I’m sorry, Professor!” She turned towards him and ran for the door.

Snape caught her by the shoulder. She writhed. “Let me go!”

“Not until you explain your bizarre behavior, Miss Granger!”

Hermione reached for her wand. “*Flipendo!*”

Snape was knocked back into the Storeroom wall, stunned.

It was one of the major rules of Hogwarts that a student never raise his or her wand to a professor. He looked at the brown-haired witch twitching before him in disbelief. She looked like a cornered, feral animal. Had she gone *completely* mad? He could completely *ruin* her future for this kind of infraction. Breaking and entering. Pilfering his stocks. *Attacking* him?!

Hermione looked up at him in wide-eyed panic. *Gods, what have I done?*

“I—I’m sorry,” she whispered, as her eyes filled with tears. She turned and fled.

Snape simply leaned back against the wall of the Storeroom where her spell had landed him, at a complete loss for words.
Chapter 19

Hermione ran through the Potions Classroom and out the door to the corridor. She didn’t know where she was going. Was Snape following her? She turned her head, but couldn’t see him. The corridors were deserted.

As she passed a window, Hermione could see the sun was beginning to set. Most of the students were probably in the Great Hall eating dinner. Did I really miss an entire day of classes, passed out on the floor?

No wonder Harry and Ginny had looked so concerned. I must have been unconscious for over 12 hours, she marveled. She moved a hand to her aching temple. She was so disoriented.

She continued to run. She didn’t know where she was going until her feet found the marble steps leading up to the Astronomy Tower. Unlocking the heavy wooden door at the top with another “Alohomora!” she pushed it open and ran to one of the metal railings, grasping it with both hands. At least here she knew she wouldn’t be disturbed. The Tower was off-limits and there were few students who would risk the wrath of Snape or McGonagall and be caught here in the tallest Tower at Hogwarts outside of class hours.

Finally, she could breathe. She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs. The air was chilly up here and she looked out over the familiar, comforting view of the Hogwarts’ grounds. Far below, she saw the gleaming white marble of Ron’s memorial, reflecting the setting sun’s rays.

“Oh God!” she whimpered, leaning her face down to rest her forehead on her knuckles. What is happening to me?

She stood up and pulled back both of her sleeves. She looked from one arm to the other. On the left, the faded “MUDBLOOD.” On the right, the angry swollen “WHORE.” Her matching set.

She began to sob. Shaking uncontrollably, she cried freely. Wailing aloud and letting it all out. Why had all this happened to her? The tears poured down her face, mixing with snot dripping from her nose. She wiped her face on her robe as she collapsed down to the stone floor. She knew crying wouldn’t help anything, but she wanted to wallow, needed to process things. She had gone to Malfoy Manor convinced that things with Lucius could not get any worse, that there was still hope for them to have some kind of functional relationship. How very wrong she had been.

Why couldn’t she wake up tomorrow and have this all be a terrible dream? She didn’t deserve this. She had always tried to do the best she could in every circumstance. She was a good student, a good friend, a good daughter, and had been a good girlfriend to Ron. She had fought as hard as she could in the War. Kept the secrets that needed keeping. Tried to be as selfless as possible.

Yet here she was.

Unconsciously, she gently rocked herself back and forth slowly, her arms wrapped around her shoulders, her legs crossed on the floor in front of her. For everything she had tried to do right, the world came back and punished her. This was her reward for trying her best: her parents obliviated. Ron dead. This betrothal to Lucius. The return of Bellatrix.

It wasn’t fair. How much was a person expected to take?

I can’t do this. I can’t endure... I won’t endure it. I will not go back to Malfoy Manor! I will not go
Suddenly, she found herself standing, and taking a step closer to the railing. She felt like she was in a trance as she lifted one leg over it. Then another. Gripping the railing tightly behind her, she stood on the stone edge of the parapet and leaned forward, looking down.

The wind rustled around her, whipping her robes and brown hair about her face and neck. *I can’t endure any more,* she thought again and again. *I won’t.* She clenched her jaw.

Hundreds of feet below, the grass shone in the fading evening light. *Would it hurt? Would I feel anything? Or would it be quick? And then…peace?*

She could feel her tears falling faster now. She watched as the liquid fell from her eyes then dropped off her face the long…long…long way down.

*I never thought…I would be someone who would consider this…* She choked back a sob. *But maybe I will finally be with Ron. I will be free.*

There was something so tempting about it. *Joining Ron. At last.* Getting away from this hell her life had become. What did she have left anymore? No family. No Ron. Very few friends. And a life of torture ahead of her.

She took a big breath in, and leaned as far forward as she could.

*Is this how it ends?*

"’Mione, you can’t," she heard, softly. It sounded like Ron’s voice. Almost right next to her, but so far away. On the wind. Or perhaps just in her head. She shook her head back and forth in sad agreement.

“No!” she said out loud. “No.”

She leaned back against the railing. She couldn’t do this. Ron wouldn’t want her to. There *had* to be another way.

She pulled herself back over the railing and turned to face the beautiful astronomical clockwork in the center of the Tower floor.

She looked at it for a long, long time.

It was here that Snape had almost killed Dumbledore. They had been in an impossible situation — the Order had known Voldemort was growing in strength, and had privately decided that in order to win the War, they would have to lose this particular battle. Dumbledore would have to die by Snape’s hand. Snape’s position in Voldemort’s trust would be cemented and Draco would be protected. Sacrificing a leg to save the body. It had been an extraordinary plan, one that had been kept from the other Order members by Snape and Dumbledore.

Hermione remembered a book she had read during the War by the Chinese General Sun-Tzu. It contained a piece of advice she had thought quite a lot about in the quiet moments in the tent, when she and Harry and Ron had been on the run and she had wondered whether they would ever prevail.

*The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.*

Snape and Dumbledore had both understood this. They didn’t attack the enemy with obvious outward displays. Snape never outwardly *fought* Voldemort. He had pretended to do his bidding in
order to undermine him. Dumbledore never fought Voldemort. In fact, he had been fully prepared to give Riddle exactly what he wanted, his life, in order to achieve the long-term goal of winning the War.

They were both such clever wizards.

It was only by sheer luck they hadn’t had to go through with that version of events and Dumbledore was still alive.

Hermione stood in front of the clockwork until the threads of a plan slowly began to take shape in her mind. She couldn’t fight Lucius and Bellatrix directly. Couldn’t win in single combat. Lucius would manipulate her mind. Bellatrix would torture her body.

But she knew what she could do. What she had always done.

She would outsmart them.

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An hour later, Snape paced the carpet in Dumbledore’s office.

“She must be mad, Albus. I’ve never seen such behavior in her. She looked like some kind of rabid meerkat.”

“Acting out because of her betrothal, perhaps? It’s not the first time she’s taken something from your Storeroom,” the grey wizard suggested.

Snape shook his lank locks in disagreement. “No, the girl was unusually agitated. Beside herself, really.”

What Severus declined to tell the Headmaster, was that as he had cleaned up the Storeroom and put the bottles back in their proper place, it had been clear that the girl had been solely interested in Healing ingredients.

“McGonagall told me she didn’t appear for her Transfiguration seminar today.”

“Nor for my Advanced Potions review,” Snape concurred.

“Well, I don’t know if assigning detentions is the appropriate response, but I will want to speak with her.”

Snape was about to disagree regarding the detentions when a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in!”

Hermione entered, looking as apologetic as she could muster.

“Ah! Miss Granger. I am concerned by reports you missed your classes today.”

“I’m sorry, Headmaster. That is what I wanted to see you about.”

Snape arched an eyebrow and moved to the side of the room to better survey this interaction. He was fairly certain the girl would tell some sort of half-truth, and he wanted to observe the attempt.

“Yes?” Dumbledore prompted.
Hermione stood tall in front of the wise wizard’s desk. She looked more than a little tense and her skin was sallow, slightly yellowish in places, but other than that Dumbledore did not discern anything particularly wrong with her. Hermione began.

“You see, Headmaster, I feel I am not challenged by my classes. I am a year older than the other students and have already completed all the reading and coursework. I am repeating myself at this point. I have already been given dispensation to take my NEWTs early, as you know, but I feel I am more than ready to take them now and that there is no need for me to wait.”

Snape snorted softly. Hermione ignored him and continued.

“With your permission, I would like to take them as soon as possible. Before my marriage on Sunday.”

“I see. And how many are you intending to sit, my dear?”

“All of them.”

Dumbledore glanced over at Snape with a furrowed eyebrow. “That may be somewhat difficult to arrange.”

Hermione pulled out a scroll and unfurled it, handing it to Dumbledore.

“I’ve already created a schedule. As it’s late tonight, I would not be able to start until tomorrow. I could do Herbology and Ancient Runes first as I’m most confident in them. I just spoke with Professor Babbling and she agreed to administer both of them tomorrow afternoon and evening. Friday I would do Charms in the morning then Arithmancy in the afternoon. Saturday I could do Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor McGonagall has already agreed to proctor those four. And I would like to do Potions as well… but that is up to Professor Snape…”

Dumbledore smiled. Seven NEWTs in three days! It was an absurd plan. Most students could only manage one NEWT a day, or very occasionally two, during the testing period; she was nothing if not ambitious. But if any witch could succeed with such an intense workload, it was the one before him.

Snape cleared his throat. “Miss Granger, surely five NEWTs is sufficient for any career path you are interested in. Seven is rather unnecessary. I don’t see any reason you need to take Potions. It is clear you have no interest in becoming a Potions Mistress. And considering your earlier behavior this evening, I am not sure why I should offer to assist you.”

Hermione turned and eyed Snape. He clearly hadn’t revealed much of what had happened in the Storeroom to Dumbledore. Otherwise, they would all be having a very different conversation. Why was he covering for her?

Dumbledore looked up from Hermione’s scroll.

“I think this is a very ambitious plan, Miss Granger. Though Hogwarts will be sad to lose you as a student, I grant you permission to sit your NEWTs this week and receive your diploma early if that is your wish. You may schedule your NEWTs as you and your professors see fit.”

Hermione stood, gratefully. “Thank you, Headmaster. I wanted to take them before my marriage. Since of course there’s no guarantee I would be able to… afterwards.”

“I was under the impression Malfoy had agreed to allow you to finish your education, Miss Granger,” Snape interjected from the corner.
Hermione swallowed. “I am no longer sure I can trust his word,” she said quietly.

The three of them stood in uncomfortable silence. Dumbledore — understanding fully and silently wishing he could intervene. Hermione — her thoughts turning back to the past torturous 24 hours. And Snape — wondering just what Lucius had done to her the previous evening to cause this little plan of hers to be set into motion.

“I should go get some rest now,” Hermione said. “If you don’t mind, Headmaster? I have a long day ahead tomorrow.”

“No, not at all. You are dismissed, and of course relieved of your Head Girl duties for the rest of this week. Take the time you need to prepare for the exams —what little time you have.”

“Thank you.”

Hermione smiled gratefully at Dumbledore and turned to go. Dumbledore who was looking after the young witch with a curious expression on his face. Snape clocked this, and took a step to follow Hermione.

“Miss Granger, I will walk you back to Gryffindor Tower,” he said. With a nod at Dumbledore, Snape followed her quickly out the office door, his dark robes billowing behind him.

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They hadn’t made it more than twenty feet from Dumbledore’s office when Hermione felt herself being yanked into an empty classroom.

“Colloportus!” Snape cast with a wave of his hand, before turning to face the young witch. The door’s lock clicked itself into place.

“You will tell me everything. Begin.”

Snape leaned against a desk and folded his arms, glowering down at her. Hermione had an instinct to laugh. After all she had been through the past several days, the idea that Snape thought she would find him intimidating and frightening was actually rather hilarious.

“I wanted to apologize for breaking into your Storeroom and making a mess of your ingredients, Sir. I thought I needed a Healing potion, but it turns out I was mistaken. I simply panicked.”

“That, Miss Granger, is an understatement.”

“Will you proctor the Potions NEWT for me?”

“I’ll consider it if you tell me why.”

“I simply don’t believe I will be granted the opportunity to take them after becoming Mrs. Lucius Malfoy. And I’d like to complete my academic career as thoroughly as I am able.”

“Why did you need a Healing potion? Did he attack you again?”

Hermione’s eyes flashed in sudden anger.

“And what if he did? It is no concern of yours, Sir. You can’t stop it. No one can. The Ministry is corrupt. Dumbledore is useless. None of my friends could protect me from Lucius. And you…well, you possibly could but you chose not to, so I must simply accept my future husband’s behavior towards me.”
Severus frowned. She wasn’t entirely inaccurate. But her pretense at accepting Lucius’s assaults was growing increasingly troubling.

“Dumbledore may accept your obfuscation, but I require the truth. I doubt you would ever accept a wizard raising his hand to you, Miss Granger. What has happened? You look…”

He wasn’t trying to be unkind, but there was such deep pain and suffering in her eyes. He knew the look well. It was the ache of a soul in turmoil. He had certainly seen that look in the mirror. He used to have a similar expression in his own eyes when he would stumble back to his quarters after witnessing or partaking in a particularly vicious display at Voldemort’s side. It was the look of the haunted, the look of someone who felt they had betrayed themselves.

Something terrible had occurred involving the girl before him, and it troubled him more than he cared to admit to consider the possibilities of what that might be. He needed her to tell him.

Hermione paused and looked into his narrow, obsidian eyes and his stone-cold expression. She knew he could read that she was lying. But she had her own plan now, and Snape would never agree to help her. He was little more than a busybody to her now. After all, she felt she now knew more about Lucius and his personality than Snape ever could.

She was all alone in this.

“I have bothered you enough with my upcoming marriage. You don’t like me, Professor. You never have. Well, think of the upshot: after Sunday you will never have to see me again. Proctor my Potions NEWT, grade it fairly, and then you and I will be done with one another. Forever. Deal?”

Severus paused and stared down at her. Then finally nodded. He straightened.

“Sunday morning. 8am. My classroom. I will administer the exam before Lucius arrives to collect you. Prepare for it diligently. I will not ease the tasks simply because of your…taxing situation.”

"Taxing!" What a git. He doesn’t know the half of it. Nonetheless, Hermione sighed in relief. There. She would get to take all seven of them. Finish her academic career the way she wanted to — to the very best of her ability.

She looked up at Snape in genuine gratitude.

“Thank you, Professor.”

She turned to the door. “Alohomora!” It clicked open.

“Miss Granger?”

Hermione turned back to him. They made eye contact. Brown eyes to black eyes. A very small measure of understanding passed between them.

“If you require any…healing potions…either now, or in the future. Simply ask.”

Hermione nodded and slipped out.

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As she walked back to Gryffindor Tower she felt a small tear start to form in the corner of one eye. She flicked it away.

Simply ask. It was probably the nicest thing Severus Snape had ever said to her.
But no, she wouldn’t be asking. The tangle of secrets she was now keeping was too complex. She had been tempted to reveal Bellatrix’s survival to Dumbledore and Snape, but Aurors invading Malfoy Manor and dragging the dark witch to Azkaban would bring too many complications.

In order for her plan to work, she needed to do this on her own, and Lucius must not be alerted.

“Pretend inferiority and encourage arrogance,” Sun-Tzu had written.

And she would pretend inferiority.

_To get what I want, she realized, I will do whatever it takes._
Chapter 20

For the second time that week, Lucius Malfoy found Severus Snape in his study.

Each of them held a firewhisky and sat across from one another in the same wingback chairs they had occupied in their previous meeting.

Snape had gone to his Dungeon suite immediately after the conversation with Hermione and flooed to the Manor. If Hermione would not reveal the truth to him, he would see what information he could extract from Lucius.

“I must say, if you continue to visit me with such regularity, people will assume we are the ones who are betrothed, Severus,” Lucius chuckled.

“This is not a pleasure call, I assure you. I warned you to soften your approach with Miss Granger. What have you done to her?”

Lucius studied Severus’s pallid, inscrutable expression. How much did the dark-haired wizard know?

Lucius had been somewhat surprised when the house-elves had informed him that morning that Hermione had flooed back to Hogwarts. Her encounter with Bellatrix must not have been as damaging as he imagined, though no doubt the girl was still suffering from the after-effects of the Crucius. No matter. It would be a lesson she would not soon forget.

Hermione had clearly not confided in Severus the truth about Bellatrix; otherwise the Manor would be full of Aurors, so why, exactly was he here? Genuine concern?

“You’re treating me as if I’ve raped the girl, Severus.”

“Have you?”

Severus narrowed his eyes at Lucius, dreading the response. From Lucius’s pleased facial expression, it was entirely possible. The idea created a sick feeling in the pit of Severus’s stomach.

“Please. I’d like to think you know me well enough to know I have never willingly polluted my body with a Mudblood.”

“The contract does specify weekly consummation.”

“And I will fulfill that aspect once we are wed. In fact, I am certain I will come to enjoy it. But I am in no hurry to betray my heritage,” Lucius spoke, only half-aware of the lie he was telling.

Lucius thought back on his encounter with Hermione on the catwalk of the library — the lust potion, and the…feelings it had conjured.

He had been pleased to realize when he had awoken this morning that he felt absolutely no regret over giving her to Bellatrix to torture, nor had any lingering tender feelings towards her. Taking the tack of seduction with her had been an utter waste of time. Hermione would only respond to pain and discipline, so that is what he would provide.

He tried not to think of the look in her eyes when she had had his fingers in her mouth. It was best not to.
Snape’s eyes bore into his own. “Did you use an Unforgivable on her?”

Lucius smiled. “I will swear on my wand that I did not.”

Severus frowned at this. Lucius tossed back his blonde hair. “Now, what exactly do you want, Severus?”

“I want you to remember what I told you.”

“That I should be gentle with her, because you are such a vociferous little watch-dog for all of your students? Yes, yes. Funny thing, though, she won’t be your student after Sunday, will she?”

Severus scowled. How did Lucius know this already?

Lucius laughed at Severus’s displeased reaction. He snapped his fingers and a piece of parchment from his desk flew into his hands.

“This came by owl just before you arrived. You see, I already have her quite well-trained.”

Severus took the scroll and read it.

Lucius,

I am sorry for what happened. I know now it was all my fault.

I have gotten permission to finish my NEWTs before we are married on Sunday. I am ready to move to the Manor and obey you as my lord and will leave Hogwarts for good with you then.

Please forgive me,

Hermione

Severus did not like this. Not one bit.

“It was all my fault” and “obey you as my lord” were not exactly things he would ever expect to see written in Miss Granger’s pen. Her curly, delicate handwriting. Handwriting he had seen on parchment for almost eight years. From a young girl’s sloppy loops to a young teen’s more reigned-in cursive to a young woman’s elegant, defined hand. He’d watched her develop her penmanship, and now this young woman was writing her “sorries” to Lord Lucius Malfoy, the most unworthy, callous, and conceited of suitors.

Severus sighed.

If only Lucius had become betrothed to a student of his from the far past, some Ravenclaw who was now in her late-twenties, whose memory had become lost amongst the hundreds of other students he had taught, someone who he would have to strain to recall.

But with a current student…and not just any student, but someone he had been required to watch so closely for the past seven years…It disturbed him.

Just as Ronald Weasley had, Hermione Granger had been under his constant supervision. The two of them had been invaluable as providers of information as to Potter’s mental state. When one of them had been agitated, he knew Potter was agitated. When one of them had been smug, he knew Potter was engaging in some malfeasance.
He hadn’t expected his watch over all three of them to occupy so much of his time and attention, and he was often angry and bitter about it. But the result, he was rapidly realizing, was that he was now unable to treat Hermione as any other past female student. It was impossible. And he was furious about it. Even in peacetime he was required to...what? Care?

Severus knew better than to expect that all of his young female pupils would grow up to marry wizards worthy of them and he was not “romantic” in that sense. In fact, he couldn’t care less about the long-term emotional fulfillment of these girls (his duty was, simply, to try to thud some knowledge into their immature skulls before they came of age), but he felt in his bones that something was terribly wrong in this marriage precisely because he had watched Hermione so closely.

She and Lucius were a terrible match, and Hermione was utterly out of sorts because of it.

Hermione was either completely bending to Lucius’s will, or she was pretending to do so. Either way, this must be the result of some barbarous abuse on Lucius’s part, since Miss Granger, in his expert opinion, was neither naturally biddable nor inclined to fabricate.

But perhaps what Lucius has done is little more barbarous than what you yourself have perpetrated, he thought. And it is to be expected... he is her future husband, and a Pureblood Lord did require complete obedience from his Lady.

Lucius was a former Death-eater, and they had all had to bottle up the rage they felt inside. Lucius was worse than some, better than most....

Severus had often had to keep his own temper in check. Voldemort had encouraged them to become violent, hot-headed, dominant. The Dark Lord had liked to turn his followers into impulsive animals. Easier to control then.

Still, Severus realized the “what happened” portion of his befuddlement continued to nag at him. Just what had Lucius done to Hermione, and why couldn’t his brain connect the dots??

She had been in such a mad panic in the Storeroom it could only have been some sort of sexual or physical assault. And yet she had not asked for his help, had not asked him to heal her as she had the first time she had come from Lucius’s presence, bursting so annoyingly into his classroom. And he could not see any visible bruising or damage to her body. Why not?

No, something is wrong here.

Lucius rolled his eyes at Severus’s brooding face.

“I think it is high time you stop meddling, Severus. By Sunday evening there is absolutely no reason why Lady Malfoy or I should ever be required to endure your presence again. I look forward to the permanent end of our association, and I have it on good authority she has never been fond of you, either. It has been too long in coming for all of us.”

Severus nodded. “I take no joy in your company, Lucius, or hers. Of that you can be assured.”

Severus rose and turned to the fireplace. Lucius angled his head to one side, studying the dark wizard.

“It’s amusing, Severus, how much you have enmeshed yourself in this whole affair. One would almost assume you’re just a sad, lonely man with nothing better to do.”

“If you had any honor, Lucius, I would not have had to intervene.”
“You call it ‘honor,’ but it’s an excuse. Don’t pretend your interest here is purely chivalrous or out of academic duty. You have always needed to be someone’s lapdog. Lily. Riddle. Dumbledore. You don’t know how to act on your own behalf. Service is all you’re good for. You probably have no idea what to do with yourself now that you have no one to serve. Tell me, do you enjoy spending your days teaching 12-year-olds the potencies of various lepidoptera? Your life is so tragic, Severus. It’s hilarious, actually.”

Severus lowered at the flaxen-haired wizard. So self-congratulatory and entitled. Snape wanted to point out that Lucius was equally broken, but there was no point in arguing or gloating. Lucius was always a waste of time.

“After Sunday, Lucius, our association is done. I will sever the floo and we will cease all communication.”

“I’m broken-hearted, Severus. All these years I thought we were friends,” Lucius retorted, sarcastically.

“In that belief you are, as you have been in most things, terribly mistaken,” Severus responded dryly.

“I suppose your students can’t matter to you that much if you are willing to abandon them so readily. Goodness, I suppose you really have nothing to care about, do you?”

Severus stepped into the fireplace and wheeled around, grabbing some floo powder. Lucius stood up to see him off, a wide smile on his face.

“I’ll collect her at 12-o’clock on Sunday. Do tell her to wear white,” Lucius purred.

Snape just glared at him as he activated the floo and traveled back to his quarters at Hogwarts.

He sincerely hoped it was the last time he made this journey.

****

An hour later, Severus sat at his desk in his private study, attempting to focus on his Potions syllabus. Instead, his thoughts turned back to Miss Granger. The pained look in her eyes. The lying.

It was almost as if…but it couldn’t be. If Lucius hadn’t sexually assaulted her, and she had no external markings or bruising, then Lucius must have cursed her — cast a spell to cause her physical damage somehow internally.

The desperation in the way she had acted was too familiar to him. It was the kind of masked physical suffering that he recalled feeling from Cruciatus and Cruciatus alone.

But Lucius was prepared to give a wand-oath that he hadn’t cast an Unforgivable on her, and that kind of torture did seem a bit extreme… even for Lucius.

Lucius and Severus had both cast the spell on Muggleborns, but it was usually part of a display in front of Voldemort to prove their loyalties. He couldn’t believe Lucius would go so far as to cast it on Hermione, his future wife. It seemed like overkill, and not entirely Lucius’s style.

*Furthermore, Snape thought, there’s no way Hermione would not have informed Dumbledore if Lucius had done that. And yet, she is lying… And her eyes…so lost.*

Snape sighed. None of it quite made sense. And now she would take all of her NEWTs over the next few days. Why? Was she truly in fear that Lucius would not keep his word, not allow her to finish
her Hogwarts education? He tried to imagine what Hermione’s life would be like in the Manor.

Many Pureblood witches simply lived the vast majority of their lives out of the public eye — sequestered in their homes, busy with garden parties and luncheons, raising children, collecting art, throwing lavish balls. Lucius could very well lock Hermione in her bedroom suite and throw away the key. Hermione would attempt to avoid pregnancy. Lucius would attempt to get her pregnant. And in between that battle, Hermione would be hemmed in by the role of a traditional pureblood wife.

As a Pureblood himself, Snape could not entirely pretend he didn’t have similar prejudices and expectations. Though he knew there would never be a Lady Snape, he understood that Hermione’s duties as Lady Malfoy would require a level of formality and restriction that she would not enjoy, but which were entirely necessary. It was simply inappropriate for a young Pureblood wife of a noble Wizarding family to run amok.

Perhaps he was being paranoid, and Hermione’s lies and despondency were simply due to her disagreements with Lucius over her role as Lady Malfoy. It was possible they had clashed over that and Hermione had decided to finish her education so as not to further cause conflict with Lucius.

Perhaps she had taken his advice to face Lucius with practicality and subservience? Good for her.

Severus moved his hand down to one of his desk drawers and opened it.

Inside lay a copy of the new law and the Marriage Contract. When the law had passed Snape had immediately ordered a copy to see just what he was going to have to endure should his name appear in the first draft. He lifted the scroll and spread it open across his desk.

He had read it many times since Hermione had burst into his office. Not because he was actually considering her marriage proposal, but simply because he wanted to be familiar with its requirements.

The specifics were both straightforward and rather detailed: perpetual cohabitation, daily conversation and interaction, sharing of meals, weekly consummation, no contraception, unbreakable marriage vows, and binding until death.

Severus had briefly wondered if he could simply marry the girl in name-only and then they could live apart, not that that would keep her safe from Lucius, but the contract was quite clearly designed to avoid any such sham marriage.

He particular disliked the “cohabitation,” “daily conversation” and “sharing of meals” parts. And the “weekly consummation” quite frankly made the bile rise in the back of his throat.

The Ministry clearly expected these marriages to involve the witch and wizard being very much a part of one another’s lives, and the idea of forced marriage was utterly repugnant to him. But on top of that, forced to share a living space and meal-times, and forced to converse daily and share your body with someone who you barely knew and/or didn’t choose!? It was ridiculous and horrifying in the extreme.

Snape hardly conversed with anyone as it was, besides his students, Dumbledore, McGonagall, and the other Professors, never mind a shared “consummation”!

What if one just wanted to be alone? Was privacy now outlawed? Could one not keep one’s own counsel under this heinous Law? Live a life separately and do what one liked?

He had lived almost forty years alone, and he wasn’t about to change who he was now.
It was a lie that every bachelor secretly harbored a desire to marry. Some people simply preferred their oneship over a twoship. Why was that so impossibly difficult for the average witch or wizard to comprehend? Just because a wizard was alone didn’t mean he was lonely.

For the tenth time in less than three days, Snape angrily shoved the contract back in his desk drawer and slammed it shut. No, he would NOT be trapped in this manner. He was the master of his own destiny now.

He may not have Lucius’s wealth and connections, but if and when the time came that his name was pulled, he would do everything in his power to get out of it. He would never, ever marry. There was no woman in the world he could spend so much time with. No one except beautiful, charming, kind, brilliant, witty Lily.

And she is long gone, he sighed.

And of course, Lucius was dead wrong. He did not live to serve anyone anymore. He wanted his freedom. For the first time since he had been younger than Hermione, he was finally free.

The past six months had been some of the quietest and happiest of his life, barring those years he had had as a child with Lily, when they had discovered the nuances of their magical abilities together before and during their early Hogwarts years.

He had worked on several research papers, completely redesigned his private lab with new equipment, re-structured all of the Hogwarts’ Potions curriculum in light of the events of the War, and even McGonagall had teased that he was becoming a tiny bit nicer to the First-Years.

He was sleeping, finally, after years of nightmares and keeping one eye open. His complexion had improved, and he was actually keeping better care of his appearance. His skin was slightly less sallow, his teeth whiter, and his hair a bit less greasy. He’d even put on a tiny bit of muscle. Not being tortured all the time will do that to a wizard, he thought grimly.

He was finally doing what he wanted to do with his time, thoroughly indulging his intellectual curiosity and interests without having to drag himself to Voldemort’s side at 1am three times a week, and no ridiculous Marriage Law would take that kind of freedom and peace away from him.

Besides, there was a chance it would be repealed in a year or two anyway, so what did it all matter? There was a good chance his name would never be drawn.

He had done the best he could by Miss Hermione Granger, and, he thought quite generously, had offered to provide her with Healing Potions as well as additional advice regarding Lucius Malfoy.

She was the one who had taken a step back. She was of-age, and her ultimate fate was simply not his concern. What happened to her as Lady Malfoy was between herself and her husband, Lord Malfoy.

He’d give her the Potions NEWT and, as she requested, grade it fairly. That was all he could do.

Snape picked up his quill and decisively focused again on his work.
Chapter 21

Hermione lay in her four-poster, surrounded by her textbooks on Herbology and Ancient Runes. She knew she should be studying, but there was a reason she planned to take these two NEWTs first. These subjects came easily to her, and she knew she had already mastered the curriculum. She just wanted to do a light review before turning out the light.

Truthfully, her mind was roiling with the events from the Manor.

She had managed to get some basic headache, anti-anxiety, and sleeping potions from Madam Pomfrey on the way back to her rooms, under the pretext that she would be needing them over the next few days as she undertook her NEWTs, but the truth is she would kill for something stronger, like Dreamless Sleep or Draught of Peace.

She didn’t dare go back to the Potions Storeroom for them, or for the ingredients to brew them herself. Not right now. She didn’t want to risk a run in with Snape.

After another hour of review, Hermione slipped under the covers and turned off the light. Alone in her bed, she tried to ignore the painful muscle spasms in her trapezius muscles and down her sciatica — the after-effects of the **Cruciatus**.

Her calves especially would not stop twitching. Her soft mattress almost increased the discomfort.

She got up from her bed, took her pillow and tried to get comfortable on the hardwood floor. Perhaps the harder surface would allow her legs and back to relax.

She sighed, staring up at the plaster ceiling. Sleep would be awhile in coming.

She prayed Bellatrix would not be in her dreams.

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As she had predicted, Hermione’s Herbology and Ancient Runes NEWTs had gone exceptionally well.

Professor Babbling had been surprised that she had finished each of them almost an hour early. Hermione’s addendum notes on the short answer questions had covered two extra scrolls.

Hermione was not one to gloat, but she knew she had aced them. *Two down, five to go*, she thought. Tackling her easiest subjects first had been a good plan. Though she wouldn’t know her results until her last NEWTs were graded, she felt she had merited at least an Exceeds Expectations on these two. And anyway, she had done what she could in the limited time she had.

She arrived back at her rooms early Thursday evening to a reply from Lucius.

_Hermione,_

*I forgive you. Of course. As your lord, I shall always correct you and look after you.*

*I would like to invite you to dinner so we may reconcile. I understand you are busy with your NEWTs, but perhaps we could meet in the Hogwarts’ guest dining room, as before, on Friday evening after your Arithmancy NEWT?*
Your husband,

Lucius

Though she resented the hours lost in preparing for her Transfiguration and DADA NEWTs she would take on Saturday, she knew she had to see Lucius sooner rather than later.

It disturbed her that he knew her precise NEWT schedule. No doubt he was receiving reports of her movements. Even though the War was over, Lucius still had his spies.

She needed to see him, though, to prepare the way — calm him down, placate him, and get him in the right mindset. She owled him back immediately.

Lucius,

Thank you for your forgiveness.

I shall endeavor to please you moving forward. I do not want us to fight. I am yours.

I will meet you at 9 o'clock tomorrow night in the dining room.

Your wife,

Hermione

The whole “your wife” and “I am yours” bit had made her gag a bit, but if it made Lucius even slightly more complacent it would be worth it.

She wondered if she was laying it on too thick again and Lucius would see through her, as he had in the Library in front of Bellatrix, but it didn’t matter. Even an outward show was preferable to outward defiance in Lucius’s eyes, she now knew.

She would be as sweet as sugar to him if it meant getting rid of Bellatrix.

She would turn their last dinner as an engaged couple to her advantage.

And if she couldn’t…well, she was prepared for that eventuality as well.

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Hermione awoke Friday morning on top of her comforter, still wearing her clothes from the previous day. She had barely slept four hours, finally falling asleep with her Charms notebook on her stomach. She leapt up and quickly changed, before grabbing her bag and heading to her Charms NEWT.

At 8 o’clock that evening, Hermione dragged herself into the Great Hall and sat down next to Harry and Ginny at the Gryffindor table. Ginny put an arm around her.

“Oh, ‘Mione, you look exhausted, poor thing! How were the Charms and Arithmancy NEWTs?”

“Pretty rough,” Hermione answered, glancing between her two concerned friends’ faces.

She had told them that her meetings with Lucius had been extremely difficult and brutal, but after she had apologized for ignoring them in the corridor, they had not pressed her for additional details. She knew they were both deeply worried about her, but were trying to give her some space.
“I don’t blame you for wanting to get the NEWTs over with, but this kind of schedule seems a bit nuts, even for you. How are you going to take three more in two days?” Harry teased, gently, placing a hand on top of hers. “You look beat!”

“I don’t know,” Hermione shook her head. The bags under her eyes were apparent, and she still hadn’t completely recovered from the *Cruiciatus* after-effects. Her right shoulder had twinged all throughout her Arithmancy NEWT. She longed to go back to her room and sleep for 12 hours, but she had an appointment with Lucius that she had to keep, and two more NEWTs to prep for tomorrow.

“I’m sorry, I know I haven’t been…as forthcoming as I should be with you both. It’s been…so difficult with Lucius. He’s impossible. I just need to know I’ve been able to finish at Hogwarts—that he couldn’t take that away from me.”

Ginny and Harry exchanged a look with each other and nodded.

“I understand,” Ginny smiled, encouragingly. “We’re here for you, Hermione. We’ll never push you to say more than you are comfortable with. No matter what, you can rely on us. What if I come to your room later tonight and quiz you on Transfiguration? Say, 11 o’clock?”

Hermione looked up at the sweet-faced redhead and beamed. “That would be amazing, Gin!”

“And I could cut Potions tomorrow and help you prep for Defense Against the Dark Arts around lunchtime?” Harry offered.

Hermione smiled. Harry and Ginny were being incredible— not pushing her to reveal too much, but willing to sacrifice their own classes to help her succeed in her crazy plan.

“Thanks! That would be amazing!”

Harry smiled. “You can always count on us.”

****

Hermione arrived at the private dining room in the Administrative Wing a half-hour early. She figured she might as well practice for Transfiguration by transforming the room.

When she entered, she was surprised at how bare bones the furnishings were — a simple metal table, three chairs, and a plain wooden mantel over a simple fireplace. It had been incredible how Lucius had transformed it into the elaborate French rococo style at their last meeting. The amount of effort he had put in had impressed her at the time, but now it just filled her with empty dread.

He always *tried* so hard with her — his abuses were always so *elaborate*. She felt like a fish caught with a hook in its mouth.

Hermione looked about at the empty room and thought about what would please him, and then decided she would do something that would please *her*. Something mid-century and modern.

If she was about to live in the Victorian Pureblood world, she wanted to have the opportunity to enjoy for the last time something that felt familiar to her. Muggle. 1960’s. Chrome and teak.

She went with a table that was a Danish design in rosewood with matching chairs, a charming credenza with a record player on the top, and wrote a quick instruction to the elves to deliver a simple meal of finger-foods — shrimp cocktail, stuffed celery, and onion dip. And a bottle of
champagne.

After the food was laid out on the table and the room had been transformed, she smiled at what she had done. Lucius would probably hate it.

She conjured a mirror on one wall and looked at herself. She looked like she had lost a tiny bit of weight. She had barely eaten in the past three days. Her plain black robe drowned her slim form. She transfigured it into a yellow floral over-the-knee dress with long sleeves, and turned her sneakers into matching yellow heels.

It looked like something her mother used to wear to Muggle church on Sundays. I look like the ultimate obedient little Mudblood housewife, she thought, sarcastically.

With a flick of her wrist, the record player turned on. It played Julie London’s “Charade.” It was from an old album her granny used to play when they would visit her in Croydon. Somehow it seemed appropriate.

Hermione waltzed over to the table and poured herself a glass of the Ruinart champagne. The entire exercise was mad, she knew.

Here she was standing in some 1960’s-style room, dressed like Princess Margaret and listening to forlorn, romantic music. It was a bizarre game of dress-up, and she had not the slightest idea of what Lucius would think of it, nor exactly why she had chosen all of this.

Who cares? She felt slightly reckless and morbid as she took a big glug of the champagne. Liquid courage, she thought. What do I have to lose?

If she couldn’t find a way out of this, in 36 hours she would marry her torturer and simultaneously be done her career at Hogwarts. Her future would be...what? More torture? Locked in Narcissa’s old bedroom until she became pregnant like some breeding mare?

How would her destiny unfold? Would she have to throw herself out the window? Down the stairs? Or better yet, endure nine months of pregnancy as a prisoner only to hand her baby over to Bellatrix Lestrange to raise, so that her child could become another perfect little sadistic, racist pureblood?

They probably would never even tell my child about me, she thought.

She couldn’t help but feel completely fatalistic about it all.

No, there was no real future for her at Malfoy Manor.

A gentle tapping on the door caused her to inhale deeply and set her champagne flute down. She picked up her wand and flicked the door open. She didn’t want to admit it to herself, but she was deeply frightened to answer it.

In the frame stood the proud, elegant form of Lucius Malfoy. He was dressed in a tailored green silk frock coat and carried an ivory-topped cane. His hair was neatly tied back and he was as handsome as ever as he briefly surveyed the room.

Lucius was surprised at the room and by her appearance. It looked a bit silly to him, all of this modern decor, but she was quite beautiful in her yellow dress. It accentuated her narrow waist and slim calves, and set off her brown hair nicely. He examined her face — she looked tired, but surprisingly healthy. Either Bella had gone easy on her, or she had healed herself rather effectively.

He quickly noticed the record player and the champagne. He smirked a bit. Was this her attempt to
Hermione was unprepared for what the sight of him would do to her. Though it was Bellatrix who had done the actual torturing, she suddenly felt like she was about six inches tall in front of Lucius. The familiar tremor in her left hand started, and she grasped her other hand to it to steady herself.

She looked down at the plush carpet she had transfigured, willing tears not to flow. It was overwhelming to be in the presence of her abuser. She turned back to the table and lifted her champagne to her lips, swilling back the entire glass as Lucius watched. She re-filled it, and drank most of that glass, too.

Finally, she turned back. He had not taken a step inside the room. She looked up at him and swallowed. At last, she spoke. The tiny mouse-voice sounded nothing like her own.

“Are you…pleased?”

He smiled and entered at this, setting his cane to the side to lean against the wall and unbuttoning his frock coat slowly, then hanging it on a quickly conjured coat-rack.

Beneath, he wore an elegant ensemble of pressed dark green pants, a white silk button-up shirt, and a matching green waist-coat and tie.

*He is always dressed to perfection,* she thought. How little his outward appearance as a gentlemen matched the man underneath! His blue eyes shone brilliantly at her.

“I am very pleased, Hermione. Any time you make an effort on my behalf, you will please me.”

She gave a small nod, and looked down at the ground again. *Why was she finding it so hard to prevent herself from crying?*

“I spoke with Professor Babbling and she mentioned how well your NEWTs went today.”

“I don’t know…I think they went well,” Hermione mumbled.

Lucius approached her slowly.

Hermione stiffened once he was within arm’s length. She had an instinct to pick her wand up from off the table and defend herself. But from what?

Would he grab her by the arm? The throat? Hurt her? *I’m so tired, Hermione thought. I don’t want to fight. Please, don’t let him hurt me.*

Lucius noticed her flinching at his proximity. *It’s for the best, he thought, she needs to fear me.* Still, he didn’t want her to simply stare at the floor throughout their dinner. He needed to reassure her.

He stepped in to her, closing the gap between them, and Hermione felt a warm arm wrap around her waist, then another slowly lift her right arm up as he took her right hand in his left. He pulled her into a dance position, and then slowly began to move her to and fro, encouraging her body to move in a small waltz to the Julie London song.

“I enjoy the music;” Lucius purred. “Very…quaint.”

Hermione couldn’t stop herself from looking up at his icy blue eyes as they danced. Lucius had no hatred in them. He seemed truly pleased…amused.

Hermione couldn’t understand how he could simply pretend that what had happened between them
had not happened. She felt a lump in her throat and felt the wetness form in her eyes, one tear escaping and dripping down her cheek as she looked away.

“Don’t cry, girl,” Lucius whispered, wiping the tear away. “I forgive you.”

Hermione took a step closer to him and leaned her head on his shoulder, quietly crying. She didn’t want his forgiveness or his fake comfort. He had done horrible things to her. But he was all she had in this moment. The only person who knew what she had been through the past week, and the only person who knew what Bellatrix had done. She cried quietly for a few seconds, her tears wetting his silk button-up.

“I…I’m sorry,” she stuttered.

“I know.” Lucius gently massaged her lower back reassuringly. “How are you?”

Hermione leaned back and looked back at his aquamarine eyes again. Was he joking? How was she? After all Bellatrix had done?!

Lucius sensed her misunderstanding.

“I mean, how are you coping with the after-effects of Cruciatu...
Lucius watched her enjoying his touch. He liked seeing her reaction, enjoyed the way her facial muscles smoothed out in pleasure.

“Narcissa used to tend to me after I…displeased the Dark Lord. The muscles and joints would contract painfully for days unless they were soothed. The cramping pain of *Cruciatus* can often take a week to completely dissipate. I want you to understand that I know exactly what you are feeling, and what I put you through. I do not take it lightly.”

Hermione looked up at him. As exhausted as she was, emotionally, mentally, and physically there was a part of her that wanted to scream at him, jump on him and punch his beautiful pale face in. He had allowed Bellatrix to torture her, and now he was trying to act sympathetic!? It was unbelievable.

But instead, Hermione sighed and simply looked at the carpet again. She needed to play along, allow him to win.

“I understand. I am sorry, Lucius. I know you were trying to be kind, and I was disrespectful.”

Lucius continued to massage her, moving up her ankle to her sore calf on the other leg.

“Does that feel good?”

“Mmmm...yes.”

“I will not allow Bellatrix to hurt you unless you disobey me.”

“So…she will be living with us at the Manor?”

“Of course.”

Hermione’s heart sunk. Though she had a plan, she had hoped against hope that it would never come to this. But with this confirmation, she knew what she had to do.

Because anything, *anything* was better than living permanently with Bellatrix Lestrange.

Hermione looked up at him. “May I use the ladies’ room?”

“Of course.”

Lucius gently lowered her feet to the floor and Hermione slid back into her heels. Lucius helped her to her feet.

“Thank you.”

Lucius watched as she walked to a door in the far corner and exited. He smiled to himself. This was all going rather well. She seemed much more subdued. This was a version of Hermione Granger he could deal with. *Perfect.*

In the bathroom, Hermione stood in front of the mirror. If it wasn’t for the horrible, exhausted, empty look in her eyes, no one could even tell what she had been through. She looked like a pretty young woman off to a party of some kind — the yellow of her dress accentuating the hazel flecks in her eyes.

*I had hoped I could wait,* she thought. *I hope hoped to finish my NEWTs at least. Leave a record of myself.*

But here was her opportunity and she had to take it.
She could *never* be Mrs. Lucius Malfoy.

Not after what Bellatrix had done to her. She would *never* set foot in Malfoy Manor again.

Hermione reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out what she needed. It was a small brown vial. She had stolen it from the Potions Storeroom in between her NEWTs today. *To hell with Snape finding out,* she had thought. *It won’t matter.*

Whether she would use it on herself, Bellatrix, or Lucius, she hadn’t known at the time, but it had suddenly occurred to her that she *needed* it and that she was terrified of *not* having it, not having a way out right at her fingertips.

She took a deep breath in. Tonight she would use it. This marriage contract would be broken one way or another.

She looked down at the vial and re-read its tiny label.

*Essence of Hemlock.*
Thank you for your patience (and reviews)! As promised, Hermione's plan for that poison is revealed. :)

Hermione stepped out of the bathroom to find Lucius still seated at the table, indulging in some shrimp cocktail and a glass of the champagne.

“Come, sit,” he commanded, pointing to the chair next to him. Hermione walked over and sat again. She poured herself a re-fill of the champagne. Lucius eyed her.

“You may want to take it easy, girl. I know you’re not used to imbibing,” he smirked.

She looked up at him and smiled, cat-like.

“Now is my chance, after all. I can’t very well get drunk once I’m pregnant.”

Lucius leaned forward and grasped one of her hands in his.

“Then you give in? You agree to provide me with an heir?”

She stared at his stunning eyes. They were flicking over her face with such raw intensity, and such… what was that? Vulnerability.

He needs this so desperately, she thought. If he wasn’t such a monster, I would almost feel sorry for him.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I told you I am yours, and I will be yours. I will have your child, Lucius. And our child will become the heir to the Malfoy name.”

Lucius closed his eyes. Her words acted like a balm to him. He gave a deep exhalation of satisfaction. At last. He opened his eyes and moved his hand to cup her jaw, running his fingers along her cheek in the manner in which he now knew she liked.

“Oh, Hermione,” he murmured.

She pressed her face into his touch. “Do you like that idea?” he continued.

“I didn’t like it at first, but now I do,” she whispered. “Just as I enjoy the way you touch me.”

Lucius swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Do you truly give in to me? In every way?”

“I-I do.”

He moved his thumb lightly over her lips, ghosting them. The memory of what had passed between them in the Library coming to the forefront of both of their minds.

“It’s not all pretend, is it, Hermione?” he asked softly. So softly she could barely hear him.
She stared up at him — his piercing gaze, his masculine jawline, and his almost feral body language. His large form was taut and he was almost sweating as if he was fighting against invisible restraints.

She could see she had been right. He would not admit it in the Library, and he plainly hated himself and her for it, but he *did* want to make love to her. She could see how much he was fighting it.

Hermione hated him, truly despised him. This pureblood hypocrite before her who treated her like she was less than dirt, but desperately wanted to fuck her. He had no morals, no character, no backbone. He was just lost in his mad hatred and well-deserved isolation. She couldn’t even bring herself to pity him.

And yet, she had never felt such *lust* course through her. His physical presence was undeniably erotic. He had been right — the lust potion had only amplified something that had already been there. She *loved* the way he held her jaw. Possessively, masculinely. It made her feel little squeezes of pleasure between her legs.

She felt a sharp pain in her stomach as she realized she was becoming intensely aroused, and the knowledge was making her sick.

What a cruel joke — to feel this way for Ron’s murderer. To be drawn like a moth to a flame to such a psychopath. The contradiction was almost beyond enduring- to have such a physical longing for someone that makes you sick. *You won’t have to endure it for long,* she thought.

Lucius inhaled deeply.

“I meant what I said. If you please me, I will keep Bellatrix at bay. You need not be alone with her ever again.”

Hermione nodded. Lucius let his hand fall from her cheek. He pushed his chair back slightly from the table and cleared his throat. He was trying to regain control, clearly.

“Thank you,” Hermione said quietly.

“I know submission has not come easily to you, but it is the natural way for Purebloods and Mudbloods. I am your Master not only because I am your Lord, but because of my superior blood status. What I have done has been entirely necessary for your instruction.”

Lucius rattled this off almost academically, dispassionately. Hermione nodded. She wondered if he even knew how much she got under his skin. He seemed to know his true feelings so little. She could work with that.

“I understand. What you did to me was to…teach me.”

Lucius nodded and took a long sip of his champagne. Hermione lifted her gaze up to him, shyly staring out from her dark eyelashes.

“May I show you what I learned?”

Lucius almost choked on the champagne. He coughed slightly and set the flute back down on the table. He raised an eyebrow and swallowed again. Surely, this was a tactic on her part. Throwing herself at him like some Mudblood whore?

But Hermione looked at him with her soft brown eyes and there was no hiding the lust in them. *Let him see,* she thought. *Let him see I find him attractive.*
Lucius searched her gaze and using just the lightest touch of legilimency, delicately pressed into the swell of her mind.

There was no lie there he could detect. Her over-whelming lust for him was all that met his gentle probing. He retreated from her mind and felt his heartbeat begin to increase. He had been struggling the past minute to ignore his rapidly increasing hardness, but her plain desire was now making it impossible.

He had won.

She had not only given in, but she was accepting how her body reacted to his, what this chemical thing was between them. She was showing him her desire for him. It was intensely stimulating. He could feel a small bead of sweat fall from the back of his neck and slide down his silk shirt.

Lucius nodded at her, then opened his dry mouth. His voice was low and rumbly.

“Come to me.”

Hermione stood up, pushing her chair back, and took two steps to him. She stood in front of him, his chair turned to face her, his back to the table now.

She trembled slightly, suddenly unsure of herself. He was a powerful grown wizard, and though she knew his desire for her gave her a measure of control, she could feel her own lust clouding her mind, distracting her from her plan. Seduction was nothing she had any familiarity with — she felt like an actress playing a role. That’s exactly what you are, she thought.

She bit her lip. “W-what would you like me to do…Master?”

Lucius bit his own lip at her use of the word “Master” and gazed up at her, slightly narrowing his eyes. Was it possible she was obfuscating? It didn’t seem like it. This was her last chance. There would be no turning back.

Test her, he thought.

“Show me your natural desire, Hermione. As you did before.”

Hermione knew he was talking of their moment in the Library. She closed her eyes.

Her cheeks were hot with embarrassment. If he simply wanted a blow-job it would almost be…what, easier? But this…the way he peeled her layers away. The way he...how had he put it? Released her. Showed her her own desires. Let her choose. It was so difficult, so much more painful.

Still, she knew what she had to do.

She opened her eyes. Lucius stared up at her with shining anticipation. His legs were apart slightly. She didn’t dare glance between them.

Hermione took a step to the left and then rotated her body, gently sitting herself down onto his lap. Lucius closed his legs to support her body weight as she settled. He wrapped his left arm along her back, and gripped his hand firmly on her left hip. His right hand moved down to hold her left thigh through her full skirts. He pulled her towards his middle so that she was secure against him. Hermione could feel his hardness under her bottom. Lucius groaned slightly as she readjusted.

Lucius smiled at her face, now only inches from his. She had willingly come into his arms, sat upon his lap like an eager little schoolgirl desperate for his approval. God, how he loved her like this!
Obedient. His slave. Wanting him.

He gently massaged her left thigh, holding back a grin when Hermione let out a small moan. She could fake so many things, and he had seen many versions of her “playing along,” but he was certain that what he was witnessing was her authentic reactions. It made him even harder.

He leaned into her right ear and kissed it softly, then growled into it. “You need my touch, don’t you, girl? You need your Pureblood Lord, hmmm?”

Hermione moaned again, quietly. His low voice was so erotic. She felt herself growing warm all over and she pressed her legs together, feeling the pulses of pleasure there begin to grow.

She closed her eyes and pressed her forehead down against his shoulder again, just as she had when they had briefly waltzed. She didn’t want to cry again. She wouldn’t cry. But she knew she was betraying Ron’s memory in this moment.

Before, she could say she had been tortured and assaulted and abused, but now she could no longer claim that she didn’t enjoy Lucius’s touch after this. In that way, maybe Lucius had won.

*There really is no way out but this,* Hermione thought.

She moved to lift her head off his shoulder, but suddenly she felt warm breath across her neck. Lucius knelt down and suckled gently on her left jugular, softer than he had ever kissed her there before.

Hermione closed her eyes and gave into it. He moved deliberately, up and down from the tip of her earlobe to the nape of her neck, sucking and nibbling. When his tongue flicked out, Hermione couldn’t help but moan. She shifted and felt the wetness between her legs.

Less than two weeks ago he had grabbed her neck so violently and whispered about how easily he could snap her hyoid bone and cause her to choke to death…and *now?* Now his touch upon her neck was…*welcome*?!

She inhaled deeply. She couldn’t pretend otherwise — she was shocked at how much she was enjoying his lips upon her — they were soft yet powerful. Possessive. Wet but not sloppy.

He was eating her up, tasting her skin, massaging her muscles and tendons with his strong mouth, sucking parts of her flesh between his lips and then swirling his tongue around in little wet circles, lapping at her. Seducing her.

“Ohhh…mmmm…” Hermione moaned, unable to fight the sensations. Ron had never devoted so much passion and time to her neck, but Lucius treated it like it was his favorite part of her body. It was producing sensations in her breasts, down her spine, and into her hips that Hermione had never felt— little tense tickles that made her feel warm and safe and…*wanted.* She could feel the thick air in the room surrounding them, and she was gasping slightly for oxygen.

Lucius smiled in between his nips. This had not been part of his plan. After her disobedience in the Library he had intended to take a harder tack with her, to rely purely on violence and punishment. But…she was reacting *beautifully.*

Her hips had begun to move of their own accord, slowly back and forth an inch at a time — responding to the pleasure, and his ears eagerly drank up every soft “mmm”, “uhh” and “oh” she uttered.

*It is so easy with her,* he realized with some surprise. *Sex with the Mudblood may be more*
pleasurable than I had originally anticipated.

Hermione’s eyes fluttered open when she realized Lucius’s mouth had left her. She pulled back and stared up at him. He was watching her through lowered lids. His eyes aglow with desire and superiority. His hands squeezed her hips and thighs roughly, possessively.

“Oh, Hermione…I cannot wait until you beg me for this.”

Hermione smiled shyly. She placed one hand on each of his shoulders and lifted herself up, placing her knees on either side of his hips and leaning down until she straddled him.

*It’s time*, she thought.

Lucius’s eyes were completely blown out with lust as he gazed up at her, his mouth forming a soft “oh” of surprise that she had taken such a bold action. Hermione found it slightly difficult to concentrate. She had such a strong impulse to kiss him, to run her fingers into his hair, to press her hips down into his and rock against him.

*Get it together*, she thought. *Don’t let him win.*

She leaned forward and up slightly and pressed her chest into his, wrapping her arms around his neck in a hug. Lucius mimicked her action, wrapping his own arms around her waist, gently pulling at the fabric of her yellow dress. He buried his face into her left shoulder.

*God, so lonely. So pathetic*, she thought. Although she realized a second later she could have been describing herself as well.

*I have to end this.*

She reached her right hand down and, unseen by Lucius, pulled the small brown vial out from her bra, then quietly popped the top with her thumb. She leaned over and emptied the contents into Lucius’s champagne flute with her right hand, careful to keep her left arm wrapped around the wizard beneath her. She watched as the drops sank to the bottom and dissipated.

She tossed the vial onto the carpet and reached for both his flute and her own. She leaned back and smiled warmly down at Lucius, taking a sip from her flute in her left hand and presenting his to him with her right.

“A toast,” she suggested, shyly looking down at him through her brown lashes. “To our future?”

Lucius smiled smugly and took the glass from her.
“In a moment,” Lucius replied, taking the glass from her. “There is one last thing we need to discuss.”

Hermione frowned slightly, but tried not to give away her disappointment.

“What is it?”

“It’s regarding your parents.”

Hermione froze.

*How does he know about them? Why is he bringing them up?*

She leaned back and stepped off Lucius’s lap, standing up in front of him and turning away, her glass in hand.

“W-what about them?”

“I know all about Wendell and Monica Wilkins of Sydney, Australia.”

Hermione wheeled around.

“How?” she whispered, feeling the blood drain out of her face.

“The ‘how’ is of no importance.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Insurance,” Lucius chuckled. “We have been enemies a long time, Hermione. I know it is not easy for you to go from my enemy to my wife. I need to make sure there are no…relapses.”

“Does Bellatrix know where they are?”

“She does.”

Hermione stared down at the floor and stumbled another step backwards. *No! No!*

“Oh, Merlin!”

She looked back up at Lucius, pleadingly.

“You can’t allow her to harm them. They don’t even know anything about me, or about the Wizarding World. They’re just harmless muggles. They have nothing to do with us!”

“Relax, my dear. No harm shall come to them as long as no harm comes to me. You and I will be
sharing a home and a bed and there will be times I shall be…vulnerable to attack. I need to ensure you don’t get a notion to stab me in the middle of the night some time,” he chuckled.

“I wouldn’t!” she protested. Though she knew full well she probably would.

“It is simply an insurance policy. Know that if anything happens to me, Bellatrix will personally make sure retribution is proportionally delivered to Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins. It was actually her own idea. Clever, isn’t it?”

Hermione froze. A wash of despair fell over her. There was truly nothing she could do now. Whatever she did, Bellatrix would not only punish her, but punish her parents.

“They’re my only family,” Hermione whispered. “You can’t!”

“Consider yourself lucky you have family,” Lucius sneered back at her, his face suddenly darkening.

Hermione moved a hand to her forehead, rubbing her temple. Was there a way out? Was there an angle here she wasn’t considering? God, why hadn’t she anticipated Lucius and Bellatrix finding out about her parents?! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

So engrossed in her thoughts, Hermione barely heard Lucius stand and move towards her. She opened her eyes. The blond wizard stood at arm’s distance. He was smiling again, enjoying having the upper-hand. In his hand he held up his champagne flute.

“A toast!” he smiled. “As you said, to our future!”

Hermione felt like everything was moving in slow motion. She watched as Lucius raised his hand and clinked his flute to hers. She watched as he slowly drew it back and then lifted the flute centimeter by centimeter towards his lips.

He was going to drink it.

He was going to die.

She would be free of him.

But my parents!

Hermione’s mind spun a mile a millisecond, running every outcome, every scenario.

Bellatrix would go after her parents immediately upon hearing of Lucius’s death, unless the Aurors could get to her first. What if the Aurors let her slip through their fingers? Did she want to take that risk?

Bellatrix would try to kill her parents, and then would come for her, and Bellatrix had already successfully evaded death, evaded capture. She seemed to move between the Muggle and Wizarding Worlds with ease. Was Lucius bribing the Ministry to look the other way?

And then there was her own life. Hermione knew she would probably be sent to Azkaban for Lucius’s murder. She had already thought that eventuality through when she had decided to steal the hemlock.

As corrupt as the Ministry was, her connections would most likely only mitigate her sentence in light of Ron’s murder, but not entirely avoid it. She might serve ten or even twenty years, but those years, she had calculated, would be far better spent in prison than in Lucius’s bed or in the Manor with
Bellatrix.

And she would still be relatively young after her sentence was served, still be in her thirties or forties. She could re-build her life… what was left of it then. Move forward. Somehow.

She had to decide.

And she had to decide NOW.

Let Lucius die and risk her parents’ lives, or stop him?

*God help me!,* she thought, as she watched Lucius tilt the flute to his lips, two inches away from pressing down on the edge of the glass.

“No!” she said aloud, knocking the flute from Lucius’s hand!

It sailed across the room and shattered on the far wall.

Lucius looked up at her, startled, uncomprehending. His eyes moved from the shattered glass on the floor by the baseboards to her panicked face.

Within seconds, his forehead smoothed and his eyes began to widen in fury.

“I see,” he glowered at her, the pieces slowly coming together.

She took a step back. He took a step forward. Hermione was suddenly very aware that her wand was on the table behind Lucius, and not up her sleeve. Lucius’s form seemed to sweep over her like a dark stormcloud.

“What did you put in it, girl?”

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered, raising her hands defensively. “I had to. I *had* to! I was desperate!”

“You *dare* try to poison me, Mudblood?!”

“I *had* to!” she shrieked again, growing hysterical, her whole body beginning to tremor.

“Your deception never ends! All of this…,” he gestured over to the table, referring to the chair they had previously occupied.

“No!” she protested, realizing what he meant. “*That* wasn’t deception! That was real! You know that was real. But I couldn’t go on…not with Bellatrix…”

“Well, well, well…” he clicked his tongue. “You are quite the little black widow, Mudblood.”

Hermione shook her head back and forth, continuing to move backwards. She bumped the credenza, knocking the record player to the floor.

“I told you I couldn’t live with Bellatrix! I can’t! Never!”

“So you would rather *murder* me?”

Hermione felt hot tears run down her face.

“Yes. Yes! I….I admit it, I confess. Oh, Gods, Lucius it wasn’t easy. I didn’t *want* to…”

He narrowed his eyes at her.
“Oh, I see. It wasn’t easy to decide to murder me? Well, that is a relief!” he exclaimed sarcastically before twisting his lips in a threatening sneer.

“No, that’s not what I mean!”

“You give me such glimmers of hope, Hermione… and then I realize all too quickly you can never escape the Mudblood that you are. You are so common,” Lucius spat.

“Oh, please! Please!” Hermione exclaimed. She was frantic now. How could she stop his anger? She knew it was hopeless.

“What?” he continued, “if this didn’t work, what was your next plan? Smother me with a pillow? Stab me in the bath? My God! You’re not even a woman, Hermione. You’re simply an animal that has been taught to walk and talk. To think I have been chained to you…”

Lucius turned his head and sniffed the air in elaborate disgust.

“I’m just so afraid of her, Lucius. I’m so afraid of her!”

Hermione felt her legs collapse from under her, felt herself fall to her knees. She clasped her hands together pleadingly and held them to her chest. Her entire torso was shaking now.

He’s going to kill me, she thought. I am going to die.

“Yes, of course you are afraid of her, aren’t you? It’s the animal instinct, Mudblood. Fight or flight.”

“Then you…understand?” she whimpered.

“I understand you have over-reached. You thought you could kill me! Murder me! Bellatrix is right! You are nothing but a sneaky Mudblood whore! And you must be disciplined.”

Lucius pulled his hand back and slapped her across the cheek.

Though Hermione had endured his blows before, never had he struck her with such power. She felt a pop in her jaw and wondered for a moment if it had been dislocated. She flew to the right, collapsing on her stomach. Her hands giving out beneath her.

She lay there, sobbing on the carpet. “I only did it…to get away…to get away from her…I had to prevent going back…”

Lucius moved to her and grabbed her roughly by the hair. She yelped in pain as he yanked her head backwards.

“How dare you try to end my life! The life of any Pureblood.”

“But you ended a life…you murdered Ron…” she whispered.

Lucius threw her forwards, releasing her hair. He began to pace.

“That was different. Two wizards, both Pureblood, meeting on a battlefield. There is honor in that, Mudblood. I honored him by defeating him in combat. I would never have poisoned him like a sneaky little rat. But this…to invite me to dine and then poison my glass…there is no honor in that.”

Hermione just cried harder. She had no idea what she could say to mitigate his rage. He was truly beyond the pale.
Lucius stared down at her pathetic form.

“My God…look at you. Dressed like some type of elegant Pureblood witch.”

Lucius knelt down and grabbed a handful of Hermione’s yellow skirt in disgust.

“You should be in rags, Mudblood, not in this. I have half a mind to go home and burn the entire wardrobe I had made for you. Perhaps I shouldn’t even permit you clothing. We could keep you in the kennels with the dogs. I’m not sure you should even be permitted to live inside the house.”

Hermione pushed at his hand as it yanked at her dress, trying to crab-walk her way backwards on the carpet away from him. She felt her dress tearing, a strip of it ripping away. She tried to hit back at him, but her blows didn’t land.

He slapped her in the face once more as punishment for her interference, then grabbed at her dress again.

As Hermione wrestled to get away, she felt it tear again. She turned to look at Lucius, but he merely grimaced at her coldly. He reached down and ripped at her skirts again roughly, tearing another long rip from the bottom all the way up to her waist. Hermione knew it was merely her robe he was tearing, only a transfigured dress and not the real thing, but the action was so hateful, so cruel.

She felt like she was an eight-year-old again on the Muggle playground at her old primary school.

She had been bullied as a small child. Her precociousness and curiosity already making her an outsider. On one or two occasions a few of the boys in her class had pushed her into a puddle, making her slacks all wet, or shoved her into a thorny bush, causing a rip in her uniform.

Even at that age, she had been good at internalizing things, never telling her parents. Hiding her shame. Making up excuses.

Lucius was just a bigger bully. Tearing strips from her pretty dress. Trying to make her believe she wasn’t worthy of respect. Wasn’t worthy of nice things. I will not be treated this way!

Hermione clenched her jaw and with a tightening of both fists, lunged herself at Lucius. He was taken by surprise and stumbled backwards as she scrambled atop him, pushing him onto his back against the carpet, knees straddling him.

She would show him just how much of an animal she could be!

She pulled back her right arm and with all her might swung her fist forward to punch him square in the jaw, only to find her fist caught in his powerful grip, the blond wizard chuckling at her.

“Fisticuffs are most definitely not your forte,” he taunted, before rolling them so that he was atop her.

She struggled, clawing and kicking with all her might, but his form was solid, weighty. She couldn’t budge him. She knew he had a foot of height and at least five stone on her, but she thought she could at least inflict some damage.

He pinned her beneath him with his thighs, and, holding both her wrists in one powerful hand, slapped her across the face again.

Hermione cried out from the stinging pain. She felt one of his hands close in around her throat. The throat that only minutes before he had suckled and kissed with such tender devotion.
It’s over, she thought. It is done.

She slowly tilted her face to the right as she felt his hand tighten around her neck. He will kill me now.

Wet tears left her eyes and dripped down her temples. Her lips contracted into a tearful grimace and she allowed a deep sob to escape her throat, her chest heaving.

It’s okay, she thought. I did the best I could.

She pressed the right side of her face to the carpet and gave in to her despair, allowing the sobbing to come. Letting it flow freely. She had cried earlier and Lucius had petted and comforted her. Now, she knew her despair would probably only enrage him. But she was ready for the end.

Let him kill me, let him do what he wants, she thought. I cannot go on.

She looked back up at him one last time through her tear-stained face.

He thinks he is such an honorable Pureblood, but I know the truth!

He had both of her wrists pinned now on either side of her body. His lower half was pressed firmly against hers, and she couldn’t move her torso in any direction. She could feel his hardness pressing into her hips.

He was panting, out of breath, and staring down at her with more hatred than she had ever seen in his wild eyes.

She stared up at him with equal hatred and loathing. Lucius Malfoy, the Pureblood Hypocrite, she thought.

“Go ahead,” she cried. “You want to hurt me so much? Then hurt me!! You’ve already done everything else you could possibly do.”

The tears continued to spill from her eyes.

“I know what you are. What you want. Hurt me then!” she sobbed, hysterically.

“Do it! Just take what you want and be done with me!”

Hermione shut her eyes tightly and waited to feel his hands at her skirts again.
Chapter 24

Lucius paused for a moment, gazing down at Hermione’s face, which was contorted with tears.

*Did she mean…?* He leaned back from her slightly, a disgusted look upon his face.

“Do you really believe that I…rape Mudbloods? Is that what you think I did in the Dark Lord’s service?”

Hermione peered up at him cautiously, looking plainly into his cold blue eyes. *Does he look hurt? Confused?*

“I-I don’t know, Lucius! I don’t know you! But, you’re hurting me! You’re hurting me!”

“You believe I am a rapist.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement.

Lucius felt his rage subside slightly, for just a moment. Did she really think he was about to rape her?

Hermione wept, closing her eyes, choking on her own sobs. Her skirts had shimmied up her legs and were askew around her upper thighs. Knees trembling and exposed to the air of the room. Calf muscles twitching.

She felt so lost, so vulnerable. *He is going to hurt me.*

There was no reason for waiting. He would have her anyway Sunday night. She had no control over her body anymore, or its fate.

*Why was he hesitating?*

She swallowed and whispered up at him. “You have brought more pain into my life… than anyone I have ever known. And I don’t know why. *Why* have you done this?”

Lucius gave a large sigh.

“*Why?…None of us get to know ‘why!’*”

He groaned in frustrated anger and leaned back a little more on his haunches. Lucius struggled to catch his breath. As angry as he was he also felt tired, defeated. He had not anticipated spending the evening locked in physical battle with Hermione Granger.

*Why were they never able to meet except in this violent manner?* As much as he hated her, he was sick of their never-ending battle.

Hermione pressed her cheek back into the carpet, suppressing another sob. She willed herself to relax her body in his grasp, flopping her arms and legs out like a corpse’s on the floor.

“Just do what you’re going to do to me,” she said, softly. “I can’t fight you anymore.”

She gave in. Finally.

Lucius stared down at the girl.
Tears poured from both of her eyes and were dripping across her temple, around the bridge of her nose and down into the carpeted floor. Her eyes were shut, but they did nothing to stem the flow. Her nose was leaking from one nostril and there was blood from a cut on her lip slowly dripping along her chin.

Her chest rose and fell with her gasping breaths, but she had pressed her lips tightly together in a grimace, awaiting another blow.

“Please, just do it quickly,” she whispered.

In that moment, he understood. Perhaps for the first time.

She really believed he would take her here, right on the carpet in this dingy little dining room. She must absolutely see him as a depraved rapist. She truly understood absolutely nothing of Pureblood ritual and customs or Pureblood honor.

Her ignorance was extraordinary.

He didn’t know why, but it profoundly bothered him that this is what she expected. He was not in the same category as Pettigrew and Dolohov! Though Narcissa had come to believe he was…

Lucius had watched the love for him slowly die out in Narcissa’s eyes over the years. How she had loved him a little less each day, believed in him less and less, until finally she looked at him as if he were a complete stranger, and a repugnant one at that. In the early years, he used to confide in her what the Dark Lord had forced him to do — the maiming, torture, assault of Muggles, and how terrified he was at what it was doing to his soul. Narcissa would listen sympathetically at first, but as the years went by, he could feel the judgment from her creeping in ever more.

Those eyes of hers that said, why are you not wizard-enough to stand up to the Dark Lord?

Though Narcissa shared his Pureblood values, she had come to believe that Muggleborns were simply not worth the attention, and that Voldemort’s obsession with public displays of torture was a terrible, repugnant mistake, and one that lowered the noble Pureblood Houses.

Lucius had disagreed, despite his reluctance at first to participate, and eventually began to see the torture as the most effective way of bonding the lesser Death-Eaters to the Dark Lord and keeping the Mudbloods in their place.

Once, in the middle of a shouting match, Narcissa had accused him of enjoying the more extreme atrocities he routinely hosted under their roof — the rapes and murders that seemed to go on and on, until nowhere in their Manor was a haven from the reverberating screams.

Right before she had left him, Narcissa had even accused him of participating in the rapes and hiding his involvement from her. It had been too much to bear.

He had done horrible things — he had assaulted women and men, he had disfigured them, he had murdered them, he had witnessed public rapes and done nothing to intervene, and he had tortured many Mudbloods until their minds had broken apart, but there was a very, very, very small line he had never crossed.

He had never taken a woman against her will, whether Witch, Mudblood, or Muggle.

Never taken a witch violently.

And when Narcissa had accused him of that…of being a violent, sadistic rapist…of enjoying violent
forced sex—Narcissa, the witch who knew him better than any other...who had known him since he was an innocent twelve-year-old boy...

It had broken him.

Lucius shook his head, looking down at Hermione’s limp, sobbing form.

Did all witches see him this way now?

He used to delight in being feared, and the truth was a part of him, perhaps a large part, still did.

He had wanted Snape and Pettigrew, and all the other Death-Eaters to believe there were no limits to his depravity, but it had all been mostly for show. All part of developing a War-time reputation.

But was this the reputation he now had among the general Wizarding World?

Was the ancient name of Malfoy and the honor, chivalry, and respectability it had conveyed for centuries now merely synonymous with the likes of someone like Wormtail? Lucius’s crimes, he had always believed, were politically motivated and necessary for the winning of the War.

Did the Wizarding World see him as a common thug? He had played up his part in various atrocities and played it up to his fellow Death-Eaters, because he wanted them to fear him, but he liked to imagine he was in a better category than most of them.

True, he had never stopped it, but he had never raped the Muggle women who were presented in front of the Dark Lord, even when Voldemort had implied he should do so.

And he had never gone down to his Dungeons to force himself upon one of them in private, either. He had never done what many other Death-Eaters had done, bartered sex for freedom and set up Muggle-women as personal courtesans. He took no pleasure whatsoever in their bodies.

In fact, until Narcissa had stopped sharing his bed, he had been faithful to her for over fifteen years.

Lucius stared down at Hermione and relaxed his grip on her wrists, ever so slightly.

Though he had not raped a witch, the threat of rape was something he had used very successfully and relatively frequently, and he freely admitted he had assaulted Mudbloods, grabbing them and manipulating their bodies to invoke maximum fear.

It was practical.

The threat of rape was simply the fastest way to ensure a female Mudblood’s compliance. But didn’t all the male Death-eaters know that for a fact?

Even Hermione had been extraordinarily malleable when that threat had been raised in their first meeting at the Manor — she had immediately played along, calling him “Master.”

It was simply too terrifying a prospect for most Muggleborns, most females, to even process. But surely all was fair in War?

Lucius cleared his throat and moved himself off Hermione.

He stood and leaned against the wall of the room, considering his next move.

Hermione lay frozen on the ground flat on her back, shaking for some time, her body barely registering that Lucius had moved away from her. The adrenaline was coursing through her so
fiercely, she was still anticipating more blows, more slaps.

Would he drag her around the room? Tear at her clothing again? Grab her neck and squeeze the life out of her?

Finally, after several minutes…Hermione was able to breathe more calmly. She became aware that Lucius was no longer above her, no longer touching her. Instead, he was several feet away, leaning against the wall, staring into space.

Hermione slowly sat up, her breath coming back into her lungs. She made brief eye contact with Lucius before he glanced away; he did not look as enraged anymore. He looked somewhat angry, but also restrained.

Hermione pulled her skirts down around her legs. Her heels had come off, somehow, in their terrible struggle and were lying several feet away near the torn pieces of her dress.

Her face was sore from his blows and when she looked down she could see the bruises beginning to form on her wrists and forearms.

Not the first time he had marked her.

She pulled her legs towards her torso and wrapped her arms around her knees. She didn’t know what she could say to Lucius, but she didn’t dare try to stand and run for the door or for her wand. She was so weak, she wasn’t sure she would even make it.

After another minute of silence, Lucius slowly moved his blue eyes to hers.

“Explain why my death was so preferable to going back to the Manor, girl.”

Hermione breathed in deeply. Why didn’t he understand?? It made no sense. Was he completely ignorant?

She tilted her head slightly, motioning towards her right arm, then turned back to him.

He merely looked at her, an expression of befuddlement.

She cocked her head. Was he a fool? Why didn’t he get it?

Hermione reached over to her right sleeve at her wrist and with a yank made a rip in it several inches long. She pulled along the tear, allowing the fabric to rend itself in two along her forearm and up to her elbow and bicep. She tore it away completely around her upper bicep, effectively making the dress short-sleeve on that side.

Her right arm now completely exposed, she lifted it up and rotated it so Lucius could see the blood-red cuts.

He peered down at the marks. There were many deep slices, jagged and raw. And they spelled…wait, was it? Yes…!

On her arm was engraved a large word:

WHORE.

As she displayed it, she turned her head to look accusingly into his aquamarine eyes.

What she saw there completely surprised her.
Lucius stared at the mutilation, his mouth dropping open, his eyes widening in profound shock.

He stiffened his spine, slightly, and leaned forward a few more inches, craning to get a better look, to make sure it was real.

WHORE.

So deep and bloody. Still fairly fresh and only partially scabbed over. Much larger than the “MUDBLOOD” carving she had on her other arm.

“It’s cursed. I can’t glamour it or heal it,” Hermione whispered.

Lucius looked back at Hermione, slack-jawed. Surely, it wasn’t possible.

His instructions to Bellatrix had been very clear.

_Cruciatu_s was permitted, but _nothing_ more. _No_ permanent damage.

Unless this was a trick of Hermione’s to make him sympathetic, Bellatrix had betrayed his instructions in the most extreme manner.

Hermione stared in surprise at Lucius’s reaction, and realized the truth all at once.

Lucius had not commanded Bellatrix to do this.
Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears again at Lucius’s flabbergasted reaction.

She furrowed her brow, questioningly.

“You…didn’t know?”

Lucius stared at her in shocked silence.

“I…did not.”

Hermione searched his face. Is he lying? It was so hard to know anymore. So hard to trust. But there was something about his reaction that rang true to her.

She placed her hands on the carpet beneath her and briefly turned to face away from him, gathering herself.

In her mind, murdering Lucius, tricking him into drinking poison, had been completely justified on the basis that he had instructed Bellatrix to mutilate her — that he would allow her continued mutilation, that he would do anything to her body.

She knew she could never forgive him for allowing Bellatrix to perform Crucius, but had he really NOT instructed Bellatrix to carve “WHORE” into her arm?? Not even known about it?!!

It was hard to believe.

She turned back to him.

“But you…you always call me ‘whore.’ I know that is how you see me. You say I’m nothing but a Mudblood whore. Didn’t Bellatrix do this at your command?”

Lucius could not take his eyes from her mutilation. As a Pureblood wizard, his fiancee was his property. How dare Bellatrix irreparably maim his property!

“Absolutely not. I would never allow your body to be marked in this manner. A mutilated witch is not what I would desire in a wife.”

Hermione nodded, but slightly folded in on herself. She truly was irreparably damaged.

“Bellatrix cursed it more extensively than the other time…I couldn’t heal it. A glamour cannot cover it. I tried everything.”

She felt tears fall from her eyes yet again, and she wiped them away.

“I think that was her point. To mark me, make me a freak, make me undesirable…”

Lucius nodded slightly. She was not incorrect in her assessment of Bellatrix’s motives.

Hermione took a deep breath.

“I did not want to murder you, Lucius. I have done everything to try to get through to you, to make this…thing work, but…she told me she would cut out my tongue…blind me…cut off my nose, my ears! The things she whispered to me…her threats… I assumed that was all your instruction. After
all, what do you care about how I look? You only want me for my womb.”

Lucius buried his face in his hands, massaging his temples. It was almost too much to take.

Did Hermione think he would happily be wed to a completely disfigured witch? That he’d delight in taking a witch to bed whose face had been so heinously mutilated?

“My God, Hermione! There is a difference, girl…there is a difference between what I want…and…that. I am not Bellatrix.”

Hermione’s eyes filled with tears again, most of them in relief.

“Is there? I’m not sure…”

She brought a hand up and covered her mouth with it, suppressing a sob.

“Lucius…I wasn’t sure…You’ve hurt me so much…I thought…you wanted me to be...cut.”

She wept openly into her hand.

Lucius simply pressed his back and neck against the wall, watching her. This was what she had thought of him? It was…revolting.

There was a difference between his pleasure in controlling her, being dominant, his tactics of threatening her, seducing her, frightening her…and authorizing, nay ordering, the carving up of her body!

He saw a clear delineation, but clearly Hermione had not. She had believed that Bella’s words and actions were entirely his.

It all made sense to him, suddenly. Not that he could forgive her for attempting to take his life, but her utter panic was now at least understandable, logical.

“I will never permanently mark your body in that way, Hermione, nor will I rape you like some common battlefield soldier. Whatever else I may do…I do have some limits, especially when it comes to the witch I take to wife. I grew used to using the threat of rape as a war-time tactic, but know I have never taken a witch against her will. And I never would.”

“What about the lust potion?”

“It was merely to allow both of us to grow more comfortable with one another.”

“But you would have bedded me under its influence…”

“I would have…” he admitted.

“And what if I had said ‘no’ even under the lust potion’s influence?”

“Then I would have respected your wishes and waited until Sunday night, though I would have been far from pleased.”

Hermione nodded. She could not fully believe him. Even their consummation Sunday night would be rape, as far as she was concerned.

After all, he had hurt her with his hands numerous times, so brutally, but she believed that he at least wanted to believe this, wanted to see himself as better than his peers, and that gave her a small
glimmer of hope. He wanted to see himself as...a good wizard? A decent man? Who knew?

But he could have raped her tonight. On this very carpet...and he had not. That was something?

Hermione took a deep breath, sensing he needed something from her as well. She looked at him — her brown eyes meeting his blue ones.

“I will never make an attempt on your life again, Lucius, but in return you must promise me my parents will be safe.”

Lucius looked at her a moment then gave a small nod.

“As long as I live, they shall be safe.”

Hermione nodded as well. She prayed he was not lying.

They sat for another minute in silence, both horrified at what had occurred this evening and at the revelations that had been brought to the surface.

Finally, Hermione shifted and slowly moved to stand.

“I have to sleep, Lucius. I have my Transfiguration NEWT in the morning.”

He reached out his hand, helping her steady herself.

“I am sure you will excel at it.”

He gave a forced smile. Hermione had to will herself not to shudder. His physical form absolutely terrified her. In the span of an hour he was kissing her neck and then slapping her across the face.

His instability left her quaking in fear.

But at least...at least he was not instructing Bellatrix. She had been her own entity, and Hermione felt Lucius was being honest in that regard.

Lucius seemed to prefer mental and emotional abuse to physical abuse, and he was possessive when it came to her body. It made sense that he would not have allowed Bellatrix to permanently mark her.

Gods, Hermione thought, how low my standards have sunk that I view emotional and mental abuse as a positive?

Silently, the two of them gathered their clothing — Hermione slipped her feet back into her heels. Lucius put on his frock coat, buttoned it, and took up his cane. They both looked about the room.

What a nightmare of an evening, Hermione thought.

“Allow me to escort you back to you rooms,” Lucius requested softly, offering her his arm.

Hermione took it. And suddenly as if none of the ugliness had passed between them, they were strolling down the corridor, the model of a Victorian suitor and his intended bride.

It was late and the halls were empty. The moonlight shone in through the stained glass windows.

They walked in silence.

Hermione guided them to Gryffindor Tower, along the staircases until they landed at the top of the
junction before her suite’s door. She turned to Lucius. He stood a step below her on the staircase, so that they were eye-to-eye.

She looked at his handsome face a long time. He looked repentant, though there was still a slight twinge of suspicion and latent anger in his expression as he flicked his eyes across her face.

“I’m still scared of you…and of Bellatrix…” she whispered.

“I know.”

“You hurt me tonight, Lucius…You…grabbed me, slapped me…”

“I know,” he nodded and looked down, solemnly.

“How can you protect me from Bellatrix?”

“I will. I promise you.”

Lucius bent down and kissed the back of her hand. She shivered and drew her hand back.

“I just wanted to get away from Bellatrix…don’t you see?” she whispered.

“I understand your logic. Though I cannot pretend your attempt on my life doesn’t disgust me. A Mudblood should never…,” he trailed off.

She nodded, eager to stop him from working himself up again.

“I know for you this is a transgression,” she whispered.

He looked up at her. His blue eyes were shining, surprisingly tender. He lifted a hand to her hair and softly ran a forefinger through one of the tendrils near her ear.

“I was only so enraged because of what came before…between us….It is very…unexpected.”

Hermione breathed in deeply and nodded.

“There is something, isn’t there, Hermione?”

She wanted to feign ignorance, but she knew exactly what he meant.

What was it? Sexual chemistry? Attraction? It was clear to her now that Lucius desired her, and Lucius seemed to be owning up to it as well. It was thick in the air around them.

Against herself, Hermione nodded. “I wish more than anything there wasn’t.”

He stepped up to the same step she stood upon, and slid his arms around her waist, turning her slightly.

“I’m so afraid of you, Lucius…just tell me you won’t hurt me anymore. That’s all I want.”

“I won’t hurt you,” he murmured against her.

“I don’t believe you, but I don’t want to fight…” she whispered.

“Then don’t fight…” he whispered back.

And before she realized what was happening, he had pressed his lips to hers. It was tender,
passionate, gentle.

She wanted to cry at the confusion — the man who had assaulted her just an hour before now kissing her again like she was made of glass.

He had strangled her, thrown her about, slapped her, and she had fought him just as ferociously, and now he pressed against her with the tenderness of a passionate lover. A more gentle passion she had never felt.

It was all so twisted — the way they were physically drawn to one another. The way their bodies lusted after one another’s.

They hated each other intellectually, disagreed about racial politics, and yet their bodies seemed somehow to drift towards each other of their own accord.

Hermione tried to push away and end the kiss, but Lucius held her firmly. His hands snaked around her, gently massaging her lower back as his tongue teased the entrance to her mouth.

His mouth massaged and lured hers. His passionate kiss was intensely engaging — not sloppy as Ron’s kisses had often been, or overly eager as Viktor’s.

Lucius knew how to kiss, and it shot little sparks up and down Hermione’s body, causing her to wrap her arms around his strong shoulders. This was the most sensual kiss she had ever had, and his lips were confident on hers, commanding. She kissed him back.

*I am probably damned,* she thought.

Lucius was like the Muggle myth of Hades. And perhaps she was Persephone. Forced into his dark world, to spend a certain amount of time in his world, consumed by him. Until eventually...what? They would tear one another apart? He would dispose of her after she gave birth? Or finally kill her accidentally in a sudden fit of rage?

Hermione wanted more than anything to push Lucius off her — to run away, to slap him, and spit in his face. She did none of those things. Instead, she heard herself give a soft moan and he gently...softly...coaxed her mouth open and slipped his tongue inside.

“Oh!”

A loud indignant gasp forced Hermione to come back to herself. She pulled herself out of Lucius’s arms and looked past his breathless face.

At the foot of the staircase stood Ginny Weasley. Her jaw dropped wide open.

She held several Transfiguration books in her arms and stared up at Hermione with the most horrified expression that Hermione had ever seen on the redhead.

Ginny had stood there and watched as her best friend, Hermione Granger, had passionately embraced her brother’s murderer.

The look Ginny gave Hermione made Hermione feel like she was beyond redemption, a sinner of the worst degree. The look was one of complete and utter hatred.

“Ginny!” Hermione exclaimed.

But before she could take a step, the redhead turned and fled down the stairs and around the corner.
Hermione moved to go after her, but Lucius held her fast.

“Don’t,” he murmured. “You don’t need her.”

Lucius kissed her cheek softly, then leaned down and kissed the back of her hand again.

“I will see you at 12 o’clock on Sunday, Hermione. Good luck with the rest of your NEWTs.”

With a polite nod, he wheeled about and disappeared down the stair. His cane clacking on the wooden floor as he disappeared into the darkness.

Hermione stood at the top of the stairs for some time, wrapping her arms around herself in her torn yellow dress.

She knew everything was wrong. All wrong.

But she was at a complete loss as to what to do next.

Before spending an hour reviewing Transfiguration and then at last crawling into her bed for some much-needed sleep, Hermione owled a brief message to Ginny.

Gin,

*What you saw…I’m so sorry. I am trying to deal with him the best way I can. Let me explain.*

-Mione

She woke up five hours later and there had been no reply.

It was clear the red-headed witch was ignoring her. She couldn’t blame her. To come across her closest female friend snogging her brother’s killer… It must have felt like the worst kind of betrayal.

But what did Ginny expect? That she would never *kiss* her future husband?

Hermione sat up in bed for an hour, quietly cramming for Transfiguration and ignoring her over-anxious thoughts.

Finally, as the clock clicked down and she had 30 minutes before she had to meet Professor McGonagall, Hermione dragged herself out of her four-poster and moved to the bathroom to brush her teeth and get ready.

She considered the events of the previous evening as she looked at herself in the mirror.

She could see the dark circles under her eyes had grown even darker and she had faint rosacea and broken blood vessels on both cheeks, no doubt from Lucius’s slaps. One cheek had a dark purple bruise near the cheekbone. It had received the brunt of Lucius’s blows. She looked at her arms. Both of them showed the imprints of his fingers — the now-familiar yellow and purple impressions that made the queasiness rise in the back of her throat.

She remembered when he had made similar markings on her the first time she had gone to Malfoy Manor, and she had run to Professor Snape to heal them.

That seemed like such a long, long time ago now, even though it wasn’t at all.

She glanced back at the mirror and pulled her nightgown down to further examine herself. Her neck was also bruised from his fingers — swollen red with light purple marks denoting the location of his
It was getting difficult to keep up with the glamour spells, she realized.

*Merlin,* she thought. _Tomorrow I am going to marry a wizard who likes to abuse me, and not only that, but one who is emotionally unstable and cannot control himself._

It didn’t matter that they seemed to have a lot of physical chemistry, that she liked his passionate kisses and his touches.

Her future with Lucius was always going to be temperamental at best.

Perhaps some nights he would make love to her. And perhaps other nights he would throw her around, beat her until she was black and blue, and then drag her to his Dungeons. How could she manage that?

Once sex entered into the equation, Hermione was terrified at the notion of how his abuse might expand.

It was true she had been titillated at the idea of some light BDSM, being spanked or dominated in a safe, loving way. But what if Lucius broke his own Pureblood code? What if when he was angry with her he began to abuse her sexually? He seemed to pride himself that he had never raped a witch, but what if he became too carried away in their marriage bed? Would he take his frustrations out on her body?

She swallowed at the thought of some of the more alarming things she had briefly read about in the BDSM manual — choking, anal sex, bondage. These were _not_ things that she felt excited by. It all terrified her. A little teasing and spanking was one thing, but to be with a wizard who wanted to push her limits in that way she found… completely unnerving. Was this where Lucius wanted to go? She knew she was never going to be adventurous sexually.

It was also rather annoying — why did these wizards assume every young witch wanted that kind of aggressive sex? Maybe it made her simple or naive, but she knew that for her, there wasn’t a big separation between sex and love, and she couldn’t understand the way many witches and wizards firmly differentiated between the two.

She remembered once when she and Ron had been snogging that Ron had bitten her, somewhat accidentally. Not hard, but definitely a nip that had broken her skin. She had confronted him, and he had sheepishly admitted to thinking that most witches liked that sort of thing.

“Ron, I just want you to _kiss_ me. I want to feel that you love me,” she had said to him. “For me, I’m here with you because I _love_ you. I am kissing you because I _adore_ you. I don’t need anything else. I don’t need you to demonstrate anything or pretend to be anything wild and crazy.”

He had blushed ashamedly at her sweet admission, and they had giggled a little together before he had wrapped his arms around her and made her feel safe and secure once more.

“I _do_ love you, ‘Mione. So, so much,” Ron had whispered. “I will never do anything you don’t like.”

Ron had always made her feel so safe and treasured. She would never have that from Lucius. It would always be eggshells — never knowing what kind of Lucius she would get. How could she live like that?

Lucius was the first wizard she had encountered whose alluring physicality had seemed to
overpower her brain. The first time she had ever experienced pure lust. What would that lead to?

She shook herself from her worried thoughts and cast a glamour spell over every injured part of her body…except of course the “WHORE” carving that could not be covered.

She was much too exhausted to attempt Healing spells, and she needed every ounce of magical energy for her last NEWTs.

She changed into a long-sleeved robe and gathered her books, heading out.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

400 kudos!!! I am overwhelmed. I especially appreciate the lurkers who have de-lurked to tell me how much they love (or hate!) the story. I love ALL your feedback and opinions!

And now...a 5,000-word chapter to celebrate! :)

After the Transfiguration NEWT, she waited a long time for Harry at Ron’s memorial.

Transfiguration had gone well. The combination essay and demonstrative portions were her forte. McGonagall had smiled warmly as Hermione had easily completed each task, despite her exhaustion, and she had hunkered down and written her long-form essays with as much wit and thoroughness as her exhausted brain could manage.

Hermione sat on the cold marble of Ron’s memorial. The warm Saturday sunshine pouring down upon her. She had an hour and a half before McGonagall would meet her to give her the DADA NEWT and she was especially nervous about that one.

Despite her experience battling the Dark Arts, she felt a little shaky in the subject. She wished she had had a few more weeks to review…but alas, it had been her own idea to take it this early.

Only two more, she thought. You can do this, Hermione. Keep it together.

She wasn’t sure if Harry would cut Snape’s Saturday Potions review as he said he would after Ginny’s horrified reaction to her kiss with Lucius. Ginny had probably told him all about it. Perhaps he would be as horrified with her as Ginny evidently was?

Merlin, I am truly all alone.

Nonetheless, she sat upon Ron’s memorial on the Hogwarts’ grounds and dutifully waited. She leaned back and spread her arms and legs across the marble, stretching in the warm light.

Her limbs were so weary. The dearth of sleep, Bellatrix’s torture, the many rounds of Cruciatus, and her terrible time with Lucius the previous evening had brought her body to the brink.

She closed her eyes, but then quickly opened them. Best not to get too comfortable. The urge to sleep was too strong and she didn’t want to miss her Defense Against the Dark Arts NEWT because she had fallen asleep on Ron’s memorial.

She glanced at her watch. She’d wait another fifteen minutes, and then she would go back to her room to cram with her DADA textbook.

Fifteen minutes passed. She looked at her watch again and it sunk in.

Harry wasn’t coming.

Ginny had told him about her and Lucius. Harry was most likely disgusted. Hermione sighed. She
gathered up her book-bag and stood, turning back to Hogwarts’ main entrance.

She took two steps and then she saw him. *Harry!*

Floppy-haired and clutching his book-bag. He was running towards her. He stopped as he came up to her, out of breath.

“Sorry, ‘Mione. Snape caught me sneaking off and launched into a lecture, but I managed to get out of it. How much time do we have?”

She smiled at the sight of her best friend and felt the tears pricking her eyes. He *hadn’t* abandoned her!

“Oh, Harry! You came!”

He strode up to her and gave her a warm hug. She winced a little as his tight hug hurt her a little in the parts of her body where Lucius had bruised her, but she hugged him back firmly.

“Of course!”

She smiled at him, before pausing, her face clouding over.

“Ginny…she seemed so angry…”

Harry sighed.

“I know, ‘Mione, but Ron was her brother. She can’t be rational about this. I don’t know the particulars, but I know you loved Ron, and I know you are doing the best you can to figure out this nightmare marriage with Lucius. I know you mean well.”

Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears again. It seemed like all she did these days was cry. Harry hugged her tightly again.

She winced against his hug once more. He had no idea how sore and tender her body was, and she was not about to tell him. She endured his eager hug.

“You’re the smartest witch I know. If you need to play along with Lucius to make your marriage work, I’m all for it. I will always support you. Now, let’s do a quick DADA quiz?”

Harry smiled up at her. Hermione nodded. The two of them sat on Ron’s marble memorial and Harry spread his DADA textbook across his lap.

After an hour, Harry shut the tome.

“I think that’s all we have time for, but Merlin, Hermione, you got about 90% of my questions correct. I think you’ll ace it!”

She smiled. “I’m glad you think so, but I’m nervous.”

Harry grasped her hand. “Don’t be.”

“You were always the best when it came to the Dark Arts, Harry.”

Harry gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“Do you know why? Because I always had you and Ron to believe in me. I felt like I could trust my
instincts because you were both behind me. Well, I believe in you, Hermione. You’re going to kill it in there.”

“Thanks,” she replied, smiling at him.

“Let’s meet for dinner afterwards in the Great Hall to celebrate. I want to hear all about it, and I know Ginny will, too.”

Hermione nodded. Harry stood and gathered up his book and bag.

“Good luck!”

They parted. Hermione was more encouraged by Harry’s support than she could articulate.

She marched back into Hogwarts and straight to McGonagall’s classroom, ready to face her challenging Defense Against the Dark Arts NEWT.

****

A couple hours later, Hermione entered the Great Hall.

Harry and Ginny sat at the Gryffindor table in their usual spot. She approached tentatively. Harry saw her and waved her over eagerly.

Ginny looked a bit uncomfortable, but Hermione couldn’t detect any anger in her face.

Hermione sat next to Ginny. It was best to confront all of this head on. She plunked her bag down on the bench between them, and came right out with it.

“I’m…I’m so sorry, Ginny. I know what it must have…looked like…It must have been horrible and shocking.”

Ginny shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut. Harry reached a hand over and took one of Ginny’s in his own.

Hermione stared down at the table, awkwardly. Eventually Ginny spoke.

“I don’t blame you, Hermione. I know you are in a bad situation. The Marriage Law has chosen the cruellest possible husband for you…but seeing you and him like that…I just…I can’t…”

Hermione nodded. “I understand, Gin.”

Ginny looked up at Harry. They had discussed all of this at length, but now was the time to tell Hermione. She turned to her brown-haired friend.

“Hermione, I’m sorry but Harry and I can’t be there for you tomorrow. At the exchange of vows. I can’t be your witness. I can’t be in Lucius’s presence. Ever.”

Ginny swallowed, suppressing her emotion. It was more than difficult to tell Hermione she would abandon her on her wedding day. But enduring the presence of Lucius Malfoy, her beloved brother’s stone-cold murderer…she could not bear it.

Hermione nodded again and repeated quietly, “I understand.”

She looked up at Harry. Part of her felt angry. She wanted to say, “Why can’t you be there for me, Harry? I need you! You’re my best friend in the world!!”
But she knew he had to support Ginny in this. Harry’s eyes were full of sorrow and conflict. He glanced down at the table.

“I’m so sorry, Hermione,” Harry said, quietly. “I agree…I just don’t think we should be there with Malfoy.”

Hermione swallowed. Though she understood intellectually — Ginny could not be there and Harry had to support his partner, his future wife — it was brutal to think that her two closest friends would not stand up next to her on her wedding day. Devastating.

In fact, Harry and Ginny were the only friends she had thought to even invite.

If they weren’t coming…she realized that she would have no witnesses. No one.

Not that the Marriage Law required witnesses.

The contract required nothing but an exchange of blood and spoken vows. Still, Hermione had hoped the attendance of her best friends would make it feel at least a tiny bit celebratory, legitimate.

But now…they wouldn’t be there for her.

“How did the DADA NEWT go?” Harry asked, trying to change the subject.

“It went well. Thanks for helping me prep.”

Ginny looked over at Hermione, guiltily. Her eyes tearing up slightly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t help you with Transfiguration. I just…I froze. I don’t think I can ever be in Malfoy’s presence again.”

Hermione nodded emphatically. She understood completely, and she didn’t want Ginny to feel torn up about it.

“I don’t blame you. You don’t ever have to see him. Don’t feel guilty. I don’t want you to come to the Manor. It wouldn’t be right.”

And suddenly the truth of the situation, and of their future friendship, was laid bare. There were three facts that all three of them understood at exactly the same time:

1. **Hermione would marry Lucius and move to Malfoy Manor.**
2. **Harry and Ginny would never set foot in Malfoy Manor.**
3. **Hermione would not be permitted to visit Harry and Ginny.**

The three of them struggled against these facts in their own way for several seconds. The heartbreak of it wafting over them.

There was a very good chance they would never meet again.

Finally, Hermione placed a hand on top of Ginny’s. A tear slowly descended from her eye. The redhead flung her arms around Hermione and buried her face in her shoulder, sobbing.

“Oh, Hermione! I am going to miss you so much! What are we going to do!?”

Hermione hugged her friend fiercely, unembarrassed to let the tears fall in the middle of the Great
“There’s nothing we can do, Gin.”

Hermione pulled back and looked at her friend’s tear-stained face, wiping a tear from Ginny’s cheek.

“It’s enough to know you care, Ginny. I was...I was so afraid you hated me.”

“I could never hate you.”

Ginny hugged Hermione again. After several moments, they broke apart, both girls weeping.

Harry liked to think he had become a strong person from the War. That battling Voldemort and facing all of his demons had strengthened his character and proved his manhood, but at the sight of his dear Ginny and his best friend Hermione saying this sad farewell, he felt the tears well in his own eyes.

He reached across the table and took each of their hands in his own as the tears freely fell from his eyes.

“It really is the end of an era, isn’t it?” he whispered.

The girls nodded in agreement.

Hermione wiped her tears away.

“Look,” Hermione whispered. “You’re probably both going to roll your eyes at me, but I wanted to surprise you with something.”

She reached into her book-bag and pulled out an envelope. Harry opened it. Inside were two plane tickets.

“I got you a 48-hour getaway to Greece. A Muggle holiday!”

Ginny’s mouth dropped open in shock. “What? What are you on about?!”

Hermione smiled. “Well, Monday is a holiday, and neither of you have classes until Tuesday afternoon. I got you tickets leaving tomorrow from Edinburgh. You’ll spend Sunday and Monday nights, and then fly back Tuesday.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be giving you a wedding present?” Harry asked, surprised, yet smiling.

“My marriage is nothing to celebrate, but you two...and our friendship...I wanted to celebrate that. If this is the last thing I can do for the two of you, I wanted to make it count. Please have the honeymoon Ron and I never could.”

Hermione squeezed both of their hands.

Harry and Ginny looked at one another, deeply moved, before turning back to Hermione. Ginny smiled through her tears.

“We will. Thank you! Oh, thank you so much, Hermione!”

Ginny embraced Hermione once again.

“You’d better go pack!” Hermione teased. Ginny and Harry each nodded. Neither of them knew
what else to say. They were deeply affected.

Hermione stood up and gathered her book-bag.

She looked at their faces, first one, then the other. It occurred to her she may never actually see them again. She inhaled deeply and smiled at them.

“I love you both.”

Then she turned away before the tears fell once more.

She walked out of the Great Hall and worked her way through the corridors and staircases through Gryffindor Tower to her Head Girl rooms.

Her tears fell uncontrollably, but they were not entirely sad ones. She loved Harry and Ginny with all her heart, and was pleased she would spare them the pain of her future with Lucius.

*If they are happy, it is enough,* she thought.

She opened the door to her bedroom and closed it behind her. She looked about the room. It contained so few things. A stack of books on the bedside table. A few toiletries on a vanity table next to a full-length mirror. A few dozen outfits shoved into a wardrobe.

None of it mattered at all. What had mattered in her time at Hogwarts had been her mind — what she had learned. And her friendships — the bonds he had made with Ron, Harry, and Ginny. Both of those doors were closing now, and she felt more than ever that the end of an era was approaching.

She put on some Muggle music and slowly, methodically packed up every single item she owned into the trunk at the foot of her bed. Saying a slow goodbye to her rooms. Her refuge for the past six months. The place in which she had mourned Ron and picked up the pieces of herself, and found a way to move forward…slowly, incrementally. She hadn’t been entirely successful, but she had done the best she could.

She conjured another trunk and filled it with the extra items she knew she would never need. She labelled the trunk “Ginny Weasley” and planned to tell the house-elves to deliver it to the redhead once she and Harry were back from Greece.

Luckily, she had gotten the okay to send Crookshanks to Luna Lovegood two days ago and didn’t have to worry about him, but she still found it difficult to separate her possessions into these two trunks.

_Hogwarts is really over,* she thought.

She was surprised at how emotional it made her.

_Hogwarts was just a school,* she thought, _and yet…it has done so much for me.*

Learning she was a witch…becoming “special”…it had meant the entire world to her. It had made her believe in herself. And being worthy of Harry’s friendship, being able to recognize his specialness and help him save the Wizarding World, it had made her feel like she was truly a valuable person, capable of anything.

And then to have earned Ron’s *love* on top of it…

There was a time…perhaps nine or ten months ago…when she was the happiest she had ever been
in her entire life.

Despite the stress of the Horcrux hunt, she knew deep down that they would eventually succeed. She believed in herself and in her boys, and in the values Hogwarts had instilled in them. Their cause was just and they could not fail. And even up until the Final Battle, she had believed that nothing could go wrong, that they would triumph over Evil, that all would be well.

She had never anticipated Ron’s death. That loss. The true cost of War.

Hermione sat on her hardwood floor. Her packing finished. She buried her face into her comforter and wept deeply. Ginny and Harry were gone now — only in a different part of the Tower, yes, but tomorrow they were off to Greece, and Hermione knew the chance was very high she would never see either of them again.

She would have no friends in her married life.

It was clear Lucius would not allow her to work — she had not even dared bring up the subject of employment. Even relating to him on a person-to-person level had been nigh impossible.

Bellatrix would no doubt be awaiting her arrival at the Manor. Perhaps she would prepare a ghastly wedding feast for the three of them.

This is my future, Hermione realized.

Tomorrow night, Lucius might play at being his better self. He might be gentle and loving to her, take her virginity with delicacy and passion. But she knew it would only be too soon until violence became a mainstay in their relationship.

Her body would be beaten and bruised by her husband. And if she displeased him enough, she’d be turned over to Bellatrix again. More Cruciatu.

Perhaps Bellatrix would carve up her flesh again. Would Lucius pretend he knew nothing? Didn’t intend any of it? Kiss her tears away until she pretended to forgive him to stave off another attack?

The scenarios flooded her quick brain. Hermione grasped her comforter even harder and cried until she had no more tears. Her eyes were swollen. Her chest compact with a dull ache. There was nothing more to weep about, nothing that could be gained.

She needed to sleep.

At 8 o’clock she would have her last NEWT — Potions with Snape.

At 12 o’clock, Lucius would arrive.

By 1 o’clock she would be Lady Malfoy.

And the rest of her life…it was not up to her.

She knew she should sleep. Or study for the Potions NEWT. But both seemed like absurdities to her now.

She stood and went to her bathroom, washing her tear-stained face in the sink. She took off her clothes and stepped into the hot shower, washing away the stress of the day. She stepped out and dried her body with a towel.

She stood in front of her bedroom mirror and removed the glamours, examining her naked body.
It was a disaster.

There was no part of her that wasn’t scratched, bruised, marked by punishment. Her body a mix of frightening colors — black, blue, purple, red, yellow. Bruises, welts, scratches, lacerations, bumps. Tender, abused flesh.

She gasped. *All this damage…and we aren’t even married yet,* she thought.

Tomorrow after her Potions NEWT she would ask Snape for some extra Healing potions to take with her to the Manor. It was clear she was going to need them.

She was too tired to heal herself now. Her magical energies were utterly exhausted from the NEWTs and it was all she could do to muster the glamour spells to hide her wounds and return her body, outwardly, to its healthy pink and white coloring.

After she had finished with the full-body glamour, she finished drying herself off and got dressed, but instead of putting on a nightgown, she found herself putting on a fresh change of clothes — jeans and a t-shirt.

If this was her last night at Hogwarts, she would at least enjoy it.

She flung a simple cloak around her body and exited her rooms.

She walked the corridors silently. It was quite late now. The prefects had all retired. The teachers were done their rounds.

All was still, silent. She loved the silence of Hogwarts.

*This is how I want to say goodbye,* she thought, drinking in the peaceful solitude.

After some time wandering the empty halls, she found herself standing at a large bay window overlooking the grounds.

Her eyes wandered, as they always did, to Ron’s gleaming white memorial, shining brightly in the moonlight.

“What shall I do?” she asked him silently.

“You will do what you always have done,” she imagined Ron answering. “You’ll outsmart him.”

*I tried,* she thought. *I tried.*

Hermione barely noticed the presence behind her until she heard the soothing, wise voice of Dumbledore.

“It is very late, my dear.”

Surprisingly, he didn’t startle her. She felt him suddenly standing next to her was somehow the most natural thing in the world.

“I know,” she said, simply.

“You have done six NEWTs, Hermione, in such a short period of time. No witch or wizard has ever done what you have done. I am very proud of you.”

She smiled and gave a small laugh. How funny that is what Dumbledore would focus on! In the
midst of all this.

“I…I did, didn’t I? Thank you, Headmaster.”

“I am so proud of you, Hermione. Not just proud of your academic accomplishments, but of the young woman you have become.”

She smiled. It was nice to hear, no matter what tomorrow would bring. Dumbledore had seen how hard she had worked. He knew her heart.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“I wish I could help you escape this marriage.”

“I know.”

“Tomorrow you must submit to the Ministry’s barbaric law.”

“I understand.”

“But…perhaps, there is one option I can offer you, my dear.”

Hermione turned to the grey wizard and looked up at him, eyes wide.

“One option?”

“I hesitated to describe it to you, but I…I feel it would not be right if I did not allow you to make the choice yourself.”

Hermione nodded, intrigued. She was all ears.

****

Hermione entered Severus Snape’s Potions classroom five minutes before 8 o’clock the following morning.

Snape was at his desk, writing.

“Good morning, Professor.”

Snape help up his hand to indicate she was not to bother him, and he went on scratching quill to parchment.

Hermione sighed. She didn’t expect him to be warm and fuzzy, but this was the last time she’d ever be in his classroom. He could at least be a little less rude.

She moved to an empty table at the front of the room and set up her station — cauldron, burner, base ingredients, scrolls and quill, extra ink. She meticulously organized everything so that it was all within easy reach.

She was ready.

She looked up at Snape’s form, bent over writing. Finally, after five minutes, he completed his work and looked up at her.

“Are you prepared, Miss Granger?”
“I believe I am, Sir.”

“Then we shall begin.”

****

Two hours later, Hermione was sweating slightly over several cauldrons bubbling away on the table in front of her.

The heat from the fumes had become so intense she had taken off her robes and tie and rolled up her uniform’s sleeves, careful not too far.

She took a step back and wiped the sweat from her brow. She was careful none of it dripped into her cauldron. The last thing she needed was for one of her Potions to become corrupted by her own salty forehead sweat.

Snape had not gone easy on her.

The multiple-choice exam had been extremely long and had taken her almost a full hour to complete. Then they had moved on to the brewing tasks.

He began by requiring her to brew one Potion at a time. She would do so, then bring it up to him for analysis. He would hand her the name of the next Potion she was to brew while he would examine the color, consistency, smell, viscosity, opacity, and concentration of the completed Potion and make notes.

She tried not to let the scratching noise of his quill bother her.

Just focus on one Potion at a time, she thought. Quickly they had moved on from one Potion at a time, to brewing two, and now three simultaneously.

Hermione was moving rapidly between three cauldrons now, stirring, chopping, adding ingredients, setting timer spells. Trying to keep her eye on everything.

The potions he had tasked her with were varied and challenging. Some of which she had brewed before, and some new to her. Pepperup, Felix Felicis, Amortentia, Draught of Living Death, Wolfsbane, Veritaserum. The list was long.

Finally, she completed her last potion and brought it up to him. He took it from her and set it down.

She knew there was one last component of the Potions NEWT and she was prepared for it.

“The final task is for you to prepare a potion of your own creation. What have you planned to present?”

Hermione cleared her throat. “I call it Mnemora. It’s a forgetfulness potion.”

Snape nodded and gestured towards the Potions Storeroom.

“You have 30 minutes. Begin.”

He turned his attention to testing and grading her Veritaserum.

Hermione moved quickly towards the Potions Storeroom and began to collect what she needed from its cabinets and shelves. She knew she had no time to waste.
Thirty minutes later, she poured the final drops of her *Mnemora* potion into a beaker and put a stopper in it. At precisely 30 minutes, Snape lifted his head from his desk.

“Time,” he called.

She brought her final potion to him and set it on his desk.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief. It was over now. She had done as much as she could. Though there had been moments where she had second-guessed herself or felt she had made a small error, there was no use in worrying about it now.

She was finally done with the NEWTs!

She stood there as the palpable relief washed over her and gave a small smile, looking up at Professor Snape. He picked up the potion and examined it under the light, then set it down on his desk.

“How…how did I do?” she asked.

Snape picked up his quill and began writing again, not making eye contact with her.

“I will deliver your results to the Headmaster shortly. You may go. Your NEWT examination is complete.”

Hermione stood there. She had just spent the past two-and-a-half hours working harder than she ever had for Professor Snape, and he could not even so much as make eye contact with her or give her a half-hearted “congratulations.”

He truly was a git.

Hermione turned, annoyed, and began to clear her station, moving the used cauldrons to an empty tub for the elves to wash later, and using a quick “*Scourgify*” to cleanse the desk of any drips and stains.

She put the rest of her supplies in her book-bag and put her tie and robe back on.

When she was all ready to go, she approached Snape again, standing before his desk.

*This is the last time I’ll ever be in this classroom,* she thought.

“How did I do?” she asked.

Snape flicked his eyes up at her. His obsidian black lenses staring down at her with cold indifference.

“Is there anything else, Miss Granger?”

Hermione shook her head.

“No…no, but I just wanted to thank you as well for your help with…Lucius. And also for looking after me and Harry and Ron while I was a student here… And for teaching me so much about Potions. I learned a great deal from you.”

She stopped talking. She knew she was babbling. She found herself getting surprisingly emotional, her voice catching in her throat.
Snape said nothing, merely continued to stare at her. His face a complete blank. Hermione decided against asking him for Healing potions in that moment. *I'll figure them out myself,* she thought.

“Anyway…I should go. I need to get ready for…the wedding. Thank you again, Sir.”

Snape looked at her for several long seconds, saying nothing, then gave a small almost imperceptible nod, before turning back down to his scroll.

*Well, better than nothing,* Hermione thought.

She turned and walked to the the door of the Potions Classroom and stopped right before she grabbed the door handle.

Hermione turned back, surveying the room one last time. So much had happened in this room over the years, and she knew she would never set foot in it again.

She looked over at the hunched figure of Professor Snape at his desk, scribbling away.

She smiled. All was as it should be.

Hermione turned the handle and slipped out, walking down the corridor and into her future.

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Hermione checked the time when she arrived back at her Head Girl suite. It was almost 11 o’clock. She didn’t have much time.

She quickly started loosening her tie and unbuttoning her skirt. She needed to change and finish packing the last of her things before Lucius arrived. She was to meet him out front of the Room of Requirement on the seventh floor, and she didn’t want to be late.

She was just unbuttoning her blouse when she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. She drew back the curtains on her four-post bed to reveal a large, beautiful white box trimmed in scarlet and gold ribbons, Gryffindor colors. A small card lay on top of it.

Was it a gift from Lucius? She shuddered slightly as she opened the card.

Inside was a note in Ginny Weasley’s pretty script. Hermione breathed a small sigh of relief.

*Hermione,*

*This is Mum’s wedding dress that she wore the day she married Dad.*

*Ron saw a wedding picture of her in it last year right before the Final Battle, and said it was exactly the kind of dress you would love.*

*I had planned to wear it on my own wedding day to Harry at some point, but after talking with Mum, we both decided it should be yours.*

*I wish so much that you were marrying Ron today and not Lucius, but I know that you will make the best of the situation, and approach things with the bravery, intelligence, and fortitude I only wish I had.*

*I will always consider you my sister.*
Love,

Ginny

P.S. Harry also included a gift.

Hermione wiped the tears from her eyes and lifted the beautiful white gown from the box.

It was a very simple A-line tea-length satin dress. No lace, no fuss, no long dragging train, no ridiculous buttons, no embroidery or elaborate, overdone patterns.

Hermione held it up to her and looked at herself in the mirror. Ron was right — it was exactly Hermione’s style and taste. Elegant and understated. Practical. A simple V-neck. Nothing too low-cut or too tight. She was grateful the sleeves were long — her “WHORE” carving would be concealed.

She lay it on her bed and looked back in the box. There was a package concealed in tissue paper at the bottom with a note on top. She picked it up.

Mione,

I tried to come up with the perfect gift for you and failed miserably (of course).

Then I thought of the one thing that you might need more than I do — something that might be practical but also remind you of all the adventures we shared at Hogwarts.

If my dad were alive today, I am sure he would want me to give it to you. I am so proud of you.

Always,

Harry

Hermione moved the tissue paper aside. Shimmering beneath it, neatly folded, lay Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. Both gifts were so thoughtful.

Hermione felt two more tears escape her eyes, but she smiled and gave a small laugh that reverberated off the walls of her spare room. She knew she was lucky that these two people loved her, knew her inside and out, cared about her.

But where she was going…they couldn’t come.

Ten minutes later, Hermione stood in front of her mirror in the wedding dress.

She had glamoured herself once more, covering every bruise and scrape, and applied a simple red lipstick and some mascara. She had transfigured her ballet flats into white heels, and coerced her unruly hair into a neat bun at the top of her head.

She looked every inch a bride. Not that Lucius will care much, probably, she thought. But this is my wedding day, and this is how I wish to look.

She gathered up the pieces of her school uniform she had discarded — the white button-up, skirt, and tie — the outfit she had worn on a near daily basis for seven years, and folded it into her trunk. I will never wear it again, she realized.

Her time as a Hogwarts student was truly over.
She went to the bathroom and gathered the last of her toiletries and placed her vanity case into the trunk, then looked around the room. There was nothing else left to pack. She'd taken everything off the walls, out of the closet, cleaned out her desk, and taken the bedding from her bed.

Everything she possessed in the world was in the two trunks in the middle of the room — one labelled “Ginny Weasley” and the other “Hermione Granger.”

*Soon to be, “Hermione Malfoy,”* she thought. The house-elves would know where to send each trunk.

She cast a quick “*Tempus*” — the time was half past eleven. She had thirty minutes.

She glanced around the chamber, then tucked her wand into her sleeve and picked up the matching white purse she had conjured to go with her wedding dress.

She left her Head Girl rooms for the last time. No longer a student. No longer Head Girl.

And soon, no longer to be Hermione *Granger.*
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I know it has been a week since I updated, but since the last chapter got 50+ kudos, I felt I had to take the time to properly reward you guys!

So here it is...my longest chapter ever.

10,000+ words.

Buckle up. :)

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Severus Snape entered Dumbledore’s office at almost precisely the same time.

The Headmaster was busy attending to Fawkes’ baby phoenix, and barely acknowledged the dark wizard’s intrusion.

“I have come to deposit Miss Granger’s NEWT results,” Snape uttered, dispassionately.

“Yes. Thank you very much, Severus. Please leave it on the desk.”

Dumbledore’s attention was entirely devoted to this offspring of Fawkes — all red and gold. He was utterly delighted with the way her beak clamored for a treat. He had named her Crimson, and was besotted.

Snape rolled his eyes and left the scroll on the desk, then turned to take his leave.

“How did she do?”

Snape stopped at the door.

“Please summarize, Severus,” the grey wizard continued.

Snape turned back to the Headmaster. He had made Hermione’s Potions NEWT exceptionally difficult, harder than any NEWT he had ever administered before. Some could accuse him of being sadistic in this, but he had also been curious as to how well she would apply herself.

After six NEWTs he knew her brain would be at its limit and he also knew she was emotionally wrung out from dealing with Lucius, so just how well could she do? She who had performed better than almost any other student he had ever had.

When she had left his classroom after the NEWT, he had re-examined her individual potions looking for any flaw — and paid particular attention to her invented potion — the Mnemora. It was solidly constructed. The base providing a powerful foundation for the swirling spells of the upper liquids to integrate and activate. It was intended to latch on to a wizard or witch’s specific memories and erase them with near-permanency.

The way the Potion affected both the nervous system and the endocrine system was exceptionally
clever. It was both aggressive and passive — unable to effect the desired change on its own, but soluble and able to work in conjunction with other magic in surprisingly powerful ways.

Snape could not help but acknowledge the skill in its conception, construction, and materialisation.

“She performed…decently,” he admitted.

“How do you grade her abilities in Potions, Severus, overall?” Dumbledore asked.

Snape breathed in.

Hermione Granger had not been an easy student, and they had often been at loggerheads, but he would not deny the result this day that had made itself so plain. He was not an unfair teacher, despite the injurious complaints of the younger students.

He could recognize exceptional ability when and if it presented itself, and there were typically only four or five students each year who performed at the very top-level, the ones who were able to approach the level of thoroughness and attention he demanded in Potions.

Hermione Granger, he had to admit, had been one of them.

Her potions had been perfect or near-perfect on every account, as he knew they probably would be. He had looked for errors diligently, and had been perfectly willing, perhaps even over-eager, to award her an Exceeds Expectations if she fell short, but her brews had been excellent. He could barely find fault, he begrudgingly admitted.

And after examining her own invented Potion, he knew she had achieved more than most Hogwarts’s students. She deserved to graduate at the top of her class. She was not quite at the level of Potions Mistress yet, but her abilities surpassed everyone in her year by a clear margin.

“Outstanding,” Snape admitted, quietly, his dark eyes staring down at the floor of Dumbledore’s office.

He would not deny a student his or her hard-earned accomplishment. He had thrown every challenge he could think of at Hermione, and she had surpassed all of them.

Snape was surprised that he was actually a little pleased. Hermione had truly learned from him, and had put in the work to get things just so, up to his own standards. Something she never could have done if all she had studied were regurgitated texts. She had finally married her rote knowledge with her own instincts and the results were exemplary.

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. Evidently, he was pleased as well.

“I want to show you something,” the grey wizard intoned.

Dumbledore pulled a drawer open from his desk and pulled out a scroll. He unfurled it and handed it to Snape.

“Her NEWT results…,” Dumbledore murmured.

Snape took the scroll and looked down at it.


• Herbology - OUTSTANDING.
Snape raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had automatically assumed she would have at least one or two “EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS,” especially in DADA or Arithmancy. The results were remarkably impressive.

“Do you know there have only been two other wizards or witches whose achievements at Hogwarts have been this excellent? Only two?”

Dumbledore shook his head, though he knew very well indeed.

“‘My generation never attempted such a thing. I only took five NEWTs, and was very proud to achieve an ‘OUTSTANDING’ in all of them. Five perfect NEWTs was considered above-and-beyond in my day.’”

Snape stared at the older wizard impassively. Dumbledore continued.

“In 1945, Tom Riddle was the first student who endeavored to take all seven NEWTs. He passed every single one of them with ‘OUTSTANDING’ marks, setting a new high mark for academic excellence at Hogwarts. Others attempted to copy him to limited success, though most of our brightest wizards only attempted a maximum of six NEWTs. Then, in 1978, you yourself attempted all seven. Do you remember?”

“Of course,” Severus snorted. “I achieved ‘OUTSTANDING’ in all but Defense Against the Dark Arts. However, I believe that my grade of ‘EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS’ in that subject was unduly influenced by my controversial opinions on the short answer questions. Anyway…it was a long time ago.”

“It’s extraordinary, is it not?” Dumbledore asked aloud. “In fifty years…only three have achieved this level of accomplishment…”

“Her mind is exceptional. It only ever lacked discipline,” Snape concluded.

“Yes…,” Dumbledore nodded in agreement. “Though I suspect she had been subjected to a great deal of that in the past two weeks.”

Snape frowned. He preferred not to think of that.

“She wanted there to be a lasting record of her. Her mind. It was important to her,” Dumbledore sighed.

“Now she will live in Hogwarts’s history forever. The most accomplished witch in fifty years.”

Severus arched an eyebrow. That was exactly the same type of language Hermione had used in his classroom.

*A record of her.*

Strange.
Hermione paced outside the Room of Requirement waiting for Lord Lucius Malfoy, the wizard she would wed within a few short minutes.

She tried to think of her future, but internally she was simply too focused with mulling over her recently completed NEWTs.

When would she learn the results? Would Dumbledore owl her? Would Lucius keep them from her? Though she was about to marry a sociopath, her priorities surprised her.

All she cared about was learning how her NEWTs had gone. Did she do okay? How many ‘OUTSTANDING’s would she receive? How many ‘EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS’?

Would she have made her obliterated parents proud? Would Harry and Ginny be pleased with her results when they came back from Greece? Would the results make her time at Hogwarts worthwhile? Would it make a difference, no matter what unfolded in her life as Lady Malfoy? Perhaps inspire younger witches?

She knew she was being childish, but this was the last thing she needed, the last puzzle-piece before she could truly move on from Hogwarts. She needed to know her NEWT results! Needed to know she had done everything she could! She wanted the satisfaction of knowing that everyone’s belief in her had been justified. Most especially Ron’s.

She wrung her hands together and continued to pace. She prayed Dumbledore would appear and give her the results. This was the last piece of information she needed. She had told him how important it was to her. Dumbledore of all people should understand.

He was the one who had offered her this choice.

Hermione slipped her fingers into her cream-colored purse and fingered her small draught of the *Mnemora* Potion. There was a reason she had devised this particular brew.

Last night, Dumbledore had informed her of the possibility of *Self-Obliviation*.

It was obviously not a solution to her marriage, but if she undertook the spell, it would remove her short and long-term memory, such that she would forget almost everything about her time at Hogwarts — her abilities as a witch, and the rules of the Wizarding World.

She would be as innocent as a Muggle — unfamiliar with magic in any sense.

Though it would remove her memories of Harry, Ron, and everyone else at Hogwarts, it was a type of solution to her nightmare — albeit a cruel one. If she conducted the spell, she would have no memory whatsoever past the time her parents had first taken her to Diagon Alley. Her mind and knowledge of the Wizarding World would be completely wiped. It would essentially undo her education.

Hermione had gone back to her rooms and thought long and hard about Dumbledore’s description of Self-Obliviation. Her initial instinct had been to reject it outright.

What would it gain her to remove her own knowledge of magic? It was the only positive thing in her life…the only thing she had left! But then she thought of the hatred Bellatrix bore her, and reconsidered. If she did go through with the Self-Obliviation, Lucius would obviously be furious, and might attempt to restore her memory. *After all, it is more fun to torture a Mudblood than a Muggle,* she reasoned.
Lucius and Bellatrix hated her because she was a Mudblood who practiced magic. Well, what is she knew nothing about magic? She would just be a Muggle then. Just a simple Muggle. Lucius and Bellatrix would be annoyed by her, but wouldn’t have the same level of justified hatred for her. Knowing Lucius’s ego, he might enjoy having a simple, docile Muggle-wife.

*When I’m just a Muggle, I may even be fooled by him. I may think he’s just a wealthy aristocrat. No doubt he will make up some lie about my memory loss. Lucius will enjoy getting to rewrite our history. It my even make him be kinder to me and our future child.*

Her life post-Hogwarts, as far as she saw it, was effectively over. That much was clear. There was no hope to get her parents back, and no one could save her from her marriage.

She couldn’t last long in an abusive marriage, and she still held firm that life at Malfoy Manor living side by side with Bellatrix would be unendurable. She knew she would eventually flee, and Lucius would find her and drag her back to him. The consequences would always be severe.

There was truly nothing left for her. In these circumstances, she did not want a child. Did not want to live day in and day out enduring Lucius’s whims, hoping to prevent his violent outbursts, seeing her child torn from her. Lucius would keep her a prisoner and would not let her work, would never let her leave the Manor. She couldn’t bear to know what kind of man she was married to, who her child would be raised by. She could not bear her own guilt, either, desiring Lucius physically when he had murdered Ron.

What if he one day succeeded in brain-washing her into accepting his abuse? How could she ever look at herself in the mirror anymore?

*No, she had decided, Obliviation was better than living this life knowing what had come before. Knowing all she had been.*

If Lucius wanted her, she would give him nothing but a shell.

Her final act of defiance. “Outsmart them,” Ron had said. And she would.

But she did not want her memory to be wiped only to have it restored by Lucius and Bellatrix at a later date. If her memories of the last ten years were to be erased...she wanted them *permanently* gone. So that there was no going back.

She squeezed the small vial of the *Mnemora* potion again. Snape had ignored her so much earlier in the day that it had been easy to procure ingredients from the Storeroom and to brew a tiny bit extra during the last section of her Potions NEWT.

The *Mnemora* had been her own idea the night before as she lay in bed, unsleeping and unseeing. How to ensure this *Self-Obliviation* that Dumbledore had described could not be counteracted or reversed? How to permanently take Lucius and Bellatrix’s Mudblood toy away from them?

She would combine charm and potion, two of her strongest subjects, and create something truly irreparable.

She knew that using both of them together — uniting both wand-magic and brewing-magic, would not allow for an easy antidote. In fact, she knew both Lucius and Bellatrix had not undertaken a Potions NEWT. Neither understood the subtleties of how a Potion could bind to a spell and enhance it. In this, she felt quite clever.

She knew she would get away with it. Her memory loss would be completely irreversible.
Her true self, Hermione Granger, would be preserved forever in the Hogwarts’s records and in the history of the War. And a new Muggle would be born today, an amnesiac: nineteen year-old Hermione Malfoy.

Hermione continued to pace out front of the Room of Requirement.

*Why hadn’t Dumbledore sent her the NEWT results yet?* It was the last thing she needed. He had promised her. Good or bad, once she had that knowledge, she would drink the *Mnemora* and cast the *Self-Obliviate*.

She had no second-thoughts. She had made her peace. This was the only way out.

“Hermione,” she heard a voice behind her.

She turned.

Lucius Malfoy stood ten feet from her. He was dressed in an elegant black suit with a white rose in his button-hole. His tall, handsome form strode over to her. His blue eyes were shining with delight.

“You look beautiful,” he said, moving down to her. He leaned in and pressed a warm kiss to her cheek.

He stepped back, turned and waved his hand. The Room of Requirement’s door opened. Inside, Hermione could see the elegant nave of a small church. Whether the Room had heard her thoughts or Lucius’s she didn’t know, but seeing the inside of a church made it all the more real.

*Here I go,* she thought. *I am about to be a bride.*

But *where* was Dumbledore?!

Hermione’s eyes looked left and right down the corridor, but there was no sign of the grey wizard. He had *promised* to let her know about her NEWTs in case she decided to go through with the *Self-Obliviate*. He said he would make sure. Hermione bit her lip, the anxiety rising.

*I can’t do this without knowing.*

Lucius smiled down at her and offered her his arm. “Shall we?” he murmured.

Hermione gave him a forced smile. She took his arm, and allowed Lucius to lead her inside the Room.

They both stood at the end of a short aisle — the room had conjured a 19th-century Gothic-style church around them — it was all lit by candles. Not quite romantic, but not quite fully ominous. Like everything in their relationship, Hermione thought, the decor fell into some dark in-between category.

At the head of the aisle a ministry official stood next to a stand bearing the Marriage Contract. There would be no witnesses. The pews were completely empty. Hermione had personally asked McGonagall to stay away. Once Harry and Ginny weren’t coming, she felt too much pride to force her beloved Head of House to bear witness to this sham marriage.

This illusion of this church is simply a dressing-up of a legal contract, Hermione realized. She had been stupid to even wear Molly Weasley’s wedding gown. *It means nothing. Ah well. I will forget it all soon enough.*
She grasped Lucius’s arm and began to walk with him up the aisle.

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Snape paced angrily in Dumbledore’s office.

“Self-Obliviate?! That is your idea of helping the girl?”

“I cannot stop the marriage, Severus, but I had to give her the choice of how she entered into it.”

“A choice between marrying Lucius as she is, or going to his House a mindless Muggle?”

Snape snorted.

“It’s absurd, Albus, and you know it! How long have you been planning this? Is this why she took her NEWTs early?”

Dumbledore shook his head.

“I had no part in that. That was her, entirely-wise, decision. I have seen her suffering, Severus, though she has attempted to hide it from us both. And the memory of her life here at Hogwarts and her career as a young witch may be too painful for her to recollect once she is Lady Malfoy. Lucius will never accept her as a magical being, and she can never love him with her memory of young Mr. Weasley’s death.”

“You think he would accept her as a Muggle?!”

“As a Muggle she doesn’t threaten him. But as a Pureblood supremacist, he will always hate her for being a “Mudblood.” Especially as she is a talented Muggleborn witch with more natural ability than he.”

Snape frowned. Dumbledore was right, though Snape was loath to admit it. Lucius would find her simple and boring as a Muggle.

Hermione would be inconsequential to him, a vessel, a woman to bear his child and nothing more.

Lucius would probably completely keep his identity as a Wizard from her. Hermione would live the rest of her life as Mrs. Malfoy, and have no idea magic even existed, shut up in the Manor. Lucius could tell her anything he wanted and she would believe him.

“And you believe as a Muggle, she could love him?!” Snape sneered.

“It’s possible,” Dumbledore shrugged. “Even without his displays of magic, Lucius can be charming and persuasive. He may take advantage of the situation and use it as a way of…starting fresh. In time, they could love one another. Lucius free from his prejudice, and Hermione free from the knowledge of his crimes.”

Snape felt a bit queasy at the idea of Lucius attempting to charm a completely amnesia-stricken Hermione.

“The only question is whether Lucius would attempt to reverse the spell.”

“It is almost impossible to reverse.”

“Difficult, but possible. He may prefer her as she is. They have already spent quite a bit of time together.”
Suddenly, everything clicked for Snape. Dumbledore planting the seed in Hermione’s brain. Hermione brewing the Mnemora. He glared up at Dumbledore’s seemingly innocent expression.

“Albus…you have been planning this!” the black-haired wizard thundered, taking a step closer.

“What do you mean, Severus?”

“Her NEWT potion. Mnemora, she called it. A forgetfulness Potion that activates and strengthens with other forms of magic. She devised it to make the Self-Obliviate permanent. Did you help her with it?”

“I did not. I have never assisted a student to cheat on his or her NEWTs. You know me well enough to know I never would, Severus, and I quite resent the implication. Now, if Hermione used your NEWT as an opportunity to brew a Potion to assist her in finding a new life, it was not at my urging. She is exceptionally clever. I do, however, have one request of you.”

“What?” Snape narrowed his black eyes in disgust.

Dumbledore handed Hermione’s NEWT scroll to Severus.

“Add her Potions NEWT result. Make the end of her academic career official.”

Snape took the scroll in his hand and stared down at it. Six top marks stared back at him all signed off by her professors. This was as many as he himself had received, and he would have to personally sign off on the document that would show Hermione Granger surpassed his own academic career at Hogwarts. The irony.

He looked up at Dumbledore. The grey wizard no doubt thought this was some sort of just revenge after all of Snape’s complaints against the Golden Trio over the years.

But Snape wanted to surprise the grey wizard. What was just was just, and Hermione deserved her OUTSTANDING in Potions. It was no bitter pill for Severus to see that the smartest students got their deserts, just as he took pleasure in assigning detention to the dunderheads. Hard work, he believed, deserved rewards, and he always valued brains over brawn.

Snape waved his wand over the scroll and murmured a quick incantation. At the very bottom of the list appeared,

“Potions- OUTSTANDING.”

And next to it his signature in silver script.

Snape handed the scroll back to Dumbledore. “There. She is done here at Hogwarts. I trust, Albus, this is the last conversation we will ever have regarding Miss Granger. I am finished my duties as her Professor, and as I have informed Lucius, I will no longer maintain any pretense towards his friendship.”

Dumbledore gave a nod in understanding. Snape moved to the door once more. Crimson squawked.

“Just one more thing, Severus.”

Snape turned, his face full of suspicion.

“What?”

“I promised her she would have her results prior to her marriage. I believe she and Lord Malfy...
about to finalize their contract in the Room of Requirement. Would you be so kind as to bring her the results?”

Snape pressed his teeth tightly together and drew his lips back in scorn.

“Why? Why me, Albus? You can deliver it yourself.”

“It’s on your way back to your classroom.”

Snape stared at the wizard for several seconds. Dumbledore turned and lifted a piece of food to Crimson’s cage. The baby phoenix nibbled it eagerly. Snape watched as Dumbledore pretended to busy himself with the bird.

Finally, Snape let out a low laugh.

“You forget how long we have worked together. True, you have known me since I was a child. You know my family background, my weaknesses, my vulnerabilities. But I know you, Albus. And if you think for one second that my alleged ‘better nature’ will take hold and I will intervene and marry Miss Granger myself, you are so severely mistaken it is laughable. Is this your grand plan?”

Dumbledore merely shrugged. Snape continued.

“You forget how much serving Voldemort changed me. I very nearly turned from the Light completely, turned from you. I am no one’s Savior.”

“No, I don’t believe you are. I simply request that you give your student her NEWT results. I promised to inform her. Consider it your final duty towards her as her teacher.”

Dumbledore glanced up at the large grandfather clock in his office.

“I believe you have ten minutes, Severus. Allow Miss Granger to know her NEWT results before she makes her decision regarding the Self-Obliviation. She deserves to know all she has achieved.”

“You are transparent, Albus.”

“Perhaps.” The grey wizard nodded thoughtfully.

“I am not your errand-boy!” Snape snapped.

“No, of course not,” Dumbledore acquiesced.

Snape shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and then back again. He was starting to feel entrapped. It was a feeling Dumbledore often brought out in him and he didn’t like it.

“I am NOT going to bear witness to this damnable contract.”

“No, of course not.”

“And I will not stop it, either. This does not fall to me.”

“It doesn’t. I understand.”

“And I will not feel sorry for her. If not her, it would have been another. It could have been any of the older students.”

“Certainly.”
Snape shifted his weight again. Dumbledore merely stared at him, unobtrusively.

“Severus, my boy, it is the very least you could do.”

Snape scowled at Dumbledore’s words. The grey wizard had a terrible way of always making Severus feel like he hadn’t leveled up, that he was always lacking. It was infuriating. Severus had already had one disappointed father-figure in his life, he didn’t need another.

And it was even more infuriating the way Dumbledore could so deftly manipulate the emotions of others, even when one knew one was being manipulated.

*Albus Dumbledore and Tom Riddle. Cut from the same cloth in that regard,* thought Snape.

Snape snatched up Hermione’s scroll that lay on Dumbledore’s desk, tucking it up his sleeve.

“Very well. I will deliver it. But that is all! I will not bear witness to their ceremony, nor will I continue contact with either of them after today.”

“Thank you, Severus.”

“One day, Albus, you will push me too far.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

With that, Snape turned and, black robes swirling about him, exited Dumbledore’s office.

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Hermione stood at the altar with Lucius, their hands entwined.

The Ministry official, a middle-aged man Hermione didn’t know, had just finished reading out the length of the Marriage Contract. Hermione had read it dozens of times, practically knew it by heart, but it didn’t make what she was facing any easier.

Lucius was smiling down at her, his face shining in victory. His pleased expression made him look as handsome as ever. Hermione glanced at his lips, thinking of the way he had pressed them upon her own. She had hoped she might feel a twinge of the passion she'd felt for him before, but right now there was nothing. Just an empty feeling of dread in her heart, and a sickening dry taste in the back of her throat.

The Ministry official set the scroll down on an elegant wooden stand next to Hermione and Lucius.

“My duty is discharged. Do either of you have any questions regarding the contract?”

Hermione bit her lip and looked up at Lucius. He shook his head, never breaking eye contact. She shook hers as well.

“Well, then, I shall take my leave. The Ministry thanks you for your compliance and wishes you a long and happy union. When you are ready, simply recite the oath-text and complete the blood-bonding. Your marriage shall be recorded in the Ministry’s archives automatically. Blessed day to you both, Lord Malfoy and Miss Granger, or should I say Lady Malfoy.”

With a polite bow to each of them, the official moved down the aisle and took his leave. As he exited the Room, he didn’t notice the tall figure slip inside just after him.

Hermione took a deep breath and looked back at Lucius. They were alone. She took a deep breath.
“Are you ready, my dear?” Lucius purred. He glanced down at Hermione’s dress. She really was exceptionally lovely in it. He could feel a warmth inside of his chest at the thought of possessing her soon.

Hermione bobbed her head slightly. Lucius picked up the scroll off the stand.

“I have only done this once before, my dear, and it meant a great deal to me then. I hope you know it means a great deal to me now. I undertake our binding with the hopes that our…connection will continue to grow.”

With an elegant motion, Lucius unfurled the scroll and began to recite.

“I, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, do promise myself in matrimony to you, Hermione Jean Granger. On my honor as a wizard, I swear to uphold this marriage contract and faithfully fulfill all requirements herein for as long as we both shall live. With my blood, I consecrate.”

Lucius set down the scroll and pulled out his wand. “Sectum parvus,” he intoned, holding the tip to his palm and lightly dragging it across. A thin line of blood appeared. Hermione stared down at it.

Lucius’s oh-so-precious pure blood, she thought. Lucius raised his palm up slightly and presented it to her.

Hermione took another breath. Lucius stared down at her, waiting for her to do her part.

This was it.

Dumbledore wasn’t coming, or at least not in time before the contract would be finalized.

What do I do?

If she took the blood-oath on “her honor as a witch,” what if she couldn’t cast the Self-Obliviate afterwards? She had to decide now.

Marriage to Lucius as a Witch or a Muggle?

Marry him with all of her memories intact, or remove them?

Can I really do this?, she wondered, as she glanced up into Lucius’s crystal blue eyes. He was smirking at her, taking her hesitation for maidenly shyness.

Can I erase my entire past? Forget Ron? Just to make myself suffer less? No, I...I can't! I have to go through with it.

Her mind made up and her heart heavy with the thought of this final submission, Hermione reached for the marriage contract.

She picked the scroll up and looked down at it. The text was written out in silver cursive, although she had read the Contract so many times by now searching for loopholes she knew the oath by heart and didn't need to read it off the scroll.

All she had to do now was say it.

Here goes.
She cleared her throat.

“I, Hermione Jean Granger, do promise myself—“

A loud *ahem* interrupted her.

It seemed to be coming from above.

Hermione turned her head to the right and glanced up at the gallery above. Stepping out of the shadows was a young man with a very familiar scar.

“Harry!” Hermione shouted in delight. “You came!”

She smiled brightly, relieved he had changed his mind. “But why aren’t you in Greece?” She took several steps down the aisle towards Harry.

Lucius followed a few feet behind.

Harry smiled down at her. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

Hermione wrinkled her brow. “But where’s Ginny?”

“Who cares?”

Hermione stopped in her tracks as Harry’s facial expression slowly changed. Twisted suddenly into something darker, strange and yet familiar all at the same time. She took a step back.

“No!”

She gasped.

“I’m afraid so,” Harry uttered in an uncharacteristically sing-song manner, putting one hand on his hip.

Hermione turned back towards Lucius in infuriated disbelief.

“You *didn’t* bring her! You wouldn’t!”

Lucius was scowling up at the figure in the gallery.

“Must you ruin everything?” he chastised.

Harry, or the witch wearing his appearance, simply laughed.

In that moment, Hermione realized the truth.

Lucius had no control whatsoever over Bellatrix.

If she was so bold as to come to their wedding at Hogwarts *polyjuiced* as Harry Potter, she could (and would) do anything she damn well pleased!

*No!* Hermione thought. *I won’t allow this! Not the two of them together. No! No more! I won’t be their plaything! I won’t let them own me!*

Hermione quickly reached into her purse and pulled out the small vial of *Mnemora*. Lucius raised an
“What is that, girl?” Lucius questioned, lifting his chin slightly.

Hermione stared him up and down in complete disgust.

“You…promised! You promised you could protect me, Lucius, and you can’t even stop her from coming to our wedding!”

“I had no idea she was so…invested. Hermione, calm down. The three of us shall find a way of enduring one another at Malfoy Manor in good time.”

Hermione let out a bitter laugh.

“‘Endure?’ Oh, I have endured enough. All I do is endure! You want to take me apart piece by piece. I won’t let you. I won’t let her!”

Hermione pulled the stopper out and lifted the vial to her lips. With a swift motion, she tossed the contents into her mouth and swallowed, then slung the empty vial and her purse aside.

Lucius narrowed his eyes.

“What was that? Don’t tell me you’ve decided to poison yourself this time.”

“That would solve all of our problems, frankly,” Bellatrix crowed in Harry’s voice above them.

“Quiet!” Lucius commanded up at her.

He quickly closed the distance between himself and Hermione and grabbed her forearm tightly, pulling her towards him.

“You will tell me what you drank!”

Hermione smiled. She knew the Mnemora wouldn’t activate until she cast the Self-Obliviate, and she had only a short window in which to cast it before the Mnemora wore off, but it was fun to spend a few seconds enjoying the sight of Lucius at a complete loss.

His eyes bore down on her; they were both angry and surprisingly… concerned.

Let him think I poisoned myself, she thought. Let his vanity be hurt by the idea I chose death over him, the bloody bastard.

“You will tell me!!” Lucius snarled, gripping her tighter. Hermione could feel his fingers pressing into her old bruises. Old bruises that will become new bruises. Perhaps that spot on my forearm will never heal again.

“How does it feel, Lucius, to be outmaneuvered?” Hermione glared into his blue eyes and stormy face.

She smiled widely. She knew she was close to the end, and she felt a rush of madness and excitement. This outcome would ruin Lucius’s victory over her, and take away all of Bellatrix’s fun. To hell with them both!

“You say I am nothing but a filthy Mudblood. You keep saying that I should never have been allowed to perform magic. Well, that is exactly what you will get in a wife. You will get a Muggle.
You will have me, but not the real me.”

Lucius narrowed his eyes even more until they were two cruel slits of flinty aquamarine.

“Oh, but I will have you!”

“You will have my body, yes, but I am going to destroy the part of me that makes me me. And you know the worst part of it for you, Lucius, is that I almost wasn’t going to go through with it. You had almost won! But when it comes down to it. You… just… weren’t… wizard-enough!”

Hermione grinned up at him, enjoying the red pallor slowly taking over Lucius’s pale face. He gnashed his teeth together, several veins popping out the sides of his neck.

"Don't push me, Mudblood!”

With her free arm, Hermione took her wand from her sleeve. Lucius glanced down at it.

“What, are you going to break it, renounce your magic?” he accused contemptuously.

“No. I am going to use it!” Hermione yelled.

And with the confidence of Godric Gryffindor himself, she turned and pointed her wand directly at Bellatrix, making a deft slashing motion.

“Sectumsempra!” she shouted as the white light shot out.

It hit Bellatrix as intended, and she flew backwards with a loud scream, a deep cut appearing across the chest of Harry Potter’s body. Bellatrix fell below the railing of the gallery, out of sight.

Hermione quickly pointed her wand at herself. “Leviosa-sui!” She felt herself lift off the ground as she craned her neck to get a look at Bellatrix. Was she down? How badly had she been struck? Hermione raised her wand-hand, preparing to cast another spell.

But before she could get herself high enough, she felt Lucius’s hand at her ankle, yanking her back to the ground. She tried to kick him, but he pulled harder until the spell released and they both fell to the unyielding stone floor. She landed with a painful thud, half on top of Lucius. Hermione felt her wand slip out of her hand and heard it clatter a few feet away.

She launched herself toward it, hand outstretched, but Lucius dragged her across the floor back towards him before she could grasp it. She turned to face him just as he lifted his own wand to her.

“No!” she shouted.

“Petrificus Totalus,” he uttered, coldly.

Hermione felt her entire body shudder and then go still. Horribly still. Unbearably still.

Oh God, she thought. What have I done? I was too cocky. I lost control. I need my wand. I need to cast the Self-Obliviate!! Why did I have to go after Bellatrix? What will Lucius do to me now?!

Her thoughts spun rapidly inside her petrified skull, but there was nothing she could do. She watched as Lucius smirked above her, his chest heaving.

“Hermione, when you have calmed yourself, we will discuss this little outburst in a civilised
He leaned down and picked up her wand from the floor.

“And I am afraid I won’t be able to trust you with this for quite some time.”

Hermione could see Lucius take a step closer to her and bend down slightly.

“You brought this on yourself, Mudblood. This interruption to our ceremony was unnecessary and imprudent. I don’t know what exactly your little plan was, but all you have done with the Sectumsempra is make your life more difficult.”

“I always found Sectumsempra made my life easier. But then, I invented it.”

Lucius looked up. At the end of the nave near the door stood Severus Snape. He stood proudly, wand not drawn, his face a blank.

“What are you doing here, Severus?” Lucius hissed. “You aren’t invited. Obviously.”

Snape turned his head slightly and raised an eyebrow at Hermione’s prostrate form.

“It will be difficult for her to say her vows when she’s a statue.”

“We had an…argument,” Lucius huffed, defensively.

“I see.”

“She can be…vexing.”

“I am familiar.”

Snape reached into his robes and pulled out the scroll.

“The Headmaster asked me to deliver Miss Granger’s NEWT results.”

Lucius rolled his eyes. “Very well. Accio scroll.”

The scroll flew to Lucius. Hermione watched as the scroll crossed her field of vision and landed in Lucius’s hand. He tucked it inside his dress robes.

Oh, how she longed to read it! It was the only thing she wanted in the whole world.

A flash of white caught her eye. If she could have moved her pupils more to the right to get a better look, she would have. But in her frozen state, she could just barely make out Harry Potter’s pale form lifting himself up from the gallery railing, a slash of red dripping down his front.

Hermione wanted to scream, to shout, to warn Professor Snape, but there was absolutely nothing she could do.

She watched, powerless, as Bellatrix rose up to a standing position and raised her wand slowly…ever so slowly…and pointed it directly at Snape!

Neither Lucius nor Snape noticed the figure in the gallery.

“If that is all, Severus, I request you take your leave.”

Snape glanced down at Hermione’s frozen form. He started to turn away, but stopped. He looked up
at Lucius. The blonde wizard was smiling smugly now, proudly towering over his bride, helpless and prostrate on the floor in her white dress. Her hair now undone and wild about her face. Her mouth frozen mid-scream.

The image was revolting.

Snape took out his wand and pointed it at Hermione.

“Finite!”

Hermione sucked in a big lungful of air as the spell released and her body once more became her own.

“P-professor!,” she sputtered. Her eyes moved to Bellatrix in the gallery. “Watch out!”

“Reducto!” Bellatrix-as-Harry shouted.

Snape turned and with a speed that amazed Hermione threw up his own wand to parry. “Protego!”

Snape stared up at the gallery at the wild-eyed bleeding Boy-Who-Lived snarling down at him. “Potter…!?"

“Enough, Bella!” Lucius shouted, raising his own wand upwards. “Expelliarmus!”

Bellatrix deflected. “Protego!”

Snape’s mouth fell open, a rare sign of emotion on the usually reserved wizard’s countenance.

“Bellatrix?!”

Hermione took the opportunity to spring into action. She leapt up towards Lucius, grasping her wand and trying to wrest it from the pale wizard’s left hand.

“Give it to me!” she screamed. “Let go of it!”

“Stop, girl!” the pale wizard ordered.

Hermione leaned forward and bit down on Lucius’s hand. Hard. He cried out and loosened his grip enough for her to reclaim her wand and point it at him.

“Impedimento!” she shouted. Lucius stumbled backwards slightly. Hermione reached into his robes and pulled out her scroll. Yes!

She scanned the room. There was a small door at the front of the altar, just a few feet away. If she could get there, get to the next room, she could look at her results and then cast the Self-Obliviate! Get out! Get out! Get out! She began to run.

“Stupefy!” she heard Bellatrix cast behind her in Harry’s voice.

She ducked, only to see the curse flying towards Snape, not her. He quickly twirled out of the way, and shot back an “Expelliarmus!” Bellatrix parried.

Hermione glanced over at the still-stunned Lucius and then back to the battle between Bellatrix and Snape. This is my chance!

She gripped her wand tightly and continued to the small door. Behind her, she could hear the curses
flying.

“Sectumsempra!”

“Protego!”

“Diffindo!”

“Repento!”

“Foraminis!”

Snape cried out in pain.

Hermione stopped in her tracks and turned. Snape was clutching his left shoulder as blood poured out of it. Bellatrix had struck him with some sort of puncturing spell, though he was still tossing curses at her and artfully deflecting. It wasn’t a fair fight. Bellatrix was moving quickly along the upper gallery and had a perfect vantage-point.

“Professor!” Hermione screamed.

Snape turned and swiftly made his way to her, dodging Bellatrix’s red and white bursts. Behind him, Hermione could see Lucius rise up and aim his wand at Snape as well.

“Professor, duck!”

Snape dove behind the front pew.

“Obliviate!” Lucius commanded. The spell blasted against the pew, inches from Snape’s head.

“You wouldn’t dare, Lucius!” Snape bellowed.

“Oh, but I would, Severus! I can’t have you running to Dumbledore and squealing about Bella.”

“Just let me kill him,” Bellatrix shouted, pausing to catch some breath. “Sevvy always was a wet blanket.”

Lucius turned to the gallery. “Quiet, Bella! You have caused enough of a mess today!”

“I’m just getting started!” she shrieked.

Suddenly, the polyjuice wore off and within seconds the wiry form of Harry Potter in front of them was replaced with the curvaceous one of Bellatrix Lestrange. Her dark hair was piled high on her head, the streaks of silver shining beneath the stained-glass windows of the church.

Though he believed what his eyes told him, Snape marveled at the truth of it: Bellatrix had survived the Final Battle. No doubt she had made a Horcrux for herself. If this were true, the Dark Lord had clearly favored her more than any of the Death-Eaters had realized.

Snape turned from his hiding place to the girl in white standing a few feet behind him.

She was pressed up against a small door, her eyes locked on Bellatrix, her entire body shaking with fear. No, more than mere fear. It reminded him of the way she had panicked in his Potions Storeroom. It was the way a prey-animal responds to the presence of a predator. He could see her left hand was trembling heavily. Sweat was gathering on her brow. Her head shook lightly from side to side.
“Miss Granger!” Snape called to her, but the girl kept her gaze locked on the Dark Witch.

“Miss Granger!” Nothing.

“Hermione!!”

At the sound of her given name, Hermione moved her eyes back to where Snape was ducked down in the front pew. He flicked his eyes over to the door behind her.

“Go!” he commanded.

Hermione felt for the door handle behind her and grasped it. She turned it and flung the door open, stepping backwards. Snape turned back to Bellatrix and Lucius, rising up slightly, flinging his outer robes back over his left forearm and taking a defensive stance, preparing to face the two of them on his own.

*I can’t leave him,* Hermione thought. *He can’t take them both on!*

She took a deep breath and took a step back into the nave.

“*Flipendo!*” she shouted as she pointed her wand at Bellatrix. Caught off guard, the witch was lifted up into the air.

“*Salis!*” Hermione cast next, conjuring a cloud of tiny salt crystals, which flung themselves into her open cuts. Bellatrix screamed in pain.

“I will *kill* you for this, you Mudblood whore!”

“Come on, Professor!”

Seizing the moment, Snape moved to the door and slipped inside just behind Hermione. Hermione stepped backwards into the doorframe to follow him.

“Hermione, wait!”

She stopped and looked back at Lucius.

Lucius put up his wand and raised his other arm, palm facing her. He took a few slow steps up the nave.

“Hermione…there is no need to fight. Let me *obliviate* Snape and we can finish what we started. I promise you we will find a way to deal with Bella once we go to the Manor, but Dumbledore cannot know about her existence. I understand what you are feeling. I can make it alright.”

Hermione shook her head. Lucius pursed his lips in an attempt at a reassuring smile.

“I *promise* you,” he said, as he placed one hand over his heart. “As your Lord.”

Hermione looked deeply into his gaze. There was the typically intense, penetrating look. The cold blue that made her shiver, but there was also a desperation, a *need* for her. To convince her. To bring her back to his side. But Hermione knew she couldn’t go to him, couldn’t trust him. Not now. High above them, Bellatrix was skipping along the gallery, waving her wand about like a lunatic.

“The trouble is…I don’t believe anything you say, Lucius,” she said softly.

Hermione stepped backwards once again and slammed the small door shut.
Behind her, she could already hear Snape casting protective charms. *Protego horribilis*, and two others she didn’t know. The seams around the door separating herself and Lucius Malfoy glowed as it was warded and sealed off.

She glanced around. They appeared to be in a small vestry. The room was tiny, smaller than her Head Girl bedroom and contained only a small table, two chairs and a trunk of vestments.

Snape finished his spellwork and spun around.

“How long have you known?” he demanded, his pale face tightly drawn in anger.

Hermione raised her arms up defensively, even though Snape was making no move to attack her. She could feel her body trembling, her knees almost knocking together.

“I…I…,” she stuttered, almost unable to form words.

She wanted to say, “I’m sorry! A few days! She tortured me! I didn’t know what to do! I was trying to protect everyone!” But no words would come out.

Hermione felt herself fall slowly to her knees, her white dress folding around her legs on the cool stone. *Am I fainting?*, she wondered, but her vision remained clear.

“Why…why do I feel…so weak?” she mumbled.

Snape glared down at her with scorn.

“The foolish accelerated NEWT schedule you insisted upon in addition to the spells you have just cast have temporarily lessened your abilities.”

*My NEWTs!* She suddenly remembered. She looked down at the scroll in her hand. She leaned over on one hip and began to unfurl it.

Snape meanwhile circled the room, checking for weaknesses, listening for Lucius and Bellatrix’s attacks. He glanced back at the brunette witch whose face was buried in the scroll and rolled his eyes at her.

“I don’t believe *now* is the time to gloat over your exam results, Miss Granger. We have more pressing matters, such as informing Dumbledore of Bellatrix’s survival. Which, I may add, he would already know about if you had trusted me implicitly as you should have and not acted the stubborn martyr.”

But Hermione could barely hear him.

A rush of relieved tears was flowing from her eyes as she stared down at the paper.

“**HERMIONE GRANGER. Gryffindor. 1991-1998.**

- **Herbology** - OUTSTANDING.
- **Ancient Runes** - OUTSTANDING.
- **Charms** - OUTSTANDING.
- **Arithmancy** - OUTSTANDING.
- **Transfiguration** - OUTSTANDING.
- **Defense Against the Dark Arts** - OUTSTANDING.
- **Potions** - OUTSTANDING.”
It was more than she could have ever hoped for, more than had believed she could have accomplished, and certainly more than she thought she could do in just four days! But the paper was signed by all of her teachers and by Dumbledore. It was certified. It was real.

Hermione Granger had taken 7 NEWTs. And she had scored perfectly. On Every. Single. One.

She rocked back and forth slightly and laughed. It was perfect! Ironic, actually. This is the send-off I wanted, she thought. I wish I could tell Ron. She wiped away her tears.

He knows. Somewhere. He knows. She smiled.

“If you are done the self-congratulation, Miss Granger, I could use your assistance with Repello Inimicum.”

Hermione wobbled to her feet.

“I…I don’t think I can, Professor.”

Snape made no move to help her up and instead turned back to pacing the walls. He stopped and looked up. High above them was a casement window, the light of day just barely visible. Hermione gave him a questioning look.

“What will you do?”

“Stand to the side.”

Snape stiffened his back, closed his eyes for a long moment and inhaled deeply, then lifted his wand solemnly.

“Expecto patronum!”

Hermione watched as a dazzling silver stag burst from his wand-end. It quickly made a circle about the room, before leaping through the air upwards to the window, its silvery light radiant against the sun beams. Hermione had never considered what Snape’s patronus was, but somehow the stag seemed to make complete sense.

Severus watched as his stag disappeared out the window. Dumbledore would understand that something was terribly wrong. Thankfully, as long as Lucius and Bellatrix were attempting to obliviate him, Bellatrix would not be running amok through Hogwarts and the students were safe. They need only hold off a little longer for reinforcements.

Before he had time to contemplate further, the walls around the door began to shake and rumble, as if in an earthquake.

The low, sadistic voice of Bellatrix Lestrange filled the room, echoing all around them.

“You cannot hold out forever, Sevvy. Now be a good boy and let me in. I promise not to hurt you or the Mudblood.”

Ennervated though she was, Hermione jumped to her feet.

“She’s lying!”

The voice of Bellatrix laughed maniacally.

“Quite the runaway bride! No matter. We’ll complete the ceremony shortly. I know Lucius is
looking forward to it, and so am I. Can’t wait for more girl-talk.”

Hermione raised her wand. “Silencio!” she screamed.

The echoes of the Dark Witch’s taunts faded away. The walls quit rumbling, and she and Snape were left in the quiet.

Hermione collapsed to the floor from the effort.

Snape moved to her and knelt down. He quickly examined her body. There were no visible signs of damage, but her exhaustion was worrying.

“Are you wounded? Were you struck by one of her spells?”

“No…” Hermione whispered. She felt weak as a kitten. Her arms and legs heavy and her head light. She reached out to Professor Snape’s shoulder for leverage and felt something wet on his black tunic. She pulled her hand back and stared at it. It was covered in garish red blood.

“Sir! You’re injured!”

“It can be healed later,” Snape brushed it aside, though Hermione noticed he winced slightly.

I can’t wait, Hermione thought. The Mnemora will wear off soon.

She lifted her wand-hand slowly and pointed the wand at herself. Snape grasped her wrist firmly.

“Don’t even think about it, Miss Granger.”

Snape wrested the wand away. Hermione grabbed for it, but ended up clutching his robes.

“Please! I have to cast… I don’t have much time. I have to cast… another spell…”

“You are far too weak now to attempt a spell as strong as the Self-Obliviate. You could kill yourself, you fool!”

Hermione’s eyes widened. How did he know…?

Snape registered her shock and sneered down at her.

“Yes, the Headmaster filled me in on your idiotic plan. He should never had described it to you. It is a coward’s way out.”

A coward! Hermione felt a primal rage bubble up inside of her at the word.

A coward! After all she had been through! After all she had endured!

With a feral cry, she dug her fists into Snape’s robes and yanked him down to her.

He fell to his knees in front of her so that they were almost eye-to-eye. She stared into his fathomless black eyes. They were nothing but black pools of nothingness. No feeling. No humanity. Just empty.

Just like Lucius, she thought.

“How dare you call me a coward, you miserable git! Do you know what I have been through?! Oblivion is better than a future with those two!”

“I do know what you have endured. You yourself told me.”
“You have no idea!”

“You mind is not to be treated so disdainfully. It is not something for you to throw away. Did it ever occur to you that even within the confines of Malfoy Manor, you could use your brain for research. You could still make valuable contributions to the Wizarding World? But no, you choose to render yourself a mindless Muggle simply because you are afraid of a little pain.”

“A little pain? A little pain!? You do not know pain!” she screamed at him as she struggled against him, desperate to get to her wand.

Snape clenched his jaw. His thin lips curled back in a cruel grimace.

“You insufferable, pompous little chit, when you have writhed in agony for hours under the Dark Lord’s curse, then you may speak to me of pain!” he hissed at her.

“Oh, but I have!” Hermione shouted back at him.

She could feel herself trembling, her body shaking all over again. She sucked down a lungful of air. Snape’s brow knit together slightly.

“I have!” Hermione pulled back slightly. Her eyes dropped to the floor. She shut them tightly.

Snape grasped her harder.

“Ow! That hurts!”

“What do you mean ‘you have’?!”

“Please let me go,” Hermione whimpered, a wave of nausea rushing over her. “Just let me have my wand. Let me escape them as much as I can.”

“No,” Snape sneered. “You will tell me everything.”

Hermione couldn’t fight it anymore.

She had kept so much to herself. Hours and hours of fighting the urge to run to Harry, to Ginny, to Dumbledore. Even to Snape himself. It had been so lonely, so hard. Snape was wrong — she wasn’t trying to play the martyr. But somehow it had just happened. I can’t shut him out, she thought. And if he understands, maybe he will let me Self-Obliviate.

Slowly, she raised her amber eyes to him. Her forehead smoothed out in a small release, an acquiescence.

“Do it,” she whispered.

“Legilimens!”

With a whoosh she could feel a pressure inside her skull, like a powerful, searching wind, winding its tendrils into every corner of her consciousness.

She felt Snape’s presence inside her mind — firm, unyielding, almost threatening. He moved between her memories easily. Too fast! It was difficult to keep up, and there was a hard pressure against her forehead. She danced around him, shuffling the thoughts and actions that were more personal in nature to the side, putting walls up around them. She prayed Snape would have the decency not to look. She couldn’t bear for him to see anything sexual.
Snape flipped between her memories of Lucius and Bellatrix, watching the scenes she brought to the forefront, careful not to pry behind her paltry occlumency shields.

He did not want to violate her, but he had to get to the bottom of her hysteria. The memories were a jumble, out of sequence, twisted up in her mind.

What he saw horrified him:

-Hermione at Malfoy Manor the first time, Lucius’s hand wrapped around her neck, his other hand upon her bra.

-Hermione’s pain at the burning ring. Her body shaking, the sweat pouring off her.

-Hermione on her knees, kissing Lucius’s robes and begging him for forgiveness.

-Her fear at seeing Bellatrix stride into the Dining Room at Malfoy Manor.

-Lucius slapping her across the face.

-Then, the Cruciatux. Over and over again. Hermione screaming in agony, writhing, begging Bellatrix to stop, screaming for “Lucius” to rescue her. Scrabbling on the wooden floor of the Library, unable to get away from the agony of the burning, slicing, scraping, stabbing pain.

-Lucius ripping Hermione’s yellow dress, pressing his hips down into hers. “Just do it!” he heard Hermione scream out.

Finally, Snape arrived at a barrier. A tall garden hedge, and behind it…something she was hiding from him.

Let me see, he whispered to her with his mind. Hermione hesitated a moment, then dropped the shield. The leaves parted and Snape stepped through.

The memory was of Hermione in her bathroom. The floor was covered in blood. She was staring at herself in the mirror. Her face was black and blue. Her body scratched and maimed. She was dressed in a blue dress that was in rags.

And there was something she was looking at. What was it? Snape moved the memory closer to him.

In the mirror. On her arm. A carving. WHORE.

Can’t be glamored, can’t be healed, he heard her think. Gods, not forever! I can’t live with this.

And then a final memory.

Hermione standing on the parapet of the Astronomy Tower. “It would be so easy…”

Snape recoiled and removed himself from her mind. The force of it caused both of them to fly backwards a couple feet.

Hermione gasped for breath. She was sobbing. The shudders wracking her exhausted form.

“Now…now do you see?!” she sputtered in between sobs. "Don't you get it now? I'm ruined."

She buried her face in her hands, unable to look at her professor.

Severus Snape stared at the girl.
Later, he would wonder if this moment had been Dumbledore’s doing all along. Was Hermione’s suffering simply part of the grey wizards’s grand plan to engineer this outcome? To prey on Severus’s sympathies, knowing his family background? Was the Self-Obliviate merely a distraction. If so, Dumbledore should be damned for it. For allowing the girl to suffer as she had.

But in this moment, all Snape could see in front of him was a young woman.

A young woman he had not been able to protect.

Just like his mother.

Just like Lily.

He swallowed heavily, feeling an uncomfortable lump in his throat.

It was not tears. He didn’t know what it was. There was no way to undo the past, after all.

But the present. The present could be... dealt with.

“Show me,” he uttered.

Hermione moved her hands from her face and reached for her sleeve, pushing it up above her elbow, revealing the “WHORE” marking.

Severus took a sharp intake of breath. It filled him with anger. He should have killed Bellatrix Lestrange long ago, the mad bitch.

“I…I couldn’t heal it.”

“That day in the Storeroom…?”

Hermione nodded.

“And the rest?”

“Glamours…” she whispered.

He raised his wand to her.

“Finite incantatem.”

The girl transformed in front of him from blushing English rose to a ghastly torture victim.

Black eyes, bruises covering her throat, scratches across her cheeks, red welts on her forearms mixed with purple impressions of fingertips. It seemed like her entire skin was a motley of black, purple, red, and yellow colors.

Severus had seen much worse, but to have it all revealed at once was deeply unsettling.

He stood abruptly and looked at the door, his hands balled into fists.

“By hiding this, you have protected them!” he accused.

Hermione felt more tears fall from her eyes, but she lifted her chin in defiance.

“Don’t you dare blame me, Sir! I did not deserve any of this!”
“You foolish know-it-all, I could have protected you!”

“I asked you to, if you recall! I begged you to marry me instead, Professor, and you refused! You refused over and over again! You turned me away!”

“Marriage is not the only form of protection.”

“No, sir. It is not. That is why I am going to Self-Obliviate. It’s why I drank the Mnenora. I am going to forget my life and start a new one.”

Snape looked at her like she was insane. He shook his head.

“Why…why would you forget the past when that is where your happiness lies?”

“They look at me like a cancer, Sir. A stain on all Wizarding kind. That is why I am beaten and tortured and Crucio’d. Don’t you understand? Purebloods will always hate me as long as I do magic. Even you yourself hate me. You always have. Its practically bred into you.”

Snape bristled. Hermione reached her hand out to him, palm outstretched.

“Give me my wand, Professor. Let me do this. Let me leave all of this behind. I don’t want to remember anymore. I don’t want to remember Ron, or Harry, or all the good things that used to be in my life. It hurts too much. I can’t live a life like this. Just let me be a Muggle. Please. At least Lucius won’t kill me then.”

The walls around them shook suddenly, as if from a nearby thunderclap.

“What was that?”

“They’re penetrating the protection spells,” Snape explained. “I can’t stop both of them.”

“Give me my wand, Sir!”

“No!”

Snape turned away from her.

“This is not your decision!” she exclaimed.

“I am making it for you,” he scowled.

“Look at me, then!”

Hermione rose up, slowly finding her footing.

Snape turned slowly to face her.

The girl was crying again. The tears pouring down her cheeks.

“If you won’t let me choose for myself, then you can at least look at the life you’re sending me to live. Take a good look, Severus Snape. This is the fate you’re consigning me to!”

Snape’s eyes scanned her bruised, battered body. It was grotesque.

“Very well!” Snape thundered.

He quickly crossed to her and shoved her wand into her hand. He pushed his face close to hers.
“If you are so very eager to become a Muggle, then you are obviously not the Witch everyone at Hogwarts thought you were. For someone who just merited seven ‘Outstandings,’ you are remarkably thick.”

Hermione ignored him and raised her wand, pointing it at her head.

“I hope you can tell Dumbledore about Bellatrix. When they break in…tell Lucius…tell him to try to be kind to me. I’m sure I’ll be a good wife to him as a Muggle.”

Hermione felt a large tear roll down her cheek.

Snape looked at the doorway. It rumbled loudly on its hinges. Behind it he could hear faint murmurs and shouts.

“They will likely obliviate me before we engage in conversation,” Snape intoned, dryly.

The door rumbled again. Faintly, they heard Bellatrix’s voice. “Here, Sevvy, Sevvy, Sevyy. Come out, come out, little mouse!”

Then, Lucius’s voice: “Hermione, you cannot stop the inevitable. We must complete the ceremony.”

“If you’re going to do it, now would be the time,” Snape intoned.

Hermione nodded.

“Thank you, Sir. For everything.”

She lifted her hand another couple inches and took a deep breath, closing her eyes.

Goodbye, she thought.

She opened her mouth.

“Obliviscatur Magica—”

Suddenly she felt an impact on her hand and her wand flew out of it, colliding against the far wall. A few sparks of the spell shooting out of it. She opened her eyes, stunned.

Snape towered above her, his eyes set in cold fury. His own wand drawn.

“You really would do this!??”

“I told you! I have to!”

The walls around them began to tremble, dust and debris falling from the ceiling.

“Watch out!” Snape snapped as a piece of wooden beam fell to the floor next to them. They moved over to the wall.

Dust and debris began to fall harder. The table and chairs collapsed with a loud crash as a piece of stonework landed on top of them.

“They’re coming through!” Hermione cried out over the noise.

Snape looked at the room around them. She was right. They had mere seconds.
Hermione leaned down for her wand but Snape grasped her shoulders. A large piece of ceiling timber collapsed to their right, causing them both to jump.

Snape swirled his heavy robes around them, shielding them from the excessive dust.

Hermione was shaking. “You must let me do it! I can’t go back to them!”

She reached forward and clutched at his tunic again, her brown eyes rimmed with purple and black bruises locking with his.

“You have to help me!” she shouted over the noise.

Snape glared at her as the entire room violently swayed around them.

“Damn you,” was all he said in reply.

“DAMN, YOU.”

And before she had time to protest, he lifted his hand and made a cut across her palm with his wand, then pressed her bleeding hand into his shoulder wound. Before she could realize what he was doing, he spoke.

“I, Severus Tobias Snape, do promise myself in matrimony to you, Hermione Jean Granger. On my honor as a wizard, I swear to uphold this marriage contract and faithfully fulfill all requirements herein for as long as we both shall live. With my blood, I consecrate.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. He was…he was going to marry her?! After all this?

A loud crack sounded from the door.

They both turned and could see a jagged split appear in the middle of it.

Snape turned back to her.

“We don’t have all day, Miss Granger,” he snarled through gritted teeth.

Hermione gulped a big breath down and stared into Severus Snape’s dark, furious eyes.

She took a large breath.

“I, Hermione Jean Granger, do promise myself in matrimony to you, Severus Tobias Snape…”

Across the room, the doorway split open.

Through the smoke and debris stepped the forms of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange, wands raised.
Chapter 28

The smoke unfurled all around Hermione and Snape, filling the room.

Hermione could barely make out Professor Snape’s face in the thick cloud of dust, though it was only inches from her own. She pushed her hand firmly into his shoulder-wound and shouted her vow.

“…On my honor as a witch, I swear to uphold this marriage contract and faithfully fulfill all requirements herein for as long as we both shall live. With my blood, I consecrate!”

As she finished the oath, Hermione felt a glowing warmth underneath her palm. She could feel a magical binding between them as their blood mixed. There was a buzzing sensation, not entirely unpleasant, that rolled throughout her body and ended in her ears.

A shimmering field of light appeared around them, and though the vestry room was still being torn to pieces, she had to marvel at the beautiful twinkling brilliance of the golden bubble they found themselves in.

It illuminated everything, including the dumbstruck faces of Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy, who stared in open-mouthed shock at the binding of Hermione Granger and Severus Snape.

“No!” Bellatrix shrieked. She attempted to cast a quick Cruciat us but the warm, golden pod surrounding Hermione and Snape shielded them, her Unforgivable Curse’s power completely absorbed and dissipated by the magical energy of the Marriage Spell. Lucius merely stood stone-still in dumbstruck silence.

Within seconds, the shimmering golden light dissolved. Hermione turned back to Snape.

He was looking at his left hand, upon which a silver ring had appeared. She glanced down at her own left hand. She also had a narrow silver band.

“It…it worked?” she uttered, in both stunned shock and relief.

Snape’s eyes moved back to hers. But there was no relief there. His expression was one of pain and simmering rage.

“You…have made…a terrible mistake, Severus,” Lucius seethed, raising his wand to the two of them.

“Get up!” Snape commanded, lifting both himself and Hermione to their feet. He quickly moved himself in front of Hermione, shielding her from Lucius.

Hermione accio-d her wand. She was still weak, but somehow the energy that had passed between them during the binding had given her a small amount of strength.

Snape turned to face the door, his wand at the ready. Hermione stood next to him. Her own wand out.

“I have done what needed doing. If you hadn’t gone too far, it would not have been necessary!” Snape seethed.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. “Now we have no reason whatsoever to let the Mudblood live. You’re
really painfully dumb, Sev. I can’t wait until Dumbledore finds you here with a dead Mudblood and your memory wiped.” She clicked her tongue. “Can’t say that will look too good for you.”

Bellatrix raised her wand, her dark eyes gleaming in delight, when suddenly it was pulled from her hand by Lucius.

“Enough, Bella.”

The Dark Witch hissed at her former brother-in-law.

“What are you doing?”

“If you value your freedom, we must depart.”

Lucius looked Hermione up and down. She felt a shiver pass through her. The expression on his face had morphed from shock to anger to something akin to broken-hearted. It was truly unfathomable, yet his right hand gripped Bellatrix’s wand tightly, preventing her from casting anything against them.

“But he knows!” Bellatrix hissed at Lucius.

“Go!” Lucius shouted.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes and swirled her wand about her head.

“This isn’t over!” she threatened, as she whipped around, disappearing into a dark, black cloud of smoke that rose up to the casement window and smashed through it, speeding off into the daylight.

Lucius watched her go, then turned back to a stunned Hermione and Snape.

He looked from one to the other — Hermione’s open-mouthed, dumbfounded expression to Snape’s testy, pickle-faced one. And without fully intending to, he threw back his head, and LAUGHED.

“Oh…oh, my…the pair of you….Good luck, Severus.”

With another chuckle, he swirled his own wand in a demi-circle and disappeared in a cloud of haze, following Bellatrix up and out — spirited away on the warm wind.

Hermione and Snape were left standing alone in the tiny vestry. The room destroyed around them. Both of them huffing and puffing and barely able to process the last thirty seconds.

Lucius…he…he actually let me go!, Hermione thought in puzzled amazement.

Slowly, Hermione lowered her wand and looked back to Snape. He was staring up at the window, deep in thought.

She stared down at the silver ring on her left hand. What have we done?, she thought.

****

Thirty minutes later Hermione and Snape found themselves in the Hospital Wing under Madam Pomfrey’s care. She had attended to Snape’s shoulder-wound and was gently healing Hermione’s bruised and battered skin.

Hermione sat on the edge of a hospital bed, her legs dangling to the floor as Madam Pomfrey clucked about her.
“Tsk, tsk…my girl, you should never have hidden such injuries from me.”

Hermione nodded and stared across the room at the dark form of Professor Snape conferring with Dumbledore and McGonagall in the doorway. She strained to make out what they were saying, but their tones were hushed. She could see Snape’s facial expression was one of controlled fury.

“As shocking as all of this is, I believe you did the right thing, Severus,” McGonagall whispered, glancing back at Hermione. “The poor wee thing. Had I known what Malfoy was doing to her I would have castrated the bloody wizard!”

“I do not doubt it, Minerva,” Dumbledore responded with a smile.

McGonagall put a hand on Snape’s tunic.

“I know this arrangement will be…difficult for you, Severus. But she’s a brilliant young witch — kind, dutiful. Under the Marriage Law, you could not have hoped for a better match.”

Snape said nothing in response.

He bit his tongue between his teeth in an effort to suppress the growing rage he had felt bubbling up since the moment Dumbledore and McGonagall had burst into the Room of Requirement seconds after Lucius and Bellatrix’s escape.

“I am going to send a full report to the Ministry. No doubt the Aurors are on their way to Malfoy Manor as we speak.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I have already alerted them.”

“If you would like to discuss anything…Miss Granger…or your marriage…please, Severus, my door is always open.”

McGonagall leaned in and gently pecked Snape on the cheek. He recoiled slightly as if she had burned him. She smiled and patted his arm.

“Good man!”

With that, McGonagall left. Snape scowled. He didn’t need McGonagall seeing him as some sort of hero. The truth was he had been manipulated and trapped into this marriage. He had had no desire whatsoever to save Hermione Granger from becoming Lady Malfoy. In fact, he had been looking forward to her departure from Hogwarts.

He turned his dark eyes to Dumbledore and glared at him. The grey wizard coughed, slightly uncomfortable.

“Well, it seems as if things have worked out for the best.”

“Yes,” Snape spoke at last in measured tones. “For you, they certainly have. Your precious Gryffindor Princess remains in the fold.”

Dumbledore sighed. “You made a choice, Severus.”

Snape’s brow folded in anger and he took a small step close to Dumbledore. “I…had…NO choice. And you know it.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat and took a step back.
“We can discuss this later. For now, I will have the house-elves send her things to your suite. What is done is done. You must find a way to live together now.”

Dumbledore nodded and turned, leaving Snape quaking with silent rage, his fists tightly balled up.

Across the room, Hermione looked away from Madam Pomfrey and made eye contact with Professor Snape…her husband. And what she saw in his black eyes was nothing but hatred and contempt. Oh Gods, Hermione thought, what a way to begin a marriage!

In that moment, she wondered if perhaps she would have been better off as Lady Malfoy after all. I cannot change things now, she thought. I am married. I am Hermione Snape!

“There!” Madam Pomfrey announced, lowering her wand. “All better!”

The Healing Witch smiled down at Hermione kindly.

“I’ve healed everything, my dear, except of course for the…wound on your right arm. I am afraid you are correct. There is nothing to be done about that.”

Hermione nodded sadly. “I understand.”

Pomfrey gave Hermione a quick squeeze of the hand and then walked to the doorway. She stopped and eyed Snape’s brooding form.

“She has been through hell and back, Professor Snape. I will be monitoring her health very closely going forward. She will need a great deal of rest to regain her magical energy. Do not do anything to upset her or… tax her.”

Snape merely scowled at Pomfrey. He had never liked the witch. She was just as much a Know-It-All as Miss Granger, only worse because she was older and more set in her ways.

There was nothing worse than a Mediwitch who thought she knew more about one’s body and health than oneself. It was the reason why he had assiduously avoided her help when he was recovering from many a Dark Revel. Scars were preferable to lectures. He glanced over at Hermione. Perhaps that was part of the reason the girl had hidden her own wounds.

Madam Pomfrey exited, leaving Snape and Hermione alone in the ward.

Hermione swallowed and gathered her courage. She hopped up from the bed gently and took a few steps towards Snape.

“Sir, I…I want to thank you for—“

“—Do not ‘thank’ me,” Snape interrupted coldly.

He cleared his throat, glaring down at her imperiously. “As our contract specifies cohabitation, you will return with me to the Dungeons.”

Hermione nodded. “Very well.”

Snape whirled abruptly on his heels and marched out without waiting for her. Hermione skittered after him, her white pumps clicking on the stone floor.

As she followed her former Potions Professor’s dark form through the halls, she couldn’t help but mull everything over. She really was married now. And to Professor Snape!
And it was clear he expected her to move into his rooms in the Slytherin Dungeons. What was her life expected to be now that she had finished her academic career at Hogwarts? And how on earth was she going to deal with having Snape as a husband? It was plain that he was furious with her. *But it wasn’t my fault,* she thought. *I didn’t ask Malfoy to abuse me!*

Lost in her thoughts, Hermione barely noticed when they came upon a large door, somewhere deep in the Dungeons. She hadn’t paid much attention to the route. She would have to ask Dumbledore for a map. No doubt Snape would be furious if she was constantly getting lost in the Dungeons, but this was one area of Hogwarts she had always had very little reason to go.

Snape looked back over his shoulder. “Hurry up, girl!” he hissed.

Hermione quickly stepped up beside him.

“Watch,” he commanded. He waved his arm over the door.

*“Lingua serpentis.”*

The door swung open into a long, stone entrance foyer. Snape glanced back at her as if to say, “Got it?” Hermione nodded. This was going to be her home now, too. She took a deep breath and stepped inside Snape’s inner sanctum.

Green light glowed from medieval-looking wall sconces. Hermione knew they were somewhere under the Great Lake, and her instinct was confirmed when she was led into the large living room at the end of the foyer. One wall was almost entirely made up of a large picture-window that looked out into the water of the lake. Hermione gasped. It was lit up in soft green light and she could see beautiful exotic fish and other sea creatures swimming by— pink seahorses, electric-blue tang, Moorish idols, bright orange sea anemones, silver sharks. It was dazzling.

“Beautiful…” she murmured.

She turned to the rest of the room. It was all mahogany, stone, and green velvet. A large fireplace big enough for her to stand in took up most of another wall. Carved tables and chairs were artfully arranged. Tapestries of serpents and unicorns hung on the walls.

To the left two steps led up to a dining area with a heavy oak table and a glowing green chandelier above it. The entire place had a decidedly medieval atmosphere. Hermione wondered if anything had been changed about the place since the days of Salazar Slytherin. *Probably not,* she thought. It was certainly not her taste or style, but she knew better than to suggest a change in interior design at this point in her marriage.

Snape gestured towards the dining room table and Hermione obeyed. As she climbed the two steps, she noticed two scrolls sitting upon it, tied together in a silver ribbon with a wax seal — *from the Ministry,* she thought. She reached for the scrolls, and then glanced back at Snape. He was removing his outer cloak and laying it across a green settee. She turned back and broke the seal, quickly unfurling one of the scrolls. It was a copy of their Marriage Contract, certified and stamped by the Ministry. She opened the other scroll.

“Read,” she heard Snape say, almost directly behind her. She flinched. He moved so silently she hadn’t even heard him approach. Hermione pulled out one of the chairs and sat at the table. Snape moved around the table and stood haughtily facing her, his arms folded.

Hermione cleared her throat and read.

*“Dear Lord and Lady Snape,*
Felicitations on your nuptials, and thank you for fulfilling the Marriage Law.

Please find a copy of your contract enclosed. You have one week to fulfill all of the requirements therein. An in-home visit by a Ministry official shall take place at that time to verify the terms are being fulfilled.

We wish you a long and prosperous union.

Sincerely,

Minister Cornelius Fudge”

Hermione finished and looked up at Snape. He was pinching the bridge of his nose. The idea of a Ministry official poking around in his private rooms was simply intolerable. He sighed, lowering his hand. He turned back to the girl sitting at his dining room table.

“Are you aware of the terms of the contract, Miss Granger?”

Hermione took a deep breath.

“Absolutely, Sir. I read it at least a hundred times.”

“Of course you did,” Snape rolled his eyes. “And the terms are…?” he prompted.

Hermione took up the other scroll and opened it, reading aloud.

“…perpetual cohabitation, daily conversation and interaction, sharing of meals, weekly consummation, no contraception…”

“Stop.” Snape ordered. Hermione set the scroll down.

“Sir, I think we need to discuss how we are going to make this marriage work. May I propose you give me a tour of your suite and then we can discuss scheduling?”

Snape wrinkled his nose. Scheduling?!

“Let me be very clear, Miss Granger. You have entrapped me into this marriage, but this is no partnership of equals. I have vowed to protect you and I shall fulfill that requirement as well as these ‘terms’, loathsome as they are to me. But you live here only by my sufferance. This is not your home and this is not a real marriage. You are not entitled to a tour nor are you entitled to my time.”

Hermione frowned.

“I did not entrap you, Sir! I was willing to Self-Obliviate, and you wouldn’t let me!”

Snape snorted. “One of the more idiotic ideas you’ve ever had.”

Hermione took a deep breath and stood up.

“I am grateful to you for marrying me and sparing me a life as Lady Malfoy. Truly, I am. But as the marriage contract is irrevocable and binding until death, this is a real marriage.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“‘Weekly consummation and no contraception?’ I’d say that is about as real as it gets, Sir!”
Snape made a face of disgust. Suddenly, Hermione felt a little pang of hurt in her stomach. He didn’t have to make it so obvious he found her physically unattractive. He was no matinee idol, either, as far as she was concerned.

“I will brew a contraception that is undetectable to the Ministry. Procreating with you is out of the question!”

Hermione inhaled sharply.

“Good! I have no interest in bearing a child anyway! And certainly not yours!”

“Then we are agreed on that point, at least.”

“But, Sir…the consummation…”

Snape turned away from her. It filled him with disgust and self-loathing to think of it. He was twice the girl’s age and up until this morning had been her teacher. He had protected her as a child and watched her age. When he closed his eyes he could still see her as a smarmy, precocious eleven-year-old.

And now he would have to force himself upon her. He was no better than Lucius Malfoy. The revolting Marriage Law was forcing him to be her rapist.

Hermione cleared her throat, trying to be brave.

“I accept that aspect of the contract and I will do my…duty,” she said.

Snape turned back to her.

“Rest assured, I see it as nothing by a repugnant duty as well. The contract specifies weekly consummation. We cannot prolong it past a week, therefore we shall do our…duty…on Saturday evening.”

“And…only Saturday evenings?” Hermione inquired.

She was a little hopeful about his lack of enthusiasm. It didn’t appear that Snape was taking advantage of the situation. After her encounters with Lucius, it would have been a nightmare to discover Snape had a secret, lascivious side, or that he wanted to bed her nightly.

Snape sneered down at her, flicking his eyes over her body.

“The bare minimum,” he emphasized.

Hermione glanced down at the floor, suddenly feeling like a bridge troll. Git.

She stood.

“Sir, I’m exhausted. If you could show me our bedroom, I would love to rest awhile before dinner.”

Snape made a humph noise.

“We are not sharing a bedroom, Miss Granger.”

“W-what do you mean?”

“You will have your own quarters. You are permitted access to your bedroom, bathroom, and this
room. Every other room here is off-limits.”

“But, that isn’t fair!”

“What isn’t fair is the fact that I am saddled with you!”

“Fine!”

Hermione spun around and stepped back into the living room space.

“Where is it, then?”

Snape pointed towards the hallway. “Last room at the end. The elves should moved your trunk for you.”

Hermione marched towards the archway leading into the hallway. At the threshold she turned back. It had been an emotionally tumultuous day, and she felt like she needed to sleep for 1,000 years, but she didn’t want to walk away feeling so angry at Snape. He had, after all, saved her from a lifetime of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange. He did know she didn’t hate him, didn’t he?

She turned back towards her former Professor.

“Sir?”

“What.”

Snape looked up at the girl standing in the archway in her simple wedding gown.

“Do you think Lucius will try to come for me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I see.”

A worried expression crossed Hermione’s face.

“He cannot reach you here in my chambers. The wards are secure.”

Hermione nodded, a small pained smile crossed her face.

“I know you said not to thank you, but I am grateful. I’ve always felt safe with you, Sir.”

With that, Hermione turned and walked down the hallway, leaving Snape alone to contemplate their situation.

True, he had protected her and her friends from Voldemort, but he knew he was no ‘safe harbor’. She won’t be thanking me after Saturday night, Snape thought, bitterly. He knew he was set in his ways, surly, independent, and uncompromising.

She was mistaken if she thought being Lady Snape was going to be much better than being Lady Malfoy. True, his temper was better-controlled and he was not interested in physically abusing her, but Hermione Granger was simply not suited to him, and he was not suited to her.

He stared down at the silver ring on his left hand and sighed in frustration. Soon enough, she will hate me.
Hermione turned the knob and stepped into what would now be her bedroom. She coughed. It was dirty, dusty and fairly empty, save for a queen-sized four-poster bed, two nightstands, a large bureau, and a small table and chair.

“Evanesce pulvis!” she cast, attempting to remove the dust bunnies from the corners.

“Lumos!”

In the middle of the floor was her trunk. The one she had packed that morning in her Head Girl rooms. She had expected to see it again in Narcissa Malfoy’s bedroom at Malfoy Manor, not in Severus Snape’s dingy little spare bedroom, but as she cracked it open it was nice to see some of her familiar things.

With a little work, I can make this room comfortable, she thought, as she glanced about. A door near the bureau led to a good-sized bathroom with a pretty green mosaic tile and a claw-footed tub. It needed a good scrub, but she was too tired to unpack and straighten things out.

She was trying to see the bright side of things. Her marriage to Snape was obviously never going to be a love-match, and he was clearly still bitter about their shared future, but Hermione was starting to feel hopeful. This morning, she had all but given up on her life. And now…the future held possibility!

Back in the bedroom, she cast a cleansing spell on the bed and transfigured the bedspread into a large goose-feather comforter, then kicked off her heels and sprawled on top of it, sliding her forearms underneath the fluffy white pillow, and laying her weary head on it.

No one is coming for me, she thought. Tonight I am safe. No one will grab me or hurt me. Snape will protect me. I can trust him. And I am still here at Hogwarts… under Dumbledore’s protection. I am safe. I am safe. I am safe.

Relax, she commanded her tense muscles.

Within seconds, the brown-haired witch in the wedding dress was fast asleep.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to all the Guests who clicked the "kudos" button on the last chapter! That's so nice of you! :)

****

Snape awoke abruptly in his bed to the sound of a woman screaming.

“No! No, please! Don’t!” The shrieks reverberated outside his bedroom.

Half-asleep, he stumbled out of bed and flung open his bedroom door. The noises were coming from the spare bedroom. What had been so newly-been appointed as ‘Hermione’s room.’

She had not appeared for the supper that the house-elves had laid out, and he had assumed she was either asleep or being typically stubborn, neither outcome of particular interest to him.

He had completed his grading per usual, spent an hour or so in his Potions Lab refining various recipes and checking on his latest research projects, and then retired early to read in bed until his eyes grew heavy. Only to be awakened now by this disruptive cacophony.

“What is it now?” he wondered, annoyed.

He burst into the spare bedroom to find Hermione writhing on her bed.

“Demi-lumos!” he conjured.

In the semi-light, he could see she was still asleep, but mumbling and tossing and turning, evidently in the midst of a powerful nightmare. She lay on top of her white comforter, still wearing her wedding gown. Her sweat-covered forehead twisting from left to right and back again. Her legs kicked at nothing. Her arms clutched violently at the goose-down.

“Please, Lucius, don’t! Please! Stop!,” she cried out.

Snape watched her torment. He knew better than to wake her — the sudden jarring from the dream-state to full consciousness often caused more damage than cure to those afflicted. He moved to her side and instead raised his wand above her.

“Cessabit!” he murmured, willing her body to pacify itself.

The girl’s feverish motions slowed and stilled. She exhaled deeply as her subconscious drifted to other places, the tension leaving her limbs. Her mind may still be troubled, but at least her body would be immune to its tempestuous commands this night.

Snape exhaled as well. Pomfrey may have healed her physical wounds, but Miss Granger evidently had psychological trauma from the events of the past week. Who knew how long it would take for those to heal?
And it was his destiny, after all, to *add* to them, he thought bitterly.

Snape sighed. Tomorrow he would brew Dreamless Sleep, and make sure his stores were well-stocked with it. She would have it at her fingertips. He did not want her to become an addict, but he would allow her whatever she needed to sleep soundly, at least for the next few weeks. They would not be easy ones.

Snape turned and exited the room, shutting the door securely behind him.

****

Hermione woke early the next morning.

There was no window in her bedroom as they were below the Hogwarts’ grounds, so she cast a quick “*Tempus.*” It was almost 8 o’clock. She vowed to get a Muggle clock at the soonest opportunity. *So much more convenient,* she thought.

Normally she would be up and dressed by now, but she realized for the first time that she didn’t have anywhere to BE. The idea was odd and a little distressing. She had no classes that needed attending, no study sessions that required her leadership, no tutoring appointments with the First-Years or Second-Years.

For the first time in her young life…there was *nothing* for her to do. She could lay in bed all day if she so desired.

She raised her head from the bed and looked around her room. It was as she had left it the previous evening. *Merlin, did I really sleep all night?*, she wondered. She had assumed that she would have awoken for supper, but her stomach had lost the battle with her nervous system. *I think I slept twelve hours,* she marveled. She felt a bit grubby in yesterday’s clothes.

She slid off the bed and moved into her bathroom. A quick “*scourgify*” and the sink and bath were relatively presentable. She turned the taps of the bath and filled it with steaming hot water. In her trunk she found her toiletries and gently arranged them on the edge of the tub and in the ancient medicine cabinet above the sink. *If this is mine from now on, I will make it my own,* she thought.

“*Parva rosea,*” she murmured as she pointed her wand at the wall directly above the bath. It instantly changed from a dull lime-green wash to a fresh, light pale-pink color. Hermione smiled.

She peeled off Molly Weasley’s wedding dress and draped it over the towel rack to the left of the sink. *I’ll have the elves dry-clean it,* she thought. *Ginny should have it back.*

*Merlin,* she wondered, *how on earth will I explain that I am ‘Lady Snape’ to Harry and Ginny when they return from Greece tomorrow,* she thought.

The entire course of events had happened so quickly, she could scarcely believe it herself. They will be happy I am still at Hogwarts, she thought. Anything but a prisoner at Malfoy Manor!

She peeled off her bra and underwear and stepped into the comforting, warm water. In the bath, she felt her muscles unclench, and she ran a loofah over her arms, examining herself in a small side-mirror.

Madam Pomfrey had done an amazing job. Her bruises, scratches, and welts were completely healed. Coupled with the rest, Hermione felt like a completely new person. Her body was no longer achy and sore as it had been almost every day the past week. She felt almost like her own self again.
As she raised the loofah to the back of her neck, she caught a glimpse of the ‘WHORE’ carving on her right arm. She frowned and twisted slightly to the ‘MUDBLOOD’ carving on her left arm. But for these twin marks..., she thought, wistfully.

She shook her head. She would not let her physical deformity affect her self-confidence. I know who I am, she thought. What has been done to me had nothing to do with me.

I will recover, she thought. I will overcome this. My magic will repair itself, and I will go on to do great things. After all, I received seven ‘OUTSTANDING’! I am a powerful witch!

She inhaled deeply, trying to build herself back up. But a smaller voice inside of her wondered, will Snape find me disgusting? Will he be grossed-out because of these marks? Will my husband find my body marred and revolting?

She swallowed the insecurity, that common self-doubt that affects everyone before being intimate with another, shook it down, and busied herself instead with shampooing her hair and shaving her legs, those tiny, comforting, female tasks.

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After bathing, Hermione decided to explore Snape’s suite, as much as she was able to, anyway.

She opened the door to her room and faced the corridor. At the far end was the entrance foyer and to the right the large archway leading into the living room and dining room area she had seen last night.

To her left, along the corridor, were three doors. She stopped at the first door and tried to turn the knob. It was locked. She had expected it to be. Snape is such an arse, no wonder he used magic to lock her out, she thought. She got on her hands and knees and peeked under the doorway. She could make out a few table legs and a smell that reminded her of the Potions Classroom.

So, he has his own private lab, she thought. She was fascinated to poke around inside, but she was sure it would take a long time before her secretive husband would remotely consider that.

The next door was locked as well. A peek under the door revealed some bookshelves and a leather chair-leg. His study, she thought. I wonder what books are in his private collection. She felt an insatiable curiosity course through her. Whatever books Snape kept were no doubt rare and would be deeply engrossing. Probably ones unavailable to the Hogwarts Library.

At the final door she didn’t bother going down on her hands-and-knees to peek. She sensed this was Snape’s bedroom. The bedroom he had steadfastly refused to share with her.

Hermione sighed and turned into the living room. The beautiful aquarium-window glowed down at her. How on earth does Snape manage to keep his circadian rhythm down here, she wondered. It always feels like it’s midnight. No sunlight at all. Well, it is technically a “dungeon”...

She smiled. She had never imagined she would get this kind of glimpse into how one of her professor’s lived at Hogwarts. Her professors were just people who appeared in the Great Hall and in classrooms and then disappeared in the evenings. She had never really imagined that each of them had his or her own domicile.

As close as she had become to Professor McGonagall, she had never even seen the older witch’s sitting room, much less explored her entire suite. How strange to think our teachers are just like us!

Hermione moved into the living room and stepped up into the dining room area. She glanced over to one corner and, thank Merlin, saw a few modern kitchen devices — a fridge, and something that she assumed was some type of oven, thought it was covered in cobwebs. So, Snape isn’t much of a cook,
she thought. *No surprise there.* She pulled on the handle of the stainless steel refrigerator, expecting to find it empty, but was shocked to see it was well-stocked — milk, juices, iced tea, yoghurt, jams, butter, fresh fruit, hardboiled eggs, etc. *Must be the elves.* On a lower rack she noticed all kinds of other foods — sliced meats, cheeses, bread, lettuce, vegetables, condiments. *No wonder Snape just picked at his meals in the Great Hall,* she smirked.

She pulled out a carafe of orange juice and a yoghurt and turned towards the table, only to jump back in shock.

On the other side, Snape stood silently, arms folded, tunic buttoned to his neck, watching her with his beady black eyes.

Hermione gasped and loosened her grip on the carafe. It fell and shattered on the stone floor.

“S-sorry. You scared me.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “*Reparo!*”

Within seconds the glass carafe was sitting on the table, full of orange juice once more. *How does he move so silently?* Hermione wondered. *It was infuriating!*

“I am going to the Ministry today,” Snape announced, emotionless.

“Are you going to help the Aurors find Bellatrix?”

“No. I am going to see if they will overturn our Marriage Contract.”

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“*Overturn it?!*”

“Yes. In light of the extreme…circumstances you have been subjected to by Lucius Malfoy, there was no other option for me but to remove you as a possible bride for him.”

“I see.”

“Therefore, as I was not part of the original contract, I am going to request this one is null and void.”

“And you think they will agree with you? That our marriage can be annulled?”

“It is possible.”

“But if our marriage is annulled, won’t I have to find another pureblood wizard to wed? Won’t Malfoy have to find another Muggleborn witch?”

“Entirely probable.”

“But then we will just be exactly back where we started, Sir!”

“That is not my concern.”

“Sir! Why can’t you just *accept* this? As things are? Or perhaps wait awhile…wait a few months until Lucius has married and settled down with another Muggleborn bride. He’ll probably forget all about me, and then maybe we can seek an annulment then?”

Snape swallowed. He really did not want to be having this conversation with her. He was going to
be late for his meeting.

“We cannot seek an annulment once the marriage is...consummated.”

“But how will they know? After all, we can just lie to them. I could move my things into your bedroom when the Ministry official comes and we can pretend.”

Snape lifted up his left hand, displaying his silver wedding band to her.

“Rest assured, they will know. The magic in the rings will...fluctuate each time the marriage is sealed.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“But that’s preposterous! You’re saying the Ministry is actually going to record how often we...”

Snape grimaced at the idea.

“Yes.”

“That's disgusting! It's a gross invasion of privacy!”

“Miss Granger, the Ministry is not interested in your ‘privacy.’ It is interested in obedience.”

Snape turned and stepped down into the living room and headed towards the archway. Hermione followed.

“Sir, don’t ask them to annul our marriage! I can’t marry anyone else, and I can’t fight off Lucius. I can’t go through that again! I know you were just trying to help me in the Room of Requirement, but can’t you see it’s for the best? Dumbledore was right.”

Snape stopped and turned back to her.

“What do you mean ‘Dumbledore was right’?”

“I’m not an idiot, Sir. Why do you think he asked you to give me counsel in regards to Lucius? Why do you think he asked you to be the one to deliver my NEWT results? He’s wanted you to be the one to marry me from the beginning. He’s the wisest wizard either of us knows. If he thinks we are the best match under the Marriage Law, maybe we are?”

Snape took a small step back and his thin lips drew themselves into a cruel twist.

“I know you consider Dumbledore beyond-reproach, but as someone who has served him in war-time the way a lieutenant serves his general, I know a bit more about his character than you do, Miss Granger. He is mercenary, as determined and selfish in his pursuits as the Dark Lord was in his. Do not for one minute think that Dumbledore taught you about the Self-Obliviate to save you from Lucius. He could never have a witch as powerful as yourself fall under the spell of the Dark Arts. It was to prevent your knowledge and ability from falling into Lucius and Bellatrix’s hands. It was not to prevent your suffering. You are merely one of his pawns, as am I.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I don’t believe it. Dumbledore cares about me. He cares about us both.”

Snape laughed. “Your naiveté is fathomless, girl.”

Snape swirled his robes around him and left the chamber, leaving Hermione standing speechless by
Hermione paced back and forth in her room.

It had been hours and Snape hadn’t returned. She had busied herself as best she could — unpacking, cleaning, re-arranging and transfiguring her room until it was to her exact liking. In fact, she had cleaned not only her own rooms but the entire living room chamber as well. Dusted, mopped, and even shined the aquarium window-glass.

She had thought about leaving the Dungeons to go see Dumbledore, but she was nervous about what Snape had said. Did Dumbledore really engineer the situation so that he could somehow use her magic and abilities for his own purposes? Surely he just meant to save her from her terrible fate with Lucius? Why would Dumbledore want her to marry Snape? Did he have some sort of future plans for her? But the War was over! There was no more Order of the Phoenix.

Suddenly, Hermione heard it. A loud bang! The front door had been thrown open. He’s back!

She flung open her bedroom door and was greeted with the tall, dark form of Severus Snape striding towards her from the foyer. As he walked, the green wall sconces flickered, mirroring their owner's emotions.

“How…how did it go?” she trembled.

From the dark, cloudy expression on his pale face, Hermione could surmise he was not granted the annulment. Snape barreled towards her down the hallway, his black outer robes fluttering about him. Ignoring her completely, he turned to the door to his study and with a wave of his hand, unlocked it.

“Sir?”

Hermione walked up to him as he opened the door and stepped in, and she followed him into his study. She jumped as the door slammed shut behind her. She was standing in a pitch-black room, but could hear Snape moving about.

“Lumos!” he muttered.

Suddenly she found herself standing in his gloomy, compact study. The wall facing her contained nothing but bookshelves from floor-to-ceiling. It was nothing like Malfoy’s collection, but must have been at least 5,000 volumes. To the left and right stood bureaus stuffed with various rolled up parchments and scrolls. Above each bureau was a large etching. The one on the left-side was of an impressive country-house. The one on the right-side was an aerial view of an industrial town — a large mill in the center of a row of brick terrace houses. She could just barely make out the word "Cokeworth" in calligraphy on the bottom.

In the center of the room stood a massive, heavy wooden desk covered with ink, quills, and a large candelabra. Before her stood two red-leather chairs, worn with age. Hermione sneezed. This room needed a good cleaning as well.

Snape removed his outer robes and hung them on a coat-rack in the corner before turning to face her. Hermione moved to sit in one of the leather chairs.

“Don’t bother,” Snape cut her off. “I don’t have much to say to you.”

Hermione stopped. A million questions ran through her head but she bit her tongue, knowing it
would annoy him. Best to let him tell her what he wanted her to know first.

Snape gave a small groan and took out their marriage contract from his pocket, tossing it onto his desk.

“Our annulment was rejected.”

Hermione breathed a huge sigh of relief. *Thank Merlin!*

She couldn’t imagine having to go back to Lucius after all of this. She couldn’t go back to that horrible feeling of being in limbo, and she knew that marrying Lucius *now* after she had rejected him and attempted to *Self-Obliviate* would only make things ten times worse for her. Bellatrix would probably carve her up like a Christmas turkey. Hermione shuddered. She glanced up at Snape. He was scowling at her. Evidently, he did not appreciate how pleased she was by his failure.

Hermione cleared her throat.

“Why did they reject it?”

“The magical binding is apparently too powerful to reverse without risking serious damage to us both. Our magical energies have been permanently linked. If the connection were to be severed, we would effectively become Squibs.”

At the word, Snape wrinkled his nose.

“Well…I suppose we’ll just have to make the best of it,” she said, the corner of her mouth twisting up in a tiny smirk.

“Don’t believe for one minute I did not seriously consider becoming a Squib,” Snape spat.

Hermione’s smile faded.

“You don’t have to be so horrible. You can’t pretend being my *husband* is worse than being unable to perform magic!”

Snape narrowed his eyes. “I suspect in some ways it might be.”

Hermione strongly resisted the urge to *accio* every book on the shelves behind him to her so that he would be pummeled with the heavy tomes. It was clear he was frustrated by his failure to get the annulment, but he didn’t have to be such an arse.

Hermione took a deep breath. *Don’t let him goad you!,* she thought.

She smiled up at him as sweetly as pie and took a seat in the leather armchair. Snape frowned as she made herself comfortable. She pulled a fresh scroll towards her and picked up a quill and an ink pot.

“What are you doing?” Snape uttered.

“Seeing as we cannot *undo* our marriage, I think it’s time we write our own contract, an addendum if you will.”

“Containing what, exactly?”

*Quid pro quo. There are things I want and things you want. Let’s see if we can come up with terms so that our marriage is as…manageable as possible.*"
Snape arched an eyebrow. It was not a bad idea, on the whole. If he could get her to sign an agreement to adhere to certain rules and stipulations, she might be easier to control. And he knew he was a shrewd negotiator. Like most Slytherins, he could always get more than he gave.

Snape sat in his own high-backed leather chair and leaned forward on the desk on his elbows, touching his fingertips together. His dark eyes bored into her.

“Very well, Miss Granger. Let us…negotiate.”

Hermione swallowed. She felt like he was laughing at her, but she lifted her chin and stared at his wan face.

“To start, I don’t want you to call me “Miss Granger” anymore. I am not your student. I am your wife and your equal. You are to refer to me as ‘Hermione.’”

Snape snorted at her impudent tone. *What a stuck-up, self-important little sprite!*

“As I explained to you before, Miss Granger, in a pureblood marriage, witches are not the equal of their lord-husbands. You are technically my property and you must obey me.”

“I understand your…customs, ridiculous and antiquated as they might be, but is it also the custom of a pureblood husband to call his lady-wife by her maiden name?”

Snape narrowed his eyes at her. She had him there.

“I shall refer to you as ‘Hermione’ in private or ‘Lady Snape’ in public. You may refer to me as ‘Severus’ in private or ‘Lord Snape’ in public.”

Hermione nodded. “I agree to those terms.”

This felt like progress to her. She pulled out her wand and charmed the quill to copy out the terms on the scroll before them.

“In exchange, you will admit that this is not a marriage of equals, and that you are my property.”

Hermione stopped the quill.

“Absolutely not!”

Snape smirked.

“Well, then, Miss Granger, our roles to one another must stay as professor and former pupil.”

“That is absurd, Sir! We are more to one another than that now!”

Snape pressed his thin lips together.

“Seeing as you just referred to me as ‘Sir’, it doesn’t seem that we are. Unless you planned to call your future husband ‘Sir’? Is that your…preference? If so, I am sure we can add that to our addendum.”

Hermione furrowed her brow.

“Of course I would never want to call my husband ‘Sir’!! That’s creepy. It’s just…is what I’m used to calling you. Old habit.”
“You can’t have it both ways, Miss Granger. Either I am your lord and husband and you are my wife, “Lady Snape,” who is mine in every way, or I am Professor Snape and you are my irritating former student Miss Granger. You want respect, Miss Granger? Then you must concede.”

Hermione shifted in her chair. It made her deeply uncomfortable to sign a document saying she was Snape’s property. Did that mean he could do whatever he wanted to her? The implications were more than a little frightening.

“I…I need to know you won’t abuse the situation. If I sign this and promise to obey you and that I am your… property, I need to know you will respect me. I need to be able to trust you. That you won’t…take advantage.”

She felt the color rise slightly in her cheeks. She thought of Lucius and how he would have treated her if she had agreed to be his “property.”

It scared the hell out of her to give Snape that power over her. To give ANY man that power over her.

Snape examined the girl’s face. She was biting her lip, a worried expression on her face, her eyes looking down at the maroon carpet. Snape sighed.

“Miss Granger, I told you yesterday that I am not interested in your body. Though I will do my duty to fulfill the consummation, I will not be violent towards your person, nor will I raise a hand to you in anger. I give you my word as a wizard.”

Hermione looked up. There seemed to be a bit of tenderness in his deep voice. Only for a moment, then his eyes gleamed in victory and his lips twisted back into their typical sneer, his voice hardening.

“Do we have an agreement?”

“Alright. You will call me “Hermione” and I will call you “Severus.” I agree to the pureblood customs and agree to obey you to the best of my ability, and accept that I am your…property.”

She struggled to get out the last word. The quill flew across the parchment, recording the terms.

“As for meals and our required daily interaction, I suggest we keep it minimal. I believe if we spend 15-minutes eating together in the dining room with a brief exchange of words, that will fulfill the contract. There is no need for additional interfacing.”

“Other than the weekly consummation.”

“Yes. Other than…that.”

Hermione hated the idea of this. She knew Snape could never love her, but she was curious about her new husband. She wanted to get to know him, spend time with him. Perhaps they could form a friendship in time. But by sharing a brief supper and a mere 15-minute conversation once a day, they would never be able to build any kind of relationship. How could this bring her anything but misery?

“I…I will agree to this, but in exchange I want full access to your study and potions lab.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You have to give me something! I don’t have a career yet, and if I’m going to be cooped up in the Dungeons with no one to talk to, I’ll need some intellectual stimulation.”
"You may speak with the elves."

Hermione made a face.

"Fine. You may access this room, but the Potions Lab is absolutely off limits. I cannot have you interfering with or damaging my research and development."

"Perhaps I could assist you?"

Snape laughed throatily.

"I think not."

Hermione nodded, trying not to show how hurt her feelings were.

"Alright. So, our daily interaction will be limited to a 15-minute supper and in exchange I will have complete access to your study."

The quill copied this down. There was one more major topic she needed to address.

"Now that I am done with Hogwarts, I would like to pursue a career. I need to know you won't prevent me from that, the way Lucius would have."

"What kind of career?" Snape asked. His interest was genuinely peaked. She had excelled in so many fields, he was curious as to where her interests lay.

"I’m…I’m not sure. When I was younger I thought perhaps I’d want to become a Healer, and then later I thought perhaps I could teach, become a Professor, but…since the War ended…I’ve thought about working at the Ministry. Perhaps at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Snape narrowed his eyes.

"You think you’re suited to be an Auror?"

Hermione shook her head. "No…not particularly. I know that’s what Harry wants to be, and he would be perfect for it, and it was Ron’s dream, too. But…there’s so much corruption in the Ministry now, perhaps I could make a difference. I thought I could do it for Ron."

"I wouldn’t waste your intellect by attempting to go into law enforcement, girl. You are correct that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is corrupt, as full of ex-Death-Eater-collaborators as those who fought for the Light, but understand that you will not be able to correct the system from within it. Harry Potter may be able to effect some change. But you…I doubt would have much impact there."

"Well, if you think so little of my abilities, then why should I pursue a career at all?"

Hermione rose, huffily. She was getting sick of his constant put-downs.

"Sit down, girl. If I thought you were a dunderhead, do you believe I would have awarded you an ‘OUTSTANDING’ in my field?"

Hermione sat.

"No, I don’t believe you would."

"An education is a terrible thing to waste. If you are drawn to public service, I would recommend..."
you consider an area of the Ministry in which research is a cornerstone. The Department of Mysteries, perhaps.”

Hermione nodded. “I will consider it. Would you permit me to pursue that, if I so choose?”

“What you do with your time, girl, is none of my concern. You may floo anywhere you like during the daytime. Nine months of the year we will live at Hogwarts. During the summers we shall be at Snape Hall. That is all I require.”

"But...why couldn't we live in London? You could floo to Hogwarts to teach." 

"Absolutely not. My duties here are more than just 'teaching'. I have evening rounds as well as off-hours duties towards House Slytherin. I refuse to be inconvenienced by having to floo back and forth six times a day simply so you can live in London."

"But...wouldn't you like to live somewhere new? I mean...being cooped up here...it's..."

"What? You don't find my suite to your personal taste? I am so very, very sorry if I am not willing to re-arrange my entire lifestyle to suit YOU, Miss Granger, but I did not choose this marriage. You might consider showing some gratitude for putting me in such a repugnant situation! Instead, you do nothing but whine and complain that things are not to your liking."

Hermione chose to ignore him.

Instead, she turned to the large etching on the wall to her left. It depicted a stunning Palladian-style house with a symmetrical three-story facade with white columns.

"Is that Snape Hall?"

"It is indeed."

"It’s beautiful."

Snape brushed the compliment aside.

"I do not have unlimited time. Finish the contract."

"Alright. You will not interfere with my choice or pursuit of career and I agree to co-habitate with you at Hogwarts and at Snape Hall."

The quill finished, and then two signature lines appeared beneath.

Hermione picked up the quill and signed, then handed it to Snape. He, too, signed. The scroll shone brightly and a yellow light rolled across the page, binding the agreement.

Snape took the agreement and the original contract and placed both in his desk drawer, slamming it shut.

“Now, if you would be so kind, Hermione, get out.”

“Happy to, though I may come back later to borrow one of your books. I do SO look forward to reading through your entire collection, Severus.”

Hermione stood in triumph and flounced out of his study.

Snape glared after her -- she had no idea what this marriage cost him. He hated her for her
obliviousness. She was a spoilt and self-deluded, whiny little Gryffindor.

At least she had agreed to limiting their interactions. He did get what he wanted, at least.

_The less time I spend in her company, the better it will be for us both_, he concluded. Resolved, he picked up his quill and a stack of papers and began to grade.

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Chapter 30

At around six o’clock that evening, Hermione stood in the dining room, putting the finishing touches on the simple lamb-and-rice dish she had ordered the elves to prepare for supper.

She added a sprig of rosemary on top, and then lit the two tapered green candles she had found in a kitchen drawer. This would be the first dinner she and Snape would have as man-and-wife, and she wanted to at least make it endurable. If their evening meal was to be their only interaction each day, it could at least be pleasant.

She had waited until Snape had departed for his afternoon classes and then quickly stolen into his study to examine his books. She had chosen a dusty, fusty tome— the Medicinal Properties of Midlands Mites, and poured over it — losing herself in the nuances of how adding the small insects could affect and enhance various healing potions.

Other than that, she had spent her day worrying about her marriage, wondering whether she should go talk to McGonagall or Dumbledore, and wrestling with her feelings towards Lucius Malfoy.

Where was Lucius now? Snape had said nothing about him, so she assumed he was still at-large. As much as she was feeling stifled inside Snape’s quarters, she didn’t feel completely comfortable with the idea of venturing outside of them just yet.

Hermione checked the time. It was ten minutes past. She knew Snape’s last class had finished thirty minutes ago. Where is he? Probably putting in an appearance in the Great Hall. Maybe he didn’t actually intend to eat with her every night — maybe he expected they would just sit awkwardly at the table doing nothing but speak occasional sentences to fulfill the Marriage Contract. She thought of the two of them sitting uncomfortably— Snape watching her slurp her soup and occasionally staring at the wall. The image made her chuckle.

Slam! The front door open and shut.

She quickly pulled out his seat for him and stood next to it. Snape strode into the room and flung a pile of books down on a nearby sofa. He pulled off his robes, and turning, stopped when he noticed the brunette witch by the dining table. His dark eyes flicked over the meal and the lit candles.

“I thought you might be hungry,” Hermione offered, gesturing to the chair.

“I do not require you to order my meals for me,” he scowled, though he proceeded towards her.

“I am simply following our agreement.” Hermione took her seat. “Fifteen minutes. The required interaction. Over dinner, I believe we said?”

Snape eyed the food suspiciously and took the seat she had pulled out for him, pulling a small bottle from his pocket and placing it on the table.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“Dreamless Sleep. I thought you might require it. After what you…experienced with Lucius.”

Hermione looked down at her plate. Her appetite suddenly dissolved.

They hadn’t yet spoken of what had happened to her, what Snape had seen in her head.
He saw everything, Hermione thought.

Well, not everything. She had managed to hide the passionate kiss she and Lucius had shared outside her Head Girl rooms, and the more embarrassing moments when Lucius made her… touch herself wearing his ring, but Snape knew most of it — her agony from Lucius’s slaps and blows, her desperation and pleas when he grabbed and twisted her body, the total revulsion as Bellatrix’s rusty knife had dragged across her flesh, the agony of the Cruciatos, and her utter hopelessness as she had climbed to the Astronomy Tower.

What she had almost done up there…

Hermione bit her lower lip. She had an urge to cry, but she didn’t want to dissolve into tears in front of Snape. Not again. Not when she felt like she had gotten him to at least start to accept her as his wife. The last thing she wanted was to become a bawling, snot-nosed little girl in front of him all over again. She breathed out slowly and looked up at him.

He was watching her very carefully. For what purpose, she didn’t know, but his gaze was steady and penetrating. If she didn’t know better, she would assume he was attempting legilimency, but she knew she would have sensed him in her mind. She stared deeply back into his eyes, almost daring him to look away. His eyes were a pure black, what you would call a midnight black, but, she suddenly realized, when you looked very closely you could see a small difference between the pupil and the iris. The pupil was more of a black-black, whereas the iris had tiny grayish flecks in it that almost looked like silver.

It’s his eyes that make him appear so intimidating, Hermione thought. If his eyes were simply blue or brown like most witches and wizards, he would be less inscrutable. But his eyes allow him to conceal his thoughts — they’re a blank canvas.

With Lucius, she was always able to look into his pale blue eyes and sense his mood — toying or furious, amused or enraged. They were so expressive in their texture and in the expression of his eyelids, but Snape’s eyelids and facial muscles were so still, even the tiniest muscles of his retina so controlled. His entire physiognomy lends itself to being an effective spy, she thought. You would barely be able to tell whether his eyes were dilated or not no matter how closely you looked.

Snape was the first to break their gaze. He picked up a fork and began to eat the dish before him.

“Thank you for the Dreamless Sleep,” Hermione spoke after a few seconds. “It was considerate of you. I will definitely use it.”

“Two drops before bedtime,” Snape replied as he swallowed the food. “More than that and you may become dependent.”

“I’m aware of the risks, however I believe three drops is the suggested dose.”

She picked up her own fork and began to eat.

“Have you ever taken Dreamless Sleep?”

“No.”

“Then your limit is two drops.”

Hermione wanted to argue with him, but his tone was decisive.

The silence filled the room. Hermione struggled to come up with more to say to him. But what do
you say to the wizard who *hates* you? The husband who wishes you were a million miles away?

She decided to wait until he spoke again.

They ate in silence. Hermione could hear the *nothingness* of the room. Snape was a polite eater and made barely any noise with his mouth or cutlery.

Hermione awkwardly ate her meal, occasionally stealing glances at him. After what must have been five minutes, she cleared her throat.

“Were your…classes…did they…go well today?”

Snape looked up at her like she was the stupidest girl in the world.

“Please don’t *speak* merely to fill air. I don’t have much use for idle conversation.”

“I was just trying to—“

Suddenly, Snape stood and pushed his plate away.

“Thank you for the meal. I believe we have met the requirement for today.”

He gave a dismissive nod to her and then swiftly exited towards his Potions Lab. The door shut behind him with a loud bang.

Hermione was left picking at her lamb, feeling utterly despondent.

****

The next afternoon Hermione found herself sitting with Ginny on the marble steps of Ron’s memorial.

She had slept in and awoken to find Snape already gone for the day. She expected he wouldn’t return until the evening, and she couldn’t *bear* the idea of another full day locked up in the Dungeons. She was feeling stronger. She had taken the Dreamless Sleep and slept almost ten hours. Her wounds had now totally healed and she was ready to emerge from Snape’s protection. *Or is it his *captivity*?*, Hermione thought, acidly.

She had met Ginny and Harry for lunch in the Hall, and then when Harry went off to an Arithmancy study session, she and Ginny had gone outside to get some fresh air and sunshine.

Ginny had told her all about the adventures she and Harry had enjoyed in Greece, and Hermione had just filled Ginny in on everything that had happened at Hogwarts — the interrupted wedding, Bellatrix’s return, and the hasty marriage to Snape. The redhead’s jaw was almost on the grass.

“That is bloody *mental*, ‘Mione!”

Hermione grinned at her friend’s bluntness. She folded her arms across her waist and leaned back against her stone seat.

“I know! Gods, I don’t know why I tried to hide so much from you and Harry. It was *so* scary, Gin. It must have been Stockholm Syndrome or something. I felt like I was falling under Lucius’s mind control. And the thought of Bellatrix killing my parents, or coming after you or Harry. I just felt like I had to… I don’t know, sacrifice myself or something.”

Ginny gave Hermione a huge hug.
“Well, I’m just glad you aren’t tied up somewhere in Malfoy Manor right now! Snape might be the greasy bat of the Dungeons, but at least you have some control over your life! I’m amazed he actually married you! Do you think he felt sorry for you?”

Hermione paused, thoughtfully.

“I’m not sure. He was shocked by what he saw in my memory. I think it disturbed him, but I’m not exactly sure why he gave in.”

“Well, I agree he’s the best choice to keep you safe from Malfoy and Bellatrix.”

“Yes.” Hermione nodded. She glanced down at the memorial, thoughtfully. *It wasn’t supposed to be like this*, she thought.

Ginny reached out for Hermione’s hand.

“Ron would understand. You know that, don’t you?”

Hermione smiled and pursed her lips, managing a small nod.

“I don’t mean to pry but…how was…I mean, your wedding night…”

Ginny raised her hands to her lips and giggled into them. Hermione rolled her eyes and gave the redhead a playful swat.

“No comment!”

“Oh c’mon, I’m totally curious what Snape is like in the sack!”

Hermione put her hands to her forehead, covering her eyes.

“Oh Merlin, Ginny please! It’s not…we haven’t yet…um…”

Ginny’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment for her friend.

“Oh! Erm…sorry, I was only teasing. I mean, it’s been *two days*, I just assumed…you know how keen wizards are when it comes to…”

Hermione gave a small nod. Her only experiences had been with Viktor and Ron, and she did find both of them generally over-eager and fast-moving when it came to the physical aspect of things, always looking to get to the next step, even if Hermione wasn’t completely ready. They had both been sweet and put no pressure on her at all, but Hermione knew a thing or two about wandering hands and over-excited wizards.

Still, she didn’t have the experience that Ginny had. Almost the very next day after the War had ended, Ginny and Harry had leapt into bed. Later, Ginny had confided in Hermione that being close to Harry in that way was the only thing that had saved her from her grief over Ron’s death.

“No, don’t apologize. I’m just…I’m really anxious about it, Gin. He basically told me in no uncertain terms that he won’t touch me unless the Law *requires* it. So we’re basically waiting until the last possible second. He acts like I’m disgusting.”

Ginny made a horrified face.

“What a miserable hook-nosed brute! Just *who* does he think he is?”
“Ginny! You don’t need to—“

Hermione tried to stop Ginny from launching into one of her impassioned monologues, but she knew she couldn’t stop her. Ginny hopped up on one of the benches and put her hands on her hips.

“—no, I have half a mind to go yell at the black-eyed git right now! He should be *worshipping* you at your *feet*, Hermione, and counting his lucky stars to have someone as gorgeous and intelligent as *you* in his bed. He might come from one of the Pureblood families, but he is acting like a complete boor, the greasy, grimy git!”

Ginny hopped down, and as she did, a dark shape was revealed to Hermione, quietly standing several yards away. Her mouth fell open as she looked directly at the stony visage of her former Potions Professor and now husband, glaring up at the two of them in barely-concealed fury from the foot of the memorial steps.

Ginny, unseeing, continued her tear.

“I’m sure it’s all an *act* anyway, the disgusting, lecherous old *bat*!”

“Ginny, *stop*!” Hermione shouted, tugging at her friend’s sleeve.

Ginny turned, and audibly *gasped* as she saw Snape standing before them.

Hermione felt her mouth go dry. She wanted to apologize, but she was so surprised and horrified, and uncertain of how much Snape had overheard, that she couldn’t make out the words. Ginny was useless, standing with her mouth dropped open.

Snape ignored the redhead and turned to Hermione, scowling.

“The Headmaster has requested us.”

With that, Snape swiveled about and strode across the grass. Hermione turned to look at Ginny.

“Oh, *fuck*, I am so so sorry, Hermione!” Ginny exclaimed.

Hermione gave her a “it’s okay” shrug and a wistful, pained smile, and then picked up her bag and trotted after Snape, purposefully giving some distance between them.

****

As they approached Dumbledore’s office, Hermione caught up to Snape.

She couldn’t let this fester. Knowing him, he probably thought the worst of her. She reached out and tugged at his sleeve. He shrugged her off and continued to walk. Determined, she reached out and held his hand, turning him towards her.

Snape looked down at their hands and back up at Hermione. She could see the indignation all over his face.

“Let *go* of me,” he snarled. Hermione dropped his hand.

“I’m sorry. Ginny shouldn’t have said those things. She was simply trying to be a good friend to me. That’s all, Severus.”

Snape leaned down and pushed his face towards her, narrowing his eyes.
“You have always had terrible taste in friends, girl, but it does surprise me to learn you lack all sense of decorum and discretion.”

“Girl?!”

Hermione could feel her blood rising.

Two Ravenclaw students walked by and glanced over at the heated exchange that was going on. Both Snape and Hermione straightened and looked around uncomfortably.

Hermione reached out and took hold of Snape’s robes, pulling him into a classroom. As soon as they were both inside, she let go of his robes and whipped around.

“I am not a girl anymore, Severus. I am your wife! If you treat me like a little girl, then you can’t be surprised if I act like a little girl!”

“A Pureblood wife would never act the way you do, Miss Granger! In fact, no honorable wife would — snickering about her husband. How common.”

“It’s ‘Hermione’! You agreed, Severus.”

“Very well, Hermione. I will make it very clear to you. I am not one of your pathetic little boyfriends whom you may gossip about to your Gryffindor simpletons. I expect you to show me respect. If you do not, I can make your life extremely unpleasant.”

Snape took a step towards her. Hermione felt the alarm-bells start to go off in her head.

“He’s just trying to scare me! Calm down. He’d never hurt me. He’s not going to hurt me…”

But, by reflex, she found herself backing away. Before she knew what was happening, she had drawn her wand and it was in her hand.

“Don’t…you…dare….” she whispered, a wash of panic drawing over her.

Snape paused and narrowed his eyes almost quizzically. His own anger seemed to dissipate as he analyzed her, his head tilted slightly to the right. For a moment, Hermione almost thought she saw fear in his eyes.

But, a moment later, his face was a mask of suppressed rage again. He sniffed the air and rolled his eyes.

“Dumbledore is waiting.”

He turned and exited, slamming the door behind him, not bothering to pause for her.

Hermione sleeved her wand and placed her left hand on her waist as she sucked in a few deep breaths. She placed her right hand on a desk next to her to steady herself, and she bent over slightly. She knew she was alone in the classroom, that nothing was really wrong with her, that she was safe, but she could feel a wave of anxiety course through her. Her throat felt tight and she could feel a slight pain in her chest.

Deep breaths, Hermione, deep, deep breaths.

She willed herself to calm down, inhaling through her nose and exhaling through her mouth. What the hell is bloody wrong with me?, she wondered. It was clear that her experiences with Lucius had left her raw and vulnerable.
Outside the classroom, Snape leaned against the wall of the corridor, his eyes closed. The words Miss Weasley had uttered had mattered little to him — he had heard similar taunts and insults almost all of his life, and he knew that most of them centered around criticisms pertaining to how strange, cruel, or ugly he was. None of this was new to him. He’d read worse things in the past week in a hastily-scribbled note a Third-Year Gryffindor had attempted to pass in his Tuesday-morning class.

Severus Snape had been through enough real torment and torture in his life to have become immune to having his feelings hurt what others thought of him.

So, why had he become so incensed at Hermione’s lack of discretion? Why did the idea of her discussing his person with Miss Weasley bother him so much?

He brushed his contemplation to the side. No, she was acting like a complete fool.

And if she wasn’t careful going forward she could ruin his effectiveness as an authority figure at Hogwarts and interfere with his reputation as a published and respected Potions Master. That he couldn’t brook.

****

Five minutes later, Hermione knocked on Dumbledore’s office and entered.

“Finally,” Snape spoke aloud, clearly still piqued.

Hermione had managed to allay her panic attack, and she joined Snape who was standing just before Dumbledore’s desk.

The grey wizard gave her an encouraging nod.

“You look much better, my dear, than when I saw you in the infirmary.”

“Thank you. I feel better. Is this about Bellatrix? Have the Aurors found her?”

“I’m afraid I have some bad news. When the Aurors arrived at Malfoy Manor, they did not find Bellatrix anywhere. Lucius was arrested and taken to the Ministry and charged with aiding and abetting a known fugitive.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?”

Dumbledore reached into his desk and pulled out the latest issue of the Daily Prophet. Hermione and Snape both looked down at the front page. There it was in big block letters.

“LUCIUS MALFOY RELEASED ON BAIL; BELLATRIX LESTRANGE STILL AT-LARGE.”

And below the title, a large moving photo of the fair-haired, blue-eyed wizard, glancing into the camera lens.

And winking.
Chapter 31

A few hours later, Hermione and Snape sat in silence over their evening meal in their Dungeon rooms.

Neither of them had spoken to one another since leaving Dumbledore’s office. Hermione was feeling incredibly anxious and though Dumbledore had assured her that the Aurors were closely monitoring her parents' home in Australia, she couldn’t help but worry.

*What is Lucius doing at the Manor right now? Is he thinking of me at all?* Hermione mentally scolded herself. Why should she care whether Lucius was thinking of her or not?

Finally, Hermione put down her fork and spoke.

“Do you think Bellatrix would still go after my parents?”

Snape paused and glanced over at her. He had been deep in his own contemplation, and did not appreciate the disturbance.

“I cannot say.”

Hermione’s face fell.

“But…I imagine that she may have larger plans than murdering the obliviated Muggle-relations of her former-enemies. The threat was likely a mere tactic.”

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Snape rose, cutting her off.

“I am sure we have ‘conversed’ enough to satisfy the requirement today.”

With a wave of his wand, he moved his empty dish over to the kitchen counter where the elves would clean it. He took a step down into the living room and paused.

“Did you take the Dreamless Sleep?”

“Yes, it was very effective.”

"Good."

Without turning back to her, Snape nodded his head and strode out through the archway. He entered his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Hermione ate the rest of her food in the dead silence of the room.

This had been the worst day she’d had since Sunday. She and Snape hadn’t even *consummated* their bloody marriage and already it felt like the whole thing was falling apart!

She cleaned her own plate and retired to her bedroom, closing and locking the door behind her. It made her feel better to sleep behind a locked door, especially if she was going to be under the influence of Dreamless Sleep. *I certainly need it tonight,* she thought.

She changed into a simple pink nightgown and brushed her teeth and washed her face. She returned to her bed and turned back the white duvet, slipping into the cool sheets. She was grateful for the cooler temperatures of the Dungeons. It felt like a soothing chilly washcloth across her forehead.
She had intended to read more about magical mites, but her eyelids were already feeling droopy. She turned to the bottle of Dreamless Sleep and pulled out the cork. She tilted it over the glass of water on her bedside and let one…two…three drops out, then replaced the cork and set it down.

Snape was probably right and three drops was overkill, but she needed to be sure she had no dreams tonight. She couldn't handle seeing those winking blue eyes in her dreams. It was bad enough seeing them in the *Prophet*.

She took up the water glass and drank it down. Within seconds, Hermione was asleep in the bed, her bedside lamp still glowing.

****

Hermione awoke groggily on Wednesday morning. She was still finding herself confused as to where she was, but it all came back to her in a few minutes.

She knew she couldn’t just lay about Snape’s quarters and wander the Hogwarts grounds all day. She needed something to DO, and until she decided upon her career, she thought she might ask McGonagall if she could perhaps apprentice with her for the next few weeks until the school-year ended. She didn’t want to start applying for jobs at the Ministry knowing Lucius was out on bail and Bellatrix was on the loose. But it was more than likely Bellatrix would be apprehended soon and as for Lucius, well, hopefully by the summertime he would be married to another witch and will have moved on.

Hermione dressed and made her way to McGonagall’s office. The two witches had a long discussion, and McGonagall was more than pleased to accept Hermione as a short-term apprentice. It would look good on her resume to have this experience to bridge her academic and professional careers. McGonagall was deeply enthusiastic about Hermione’s interest in the Department of Mysteries, and gave Hermione several interesting books on famous former Unspeakables.

****

A few hours later she was sitting in Snape’s quarters curled up on a comfortable couch in the living room— my *quarters now, too* — she tried to remind herself, and reading another one of the books from his study, this time *A Compleat Historie of Alchemy*. Suddenly, she heard the front door open and heard Snape’s boots march across the flagstones. His footsteps moved from the foyer to his bedroom and she heard him open and abruptly shut the door.

She was learning that it was hard to focus on anything when Snape was in their quarters. She thought about him constantly — how to best relate to him, how to earn his interest (or at least avoid his approbation). As tragic as she knew it was to admit, there was still a part of her that wanted his approval.

She respected him deeply. She thought he had acted with terrific courage and intelligence during the War, and the sacrifices he had made for all of them were, in her mind, incredibly admirable. She even admired the way he rejected all titles and honors after the War, rejecting positions of glory to instead return to Hogwarts as Potions Professor and continue on as he always had.

Hogwarts was clearly special to him, as it always had been to her. She had a million questions in her mind for *that* Severus Snape.

But then there was the other Snape. The cruel, caustic former Death-Eater who had a temper and lashed out.
She had experienced that firsthand. She knew he took pleasure in the torment of students on occasion — there was something very mildly sadistic about him. Not like Lucius Malfoy, who was always ten seconds from physical violence, but a darkness simmering on a low boil, always just beneath the surface.

With Lucius, she knew that darkness had been created from his idle life of privilege, his parents’ teachings about blood status, his seduction into the service of Voldemort, his abandonment by Narcissa, and his inflated ego.

It was very formulaic.

With Snape…he was so obviously damaged.

Snape reacted in ways she was sure he could not fully control, and he liked having the upper hand in almost any situation. He enjoyed making others feel small and stupid, which to be fair, compared to him they almost always were. But Hermione got the sense that even underneath his cruel actions he wasn’t truly unfeeling, unkind. He had loved Harry’s mother, and he had turned away from Voldemort and returned to the Light. There was goodness in him. There had to be.

Oh, Merlin, I’m trying to turn him into a Bronte hero, Hermione thought, with a smirk. Severus Snape, the dark brute of the moors! She smiled to herself. She vowed yet again to have more patience with him. His anger towards her couldn’t possibly run this hot for…the next hundred years…could it?!

She turned the page of her book back one page. Though her eyes had skimmed it, she hadn’t really retained any of it. She closed the book and stared up at the aquarium window. Two orange jellyfish were playing a game of hide-and-seek. She smiled.

Her thoughts turned towards the impending “wedding night” on Saturday. She was incredibly anxious about it. She believed him when he said he wasn’t interested in her body and wouldn’t hurt her, but he was a full-grown wizard and obviously had experience.

She was ashamed to admit to herself that her biggest fear was disappointing him.

Even if he hated her 95% of the time, if she could just please him in that regard, when they were alone together in bed, maybe that would make up for his perceived burden in having to wed her? If he enjoyed her body maybe that could be her “in” — her way of bringing them closer together, paying him back for his protection of her, making him tolerate her…maybe one day even care for her. She had seen Muggle movies with that sort of storyline, good sex leading to the characters falling in love, etc. Though to be fair the characters in them were all incredibly insipid.

She was also afraid of the act itself. Would it hurt? Most of her Gryffindor peers who had gone “all the way” had said as much, and the prospect made her extremely nervous. How much would it hurt? Like, a knee scrape? Or like, so unbearable she’d have to beg him to stop? She had no way of knowing, and that was scary. She had heard all about lubricant charms and pillows and positions, but knowing what other people used and what her friends had done in the past actually gave her even more anxiety. How am I supposed to know what will work for me?

Ron had touched her with his fingers, but that was as far as she had gone, sexually. It had felt really nice, but she couldn’t imagine the difference between a finger and a penis. How on earth was that supposed to be comfortable, something that large? What she had felt when Lucius had pressed up against her had terrified her. And she was terrified Snape would be the same — rough, to-the-point, grasping, selfish, using her only for his own pleasure.
What Snape had said to her in the classroom was right. He could make her life “extremely unpleasant.” Surely, he wasn’t meaning in their intimate relations, though. Right? Right...?

Also, would she feel differently afterwards? He was her husband, so it didn’t feel improper to her to have sex with him, but would she feel overly attached to him afterwards? Beholden to him? Less herself? Would she feel used? Didn’t witches feel all kinds of different ways after being with wizards? You’re probably setting the feminist movement back fifty years even thinking this way, she thought, rolling her eyes at herself.

It was agony, her lack of knowing.

It was times like these she wished she had had an older sister or two. If there was one thing Hermione Granger absolutely hated, it was lack of knowledge.

The giving up of complete control over one’s body was also scary. She didn’t want to be at Snape’s mercy. But obviously there was no way not to give up a measure of control if you were a woman. It’s just anatomical differences, Hermione. It’s biology. You need to stop obsessing and freaking out over this. She knew that wizards were probably on the whole just as nervous as witches, but still…it did feel like they had the upper hand! It was far more vulnerable to be the fillee than the filler!

Get over it, Granger!, she thought to herself. She remembered what Luna had said once, when the Gryffindor girls were up late one night studying. Hermione had been surprised to discover that Luna had been dating a slightly older wizard outside of Hogwarts, Rolf Scamander, for some time, and Luna had dropped the bombshell that she’d had sex with him. The other girls had giggled and pressed her for details, but Luna had just smiled in her Luna-way. “Oh, girls,” Luna had said, “Everyone makes it into such a big deal. But sex is really just a tiny movement.”

At the time Hermione had giggled with the other girls, but she thought about that phrase a lot later on. “Just a tiny movement,” Hermione thought. No big deal. And anyway, if you keep over-thinking it, you’ll drive yourself nuts. Billions of witches have been virgins and had sex for the first time. You’ll be fine.

Slam! Snape’s bedroom door flew open. Hermione jumped slightly, her focus shifting from her thoughts back to the present. Why does he always have to throw them off their hinges, Hermione wondered with an eye roll.

He appeared in the archway and walked towards her. He had taken off his outer robes, and wore his black pants and long black buttoned-up tunic. In his hand he held a white piece of paper. He joined her at the aquarium-window and held it out to her.

“What’s this?”

He didn’t answer her. She opened it. It was an appointment with her old counselor at St. Mungo’s for tomorrow morning. Hermione looked up at him in surprise.

“You booked a session with my therapist?”

For a moment, Hermione wondered if he had booked a session for the two of them. Some sort of marriage counseling. She tilted her head, extremely confused.

“You want us to go…to counseling?”

Snape rolled his eyes.

“We are not going. The appointment is for you.”
“Why?”

Snape inhaled and turned towards the fish. His dark eyes moved across the glass, looking deep into the lake’s waters.

“I noticed from your…response to me yesterday in the classroom that you may benefit from a session with your old therapist.”

Hermione pressed her tongue against her teeth. Was he joking?

“You are the one who provoked my ‘response’! I apologized for what Ginny said. And I’m sorry if you felt embarrassed, but I would never gossip about you.”

Snape made a small “umph” noise and folded his arms.

“Regardless, I think you would benefit from some time spent with a mental health professional. Your appointment is tomorrow at 11am.”

“You can’t just make appointments for me and order me about!”

Snape narrowed his eyes at her, and sighed.

“I am attempting to do something for your benefit. You forget I have seen what you have been through. Trust me when I say it would be better for you to work out your emotions now, rather than bottle them up.”

Snape peered into Hermione’s stubborn face. Her brown eyes defiant and on the offense. Why couldn’t she just listen? Pomfrey had healed her physical wounds, but in the past three days the girl had done nothing but hide herself away in his rooms. Why couldn’t she see how traumatized she really was?

He knew what it was like to tamp down anger and resentment. He had personally never gone to St. Mungo’s, but he knew Hermione and many of the students had done therapy these past six months since the War ended, and he considered it wise. A way for the next generation to heal.

Hermione put her hands on her hips. It was pretty rich having Severus Snape critique one’s mental fitness! He of the constant gloomy looks and suppressed fury.

“I am working things out. But it’s rather difficult when my attackers are running free! If you want to help me, you can take me to the Ministry so I can demand some answers! I don’t need to go to St. Mungo’s. My mental health is fine.”

Snape took a step back away from the glass and began to walk a slow circle around Hermione. She felt his eyes examining her like she was a bug under glass.

“You left hand tremors slightly when you are agitated. You have heightened emotional reactions to the events around you. You have socially isolated yourself from your closest friends. And you have not been sleeping well.”

Hermione balanced her weight from left to right. He wasn’t wrong, but she was furious at his intrusion. How dare he use what he saw in her head against her! How dare he play the armchair psychiatrist, as if he were any better! She glared up at him.

“I am sleeping fine. The Dreamless Sleep was your idea.”
“You took three drops last night.”

“How did you—“

“—The bottle is charmed, naturally.”

“I don’t appreciate being spied on!”

“I am not spying on you.”

“Boy, you really can’t turn it off, can you? Is there anything else in my bedroom that you have charmed? Any other way you are keeping tabs on me?”

Snape stopped moving and faced her.

“I am attempting to help prepare you.”

Snape took a deep breath in. He refused to allow her to escalate this conversation into a quarrel.

“Prepare me for what?”

Hermione froze. Does he mean…Saturday night?

Snape exhaled and moved towards the fireplace across the room. With the wave of his hand it roared to life. He sat in one of the large chairs and raised his right hand to the bridge of his nose, gently massaging it.

Hermione watched him, confused by his actions. He seemed exhausted, defeated, like something was weighing him down.

What the hell is going on, she wondered. She moved to the fireplace, joining him in the chair next to him. She watched his tired expression, and waited for him to speak.

Eventually, he dropped his arm to his side and looked into the flames in the grate.

“Miss Granger—“

“Hermione.”

“Yes, Hermione. You know Saturday night is unavoidable. I will obviously attempt to make it as easy as possible for both our sakes, but as this will be your first…encounter…since Malfoy assaulted you, it may be easier for you if you speak to your therapist prior to our consummation. I do not want to cause you additional mental anguish.”

Hermione leaned back. Suddenly, she perceived his meaning. Does he think…? Did he assume…?

“Lucius didn’t rape me.”

Severus’s black eyes moved from the flames and found Hermione’s face. Her cheeks were a little red, but whether from the heat of the fire or the embarrassing subject matter he couldn’t say. She leaned forward imploringly and put a hand on her armrest. He shook his head.

“You don’t have to lie to me.”

“No, Severus, it’s the truth. He didn’t.”
“I know what I saw.”

“You saw him almost rape me. He ripped my dress. Remember? It was yellow. And he…climbed on top of me and pressed himself against me. I was terrified he was going to, but he didn’t. He stopped at the last-minute.”

“You said you were ‘ruined’.”

“I was upset. It was just a word.”

Severus looked deeply into her eyes, searching for any signs of deceit, but there were none. They were slightly watery, almost like she was about to cry, but everything about her expression said she was being honest.

He turned back to the flames. Thank Merlin for small mercies. At least Lucius didn’t do…that to her on top of everything else. Perhaps it would make Saturday less traumatic for her.

Hermione studied his expression, processing her own thoughts. Had he only agreed to marry her because he thought Lucius had raped her? He seemed greatly relieved, but Hermione felt agitated.

She could see now that he had been genuinely trying to be kind with the appointment, but she found herself a little disturbed by his focused concern over what had occurred with Lucius.

Why should it matter to him, frankly, whether Lucius had raped me or not? It's none of his business! Would he have seen me as “damaged goods”? Ugh!

Hermione stood up, shaking her head. Severus Snape was a piece of work.

Is this more Pureblood obsession-with-purity-in-all-forms bullshit? Is he just relieved he’ll get to have me first? Merlin, he thought Lucius had raped me and didn’t say anything to me about it for three days!??

“I’ll go to the appointment, anyway. It would be good for me. Thank you. But, Severus—“

He glanced up at her.

“If you had wanted to know, you could have just asked me whether or not I’m a virgin.”

She picked up her book on the way out. A few seconds later, Snape heard the front door slam.

He grumbled aloud to no one and poured himself two fingers-worth of firewhiskey from a crystal decanter on the table next to him.

There was only one thing to do when saddled with a recalcitrant Gryffindor wife who willfully misunderstands you.

Drink.
Chapter 32

Hermione sat in Professor McGonagall’s office the next afternoon, lost in thought.

Her morning therapy session at St. Mungo's had gone well — it had been a relief to explain the situation of Lucius and her quick marriage to Severus to a third party who wasn’t as emotionally invested in her the way Ginny was, but Hermione knew she had obfuscated and purposefully left out a great deal.

She hadn’t been able to come to terms with some of the more difficult aspects of the past couple weeks — Snape’s cruel treatment of her, Lucius’s abuse and his manipulation, her thoughts of suicide.

What she had been able to discuss had been the long night of torture with Bellatrix — and it was a relief to get that at least off her chest. How powerless it had made her feel. How angry. How frightened. Her counselor Mathilda Merrybrook had met with her after Bellatrix had marked her as a “MUDBLOOD” the year before, and had also met with her several times to discuss Ron’s death, so she at least felt relaxed and very comfortable in the older witch’s calming presence.

Nevertheless, Hermione was still annoyed that Snape had made this appointment without asking. How did he even know who her therapist was? She didn’t like the idea that he felt entitled to the personal information in her Hogwarts’ file. Technically, she wasn’t a student anymore. He had no right to snoop. She didn’t like the idea that he was thinking about her purity, her virginity. It kind of creeped her out.

“Miss Granger?”

McGonagall’s sharp Scottish brogue broke through Hermione’s thoughts.

“Sorry, Professor.”

“I was wondering if you could review the Third-Year essays while I am teaching? Please mark any you find exceptional for my personal attention. Those who have applied themselves might benefit from some time with you in the next few weeks. You would be an extraordinary mentor to them, as long as we have the privilege of having you here at Hogwarts!”

The older witch smiled warmly, and Hermione nodded in response.

“What of course. I would be happy to — thank you. I’ll review them.”

McGonagall took up her teaching case and strode out.

Hermione sat at the table that had become her own make-shift desk as McGonagall’s assistant.

It wasn’t that she minded working for McGonagall. The witch had been exceedingly generous, and Hermione knew she would receive many private Transfiguration lessons in the next few weeks that would continue to expand her skills, but her heart just wasn’t in McGonagall’s field and she knew it.

She didn’t want to teach or chaperone or mentor. She wanted something more intellectually stimulating. Snape had been right — even law enforcement would be boring to her. She needed to pursue the Department of Mysteries. She needed research. She wanted to work right at the cutting edge of magic, and she needed a challenge.
She was deep in thought when she heard an owl tap at the window. She let it in and took the scroll from it. She unfurled it slowly, almost knowing who is was from before she read the words.

_Hermione,_

_I would like to see you if you would permit it. Meet me at the Manor tonight at 8 o’clock? I promise you no harm._

_Yours,_

_Lucius_

Hermione dropped the scroll on her desk and took a step back. She knew Lucius would not simply ignore her for the rest of his life. Their paths would cross again at some point, and they would exchange words. But Hermione was damn sure she was never going to Malfoy Manor ever again, and she would never allow herself to be alone with Lucius ever again.

_Does he think me a complete fool?_

Hermione shook her head and crushed the paper into her hand. She left McGonagall’s office and made her way straight to the Potions Classroom.

She arrived just as the Second-Years were being dismissed. She slipped inside just in time to see Snape upbraiding a young student.

“—and if you continue to provoke your classmates, Mr. Chiltern, then you cannot be surprised when they meddle with your potion.”

“But! But those Slytherins started it, and then they blew up my assignment!”

“Enough excuses. You may ponder your own culpability in the destruction of one of my more valuable cauldrons in detention. Twenty points from Gryffindor.”

The poor lad turned with a crestfallen visage and passed Hermione on his way out the door.

Snape arched an eyebrow at her presence and she closed the door behind the boy. They were now alone in the classroom. Hermione found it bizarre suddenly that she had last been here only 5 days ago when she had taken her NEWT. Strange to be back in the Potions Classroom and even more strange to find herself married to its denizen!

She cleared her throat and smiled slightly, taking a step forwards.

“Still favoring Slytherin, I see?”

“Not that you know the circumstances, but thank you for assuming the worst of me.”

Snape turned and moved over to his cabinet, replacing various implements from class. Hermione sighed. He was evidently in a terrible mood. He glanced over his shoulder towards her.

“May I ask what you are doing here?”

“I wanted to show you this.”

She handed the small scroll to Severus. He took it and read it, then crumpled it up and handed it back to her.
“What do you intend to do?”

Hermione cocked her head, surprised. Did he think she was considering going?!

“Well, I certainly don’t intend to meet him! As you know, I don’t exactly have fond memories of my visits to Malfoy Manor.”

“You would be a fool to return there, or leave the Hogwarts’ grounds at this time.”

Snape turned back towards the classroom and continued to tidy up, picking up a large copper cauldron that had a completely melted bottom. Poor Mr. Chiltern’s, no doubt, Hermione thought. She followed Snape as he deposited it in the rubbish bin. He was refusing to make eye contact with her.

“Don’t you care at all that he owled me?”

“I told you before that what you do with your time does not concern me. We are only required—“

“—to interact for fifteen minutes a day. Yes, I remember!”

“Then I cannot fathom why you are wasting my time, unless you have separate plans for the evening and wish to get our daily confabulation over with sooner.”

“I just thought…that as my husband…you would care that Lucius had messaged me. But seeing as you don’t, I’ll leave you to your work.”

Hermione turned and left the classroom, slamming the door.

Severus rolled his eyes. She certainly was a self-important drama-queen. Did she expect him to put his life on pause every time she had something she wanted to discuss? Still, Severus certainly didn’t like the idea of Lucius reaching out to Hermione, and he was pleased she wasn’t trying to hide anything from him. It probably showed her mental state was in better shape.

Still. Whatever Lucius wanted, it certainly couldn’t be for Hermione’s benefit. But the girl was smart enough to sense a trap, and she certainly was not foolish enough to go back to Malfoy Manor. Of that he was certain.

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The next morning, Hermione had an advanced Transfiguration lesson with McGonagall, and then helped the older witch with planning an upcoming field trip for the Fourth Year’s to the magical village at the bottom of Loch Ness. When that was finished and Hermione was free for the afternoon, she found her thoughts turning to Lucius.

She wandered the halls and the grounds and then found herself in her usual thinking spot on the steps of Ron’s memorial. She leaned against the cool stone and looked up at the clouds.

“What do you think Lucius wanted to discuss, Ron?” she wondered aloud.

Last night, Snape had not returned to the Dungeons for dinner. Hermione had decided to make an extra effort and had ordered a nice filet and a small Bakewell pudding for dessert from the elves. She’d laid it out and had spent half-an-hour thinking up ways of engaging Snape in conversation and how to ingratiate herself to him. After two hours, she’d given up waiting, put the food away, and gone to her bedroom. She’d fallen asleep quickly, and never even heard him come in.
She wished she could have talked about Lucius with Snape. Obviously it was an uncomfortable subject, but she felt she needed to explain more about the specifics of what had happened between herself and Lucius to him. Not the embarrassing parts, of course, but she wanted to give Snape the opportunity to get any more clarity he needed from what tiny glimpses he had seen in her head.

And from her session with her therapist she had finally realized that she wanted to confide in Snape. She wanted to explain it all to him. She wanted them to be on the same page, be a team in this. But Severus Snape just had to make everything so damn difficult.

Hermione sighed. It was unfathomable. Tomorrow night she and Snape would be having sex, and yet they had barely had any substantive conversations! She felt he didn’t know her, and she certainly didn’t know him! It truly felt like an arranged marriage. How could you expect to be completely intimate with someone you barely knew? And it continued to hurt her feelings that Snape had no desire to get to know her. Maybe he just truly doesn’t care, she thought. The thought of spending the rest of her life in a loveless marriage made her breath catch in the back of her throat. She willed herself not to cry. She was sick of crying.

*Oh, Ron, how can I make this work?*

Maybe it would be possible to kill him with kindness, wear him down over time with as much sweetness and thoughtfulness as she could manage. He couldn’t hate her forever if everything she did was to try to make his life easier. What could she do?

An idea suddenly popped in her head. She picked herself up, gently touched Ron’s marble headstone for good luck, and quickly clattered down the steps of the memorial.

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Thirty minutes later, Hermione found herself walking up to the statue of the one-eyed witch in the third floor corridor. She tapped it and whispered, “Dissendium.”

A few moments later she was in the secret passageway that connected Hogwarts to the Honeydukes cellar in Hogsmeade, the Invisibility Cloak wrapped tightly around her. She smiled when she thought of the Weasley twins and their clever discoveries.

She knew she was taking a risk leaving the Hogwarts’ grounds, but she had a mission. She was going to Ceridwen’s Cauldrons to purchase her husband, Severus Snape, a wedding present. He’d probably hate it, but it was going to be her first major offensive move in Operation: Win Severus Snape Over.

Soon enough, Hermione found herself opening the trap-door in the Honeydukes cellar and pulling herself up. She kept the Cloak on until she exited the sweet shop and stepped onto the High Street. She ducked into an alley and removed the cloak, breathing a sigh of relief. She stepped into the street and moved a few shops down, entering Ceridwen’s.

She lingered for some time, looking at the various cauldrons. She considered springing for a Self-Stirring Cauldron, but the truth is she was skint. Her parents had barely been able to support her education at Hogwarts, and she had always felt self-conscious over her sweaters that had moth-holes in them, or her jeans that were a little bit frayed around the edges. The small allowance they had provided for her had been mostly used up on supplies while Harry, Ron and she had been on the Horcrux hunt, and she hadn’t much left.

Still, she wanted to get Snape something nice. Something that was worthy of a wedding gift. She finally settled on a large, elegantly curved silver cauldron. It was perfect. She brought it to Mistress
Shingleton at the front. “Would you mind engraving this for me?”

A few minutes later, Hermione happily exited the shop, casting a quick “diminuendo” on the large wrapped box that contained the cauldron, and pressing it into her pocket. She stepped into the nearest alley and was just about to take out the Invisibility Cloak from under her robes, when she felt a hand wrap around her wrist, and another clamp over her mouth from behind.

She let out a muffled scream and struggled, but found herself forced by an unseen entity towards a doorway further along the alley, and then dragged up a flight of stairs. At the top, another door was flung open by wandless magic, and Hermione felt herself pushed from behind into a simple living room space. She stumbled forward and the door behind her slammed shut. She wheeled about to face her attacker, though she already knew who it was.

She knew those hands. She had felt them upon her person so many times.

She grabbed her wand from her sleeve and pointed it directly at the handsome, proud face of Lord Lucius Malfoy.

“Get away from me!” she shouted. “You make one move and I’ll stupefy!”

But to her surprise, Lucius made no effort to reach for his own wand. He simply raised his hands, allowing himself to be at her mercy. He was elegantly dressed, as ever, in a long navy blue frock coat, and matching pants, vest, and tie. His blonde hair hung in smooth loose strands around his neck. His elegant fingers gripped the edge of a walnut cane.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said, softly.

Hermione almost snorted. She took a step backwards, scanning the room. It was simply but elegantly furnished — a couch and a few chairs, a fireplace and a credenza. There was another door at the far end, though it was closed, and some daylight streamed in from a set of French windows on the adjacent wall.

“What is this place?”

“A couple rooms that I keep in Hogsmeade. It was useful to have a meeting place for the Death-Eaters in the village. No one else is here now, and few know of its existence.”

He took a small step forward, but Hermione raised her wand a few inches, biting on her lower lip.

“Don’t you dare come any closer!”

Lucius paused. His blue eyes flicked up and down her body. He seemed… relieved to be in her company. Hermione furrowed her brow.

“Why did you grab me?”

“If you will permit me to explain—“

“—do you know where Bellatrix is?”

“I do not. I advised her to flee to the Continent. If she is wise, she will have listened.”

“Do you think she will… go to Australia?”

“I made it clear to her your parents were not to be harmed. I was merely using that against you, Hermione. You did, after all, make an attempt on my life.”
Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

“You also said you made it clear to her to stay away from our wedding. And that didn’t stop her from showing up and marching into Hogwarts polyjuiced as Harry!”

“She is difficult to manage. At the best of times.”

“She is out of her bloody mind! You are, too, if you thought it was a good idea to keep her out of Azkaban and live with her at the Manor!”

Lucius clenched his teeth a little.

“I don’t expect you to understand this, but family is very important to me, as it is to all Purebloods. I don’t give up.”

“Is that why you’re here? Because you haven’t ‘given up’ on me?”

“In a way. You didn't respond to my owl.”

Hermione held tightly to the end of her wand, ignoring his last statement.

She could feel a small bead of sweat forming on her brow. She didn’t like this. She didn’t like any of this. And she could feel her left hand starting to tremor again.

“I could hurt you, you know. I could cast Sectumsempra. I could cast Cruciatus. Or Avada Kedavra. You deserve it.”

“True, but you won’t.”

“Are you so sure?”

Hermione pursed her lips together. It would be so tempting. She wanted to. She wanted to see him writhing in absolute agony at her feet. After all the torture he had put her through during their nightmare of an engagement. Her life would be easier if he were dead.

“I’ll accept whatever retribution you see fit to bestow.”

Hermione lifted her wand, slightly, and pointing it at a downwards angle, aiming it at his chest.

Suddenly, Lucius closed his eyes and slowly, ever-so-slowly began to kneel down onto the wooden floorboards in front of her. Hermione could scarcely believe it. Lucius Malfoy was kneeling at her feet! Surely it was another game, another layer of manipulation. He knelt all the way down, his robes pooling on the floor around him, his head bowed low in submission. Hermione didn’t like this one bit. It felt weird and wrong.

“Get up,” she whispered.

Lucius opened his blue eyes and smiled.

“I’m glad my treatment of you didn’t destroy your better nature. I am not lying, however.”

He slowly reached into his sleeve and withdrew his wand. Hermione was seconds from attacking him, when he tossed the wand onto the chair next to her. Her eyes widened, but she wasted no time in picking it up. It was heavy and elegant. She could feel his magic pulsing from it when she grasped it. She quickly tucked it up her sleeve, keeping her own wand trained on the blonde wizard.
Lucius gestured towards her, bowing his blonde head slightly more.

“You have my wand. I am defenseless, and I will accept punishment for my crimes against you. I will accept Cruciatu ... if that is what you require.”

Hermione gazed at him in amazement. She felt a strange rush of power wash over her. Was this what Voldemort had felt? To have these grown men fall at his feet and be completely willing to endure the most extreme bodily agony to prove their devotion? It was heady.

Hermione exhaled through her nose and lowered her wand to her waist, still keeping it pointed in his direction, however.

“I know you don’t have a death-wish, Lucius, so why are you here? I’ve married Severus Snape.”

“I wish you hadn’t.”

Her tilted his blue eyes up at her, locking into her soft, brown ones. There it was again. The sad, needy, desperate Lucius. The Lucius who desired her and hated himself for desiring her. The part of him that had lured her in. Just slightly, only slightly. The part of him that frightened her the most, because he was so marginally aware of it himself.

Hermione cleared her throat.

“Don’t be absurd. I am sure you are thrilled to be rid of the obligation. You can marry another Muggleborn now, whomever you choose. You're finally free from "Hermione Granger: The Mudblood" - aren't you happy? My marriage to Severus is binding. We are permanently linked now. He tried to get it annulled and couldn’t.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“He tried to get it annulled? But that would only be remotely possible if the marriage hadn’t been…”

Hermione willed herself not to break eye contact with Lucius, but she could feel the color rise in her face. She glanced out the window, then back to Lucius. His blue eyes had widened slightly and were thoroughly examining her body. It was as if he was apprising her worth, the way an antique dealer would a valuable piece. She shifted her weight slightly, uncomfortable.

“Oh, I see…”

Lucius sat back on his legs slightly.

“I would like to get up. May I?”

Hermione nodded.

“Coniungere manus!” she cast, and a set of glowing magical handcuffs appeared around Lucius’s wrists, pinning them together.

The corners of Lucius’s mouth upturned slightly.

“I must say, it has been some time since a witch cast that spell upon me.”

Hermione motioned for him to sit in the chair near her. She took a few steps back as he did so, until she stood a few feet from him, her gaze and wand never-leaving his person.

“You grabbed me in the street and brought me up here. Say whatever it is you have to say.”
Lucius cleared his throat and looked at the floor. 

“This is not easy for me. You know how important blood purity is to me. And yet...I think we discovered something in our short courtship—"

“—courship?!” Hermione could not help but interject, yet Lucius continued. This time he looked directly at her.

“There is something between us. You admitted as much, and I certainly felt it. I thought about you while I was in Azkaban, and I came to a simple conclusion: I desire you. As much of a betrayal of my heritage as it is, and as loath as I am to admit it, I desire you. I was looking forward to having you in my bed. And not simply to satisfy my own pleasure and inflict pain upon you but...I found myself looking forward to satisfying you as well.”

He paused.

Hermione felt his piercing aquamarine eyes glitter at her. It was terrifying and revolting, but it also was bringing to mind the moments she had experienced with him --the tiny twinges of that something between them. The way his fingers had felt inside her mouth. The look in his eye when she realized he wanted her upon the catwalk of the Library. The way he had kissed her out front of her Head Girl rooms in Gryffindor Tower — the way his tongue had slipped inside her mouth. Briefly. Only briefly.

She shook her head, swallowing.

“There is nothing between us. You are damaged, Lucius. You are twisted and sick. We would not have been a good match. It’s better that I married Severus. Find yourself a witch who can make you happy, who wants these mind games.”

She lowered her wand slowly, and began to back up towards the door.

“Ah, as Severus will make you happy?”

"I...um..."

Lucius gave a low chuckle, though he didn't rise from the chair.

“Severus cannot love anyone or anything. His heart has long since shriveled. All he knows how to do is serve. And if he doesn’t find you worthy of serving, Hermione, he will make your life a misery. It has been...five days since your marriage, and he has yet to even bring himself to touch you? That should tell you everything you need know about him.”

Hermione paused.

His words seemed to draw such a pain out of her heart. It had been five days. Five full days. And Snape still hated her, avoided her. Hadn’t even so much as held her hand.

Was she so lacking? Hermione shook her head.

“It is inappropriate for you to weigh in on the relationship between my husband and myself. Our engagement is done, Lucius, and I never want to see you again. My advice to you is to find a way to redeem yourself in the Wizarding World. You have done horrible things. What you did to Ron...what you did to me...I can never forgive you. If you want to find respect again in the Wizarding World, then you need to do some good with your life. You could start by helping the Aurors find Bellatrix.”
“And what if I did?”

“Did what?”

“Helped them to find Bellatrix? Tried to make amends? Would you at least be willing to see me, and speak with me from time to time?”

Hermione couldn’t tell what tactic this was, but it was categorically Slytherin; yet if he could be manipulated into helping to get Bellatrix back into her cell at Azkaban, she was willing to feign a little.

“I promise nothing. I don’t trust you. But if you were to turn Bellatrix in, I do know there are many who would look favorably upon that.”

Lucius placed his hand over his heart and lowered his head reverently. Hermione wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips in displeasure. She couldn’t quite figure out what new game this was for him, but she was certain she didn’t want to be a part of it.

She backed out all the way to the doorway, opening the door behind her.

“I will leave your wand on the bottom-stair. Wait two minutes, and you may retrieve it. Don’t you dare grab me or assault me ever again. If you do, I will kill you, Lucius. I promise you that.”

He nodded, and stood slowly, then gave a small formal bow.

“I wish you good luck with Severus, Hermione. I am afraid he will not... appreciate you as I would have. You deserve much more than him in your first bedding.”

Hermione stepped outside the room and whispered a quiet "Finite Incantatem," releasing Lucius’s handcuffs just as she closed the door after her. She paused on the staircase.

She wanted to roll her eyes, but his words had come out so earnestly, it genuinely surprised her.

Lucius Malfoy was either the greatest actor of his generation, or somehow in his twisted brain, he had convinced himself that he genuinely cared for her. It made her slightly sick to her stomach.

Either way, none of it mattered now. She needed to get away from the blonde wizard as quickly as she could. She placed his wand on the bottom-stair as she had promised (he’s lucky I don’t snap it in two, she thought), and she quickly flung the Invisibility Cloak around her body and headed back towards Honeydukes.

Minutes later, as she moved along the secret corridor from the Honeydukes cellar back to Hogwarts, all Hermione could think about were Lucius’s words: “I desire you” and “Severus cannot love anyone.”

If these things were both true, then Hermione had a deep foreboding about the future.
Friday evening, Severus sat in his living room before its stone fireplace, letting the warmth seep into his bones.

He no longer spent much time in the living room. Hermione was always there if she wasn’t in her own bedroom, and he preferred to cross paths with her as infrequently as possible. Especially since their conversations tended to become arguments if they continued for too long. He hadn’t seen her since yesterday’s altercation in the Potions Classroom. He had extended his rounds late into the evening rather than face dinner with her. Not because he was afraid of course, but he found everything about their conversations so domestic and tedious.

Tonight, however, it was she who had missed their evening meal. As he hadn’t seen her all day, he knew it was unfortunately necessary to wait up for her so they could at least spend a few minutes in each others’ company to fulfill the marriage law requirement. The last thing he wanted was a Ministry Official beating down his Dungeon door because he was neglecting to speak to his wife once every cursed day.

And yet, no matter what he did there would be a Ministry Official in his rooms on Sunday anyway — to make sure the first week of their marriage had “gone to plan.” It was absolutely infuriating.

What a horrible farce, he thought, gazing into the yellow and orange flames in the grate. He had tried not to be unnecessarily cruel to the girl, tried to keep his distance, but she somehow managed to push all of his buttons. He had found her insufferable when she was a child and as a young woman he still found her rather insufferable. Incredibly intelligent, yes, but also conceited and foolish. Quick to always think she knew better than her elders. Someone who spoke before thinking and always had to do everything the hard way.

When he had imagined her marrying Lucius, he had known that her challenging personality would grate Lucius in exactly the same way, and he had known it was a disastrous match. It had occurred to him then that egocentric, dominating Lucius would be better suited to someone more docile, someone like Miss Lovegood, for example. It had never occurred to Snape to consider that he too would be better suited with having a simple, uncomplicated, docile wife, because he had never ever wanted a wife.

And he certainly did not want Hermione Granger.

Still, he could not blame her for reaching out to him. Her small hands had clutched so desperately at his robes in the vestibule they had locked themselves inside in the Room of Requirement. Her brown eyes had looked up at him, filled with tears, begging him to help her, to allay her suffering. He had seen young women in pain before, Muggle-women begging him to kill them and end their suffering at the end of a particularly brutal demonstration before the Dark Lord, but he had never performed legilimency on them, never seen their suffering from the first-person.
Witnessing in her mind what Hermione had been through at Lucius’s hands was horrific. It had bothered him. Deeply bothered him. Angered him. Somewhere deep in his bones, in his marrow. He had flipped through those images from her memory many times in the past several days, and they always made him clench his jaw and roll his tongue. He would feel his nervous system fire up and shake at the injustice of it — Lucius Malfoy doing whatever he wanted to this nineteen-year-old child.

Severus Snape hated entitled men. And he especially despised entitled men who abused their wives. He knew it was not uncommon among Pureblood men to discipline their wives. He understood tradition and did believe in the Pureblood customs, but there were some things that he knew in his very soul were wrong, and a wizard who beat a witch was no true Pureblood.

He knew that the marriage was all Dumbledore’s manipulation — bringing up childhood trauma, saving Hermione because he couldn’t “save” his mother, etc. The psychology of it all was so very, very predictable.

Still. It had worked. And Severus had allowed it to work.

Part of him had acquiesced, given up his own life so that Hermione Granger, Princess of Gryffindor could have hers. And that was what he was the angriest about of all. He’d given in. He’d married Hermione rather than condemn her to a life of torture. He hated Dumbledore for it. He hated himself for it. And he hated Hermione for it.

He had expected to die in the War. And when he hadn’t, it had been a huge relief to discover the peace of solitude. For once in his life, he had had no mission and no cause. He would retire to his quiet chambers each evening, and he would look around…realizing there would be no summons. Not from the Dark Lord. Not from Dumbledore.

It had been a remarkable transition…suddenly living his life as he chose. Quietly. Privately. Behind closed doors.

He had so wanted to rest, to live a life of no obligation, no more duty, and the past six months had shown him that there could be the dream of a better life. A simple, uncomplicated life. But now the dream was gone.

He had the next hundred years to be Mr. Hermione Granger. The ridiculousness of it.

That his entire life had come to this. A laughing-stock. The teacher forced to marry his student. There would be no hiding it come next term. Within a few months, everyone at Hogwarts would know. Rumors about the professors spread like wildfire. It was just another thing for the students to pass notes about, to whisper about him behind their hands and textbooks. Miss Weasley had already begun by calling him “lecherous.” Soon every young witch and wizard at Hogwarts would laugh and think the same. He had taken the Mark to stop such gossip, to quell the insecurities and the painful loneliness inside of him. To become feared rather than mocked. And yet despite everything he had done, he was back at the start.

Snape rose angrily and paced back and forth. He moved to a cabinet near the fireplace and opened it, pulling out a crystal tumbler and a bottle of Blishen’s Cinnamon Whisky. He filled the glass halfway and slid the bottle back onto its shelf. He took a large gulp of the amber liquid. It burned his throat, but he took another large swill.

He turned back to his favorite chair and loosened the top buttons on his tunic and unbuttoned the top button on the starched white shirt underneath. He plopped back down and sipped his alcohol broodily, his elegant fingers wrapping around the base of the glass.
And tomorrow I must consummate this horrid farce of a marriage. He pulled his lips back and wrinkled his nose in sheer disgust.

He would have to rape his former student, and then proceed to continually assault her once a week like clockwork. His stomach churned at the idea, and for a brief moment he thought he might vomit right there on the carpet, but he breathed out fiercely through flared nostrils and took another slug of whisky instead. As if all the crimes I have committed were not enough, now I must do this, too.

He leaned back in his green velvet chair and tried to recall the last time he had even been with a woman. It was not something he had ever kept track of as these...encounters had never occurred in his life with any regularity, especially in recent years.

He had been absolutely sickened by the public debauchery that had been required from time to time at the Dark Revels, and had managed to beg off active participation in any of the sexual violence or voyeuristic pleasures by painting his devotion to his Lord as that of a monk, and confessing himself as impotent. His energies were completely and fastidiously devoted to the Dark Lord’s cause, he had explained vociferously. He was not interested in sexual power, Earthly delights, or the pleasures of the flesh. His interest was only to serve the cause.

The Dark Lord had looked into Snape’s mind many times, and though Severus could occlude better than almost any other living wizard, in one way he always allowed Voldemort to see the complete truth: the only woman he could ever love had been Lily Evans.

And she was gone.

Instead, Snape had shown his devotion to the Darkness in other ways. He knew he had not been clean. He often had dreams in which the faces of Muggles that he had tortured and killed in front of the Dark Lord — for the Dark Lord — appeared to him.

He, too, knew about the necessity of Dreamless Sleep.

And yet the actual truth was that, Severus had been a relatively young, healthy male wizard. Not impotent at all. He certainly enjoyed the touch of a woman and at times the longing for it became almost physically painful — in his chest as well as his groin. But in those moments he would often remember details about Lily. The smell of her lavender shampoo. Her tinkling laugh. The feel of her soft auburn hair. They had never been together in that way. Intimately. Severus had hugged her many times, held her hand often as a young child, but less and less as they aged.

She had kissed his cheek a total of fourteen times.

He had counted.

And sometimes in the dark Severus would use his sense memory of her to satiate his baser desires, to stroke himself. And it would be enough. For awhile. It amazed him sometimes how the memory of moments shared with someone a decade earlier could still spark such immediate longing. It was odd how a person could bottle up a memory and use it for fantasy years later. It was like a potion, the way the brain stored such intimacies.

After Lily and James had become an official couple and his friendship with Lily had ended so disastrously, Severus had spent his sixth and seventh years at Hogwarts successfully scorning every female who dared to look in his direction. But, sometimes, he slipped up.

At the Yule Ball his seventh year, he remembered having too much punch and spinning Wendla Mulciber around on the dance floor in some desperate attempt to make Lily jealous. Lily had
frowned at his behavior and turned away. Afterwards, Wendla had practically thrown herself on top of him in her tiny single-room in the Slytherin Dungeon’s Girls Dormitory.

He had simply…allowed it. Two years of estrangement from Lily had left him vulnerable and he had finally made a choice, had given in to his eighteen-year-old body’s craving for soft woman.

The next morning Severus had coldly informed her that though he had enjoyed the act, he would never have any romantic attachment to her. To his surprise, Wendla had been in complete agreement and the two of them had enjoyed several months of discreet but enthusiastic carnal pleasure. Both Severus and Wendla had made sure no one found out.

Severus had enjoyed sex once he had discovered it, but it never interfered with or diminished the strength of his love for Lily, and he would often think of Lily when he was lying wrapped up in Wendla in the dark. How could it be with Lily if only she would leave James Potter and come to him? What would it be like to hold a woman he truly loved? Wendla had ended their arrangement a month before graduation when she began seriously dating a Ravenclaw who she eventually married, and Severus had been surprised at his total indifference.

That romantic indifference had continued throughout every sexual encounter he had ever had. His involvement with the Death Eaters kept him thoroughly occupied, and he had never really wanted anyone but Lily, so he simply never pursued women. And women did not often pursue him in those post-Hogwarts years either.

But when they did… if he found them physically attractive, if he was exhausted or anxious or had been dwelling on James and Lily’s nuptials, the news of Lily’s pregnancy, or the stress of Voldemort’s increasing demands, if they seemed to be looking for something temporary, and if, above all, he was confident that the witch was not in any way emotionally attached, then he would on occasion allow himself to be lead by the hand somewhere.

In those darkened rooms, he would take his pleasure from them and do his best to make sure they took theirs. He found the relief that all wizards do in a willing witch beneath them, in making a witch cry out in ecstasy. In that, he knew he was nothing special.

Afterwards he would carefully button himself back into his tunic as they slept, wrap his cloak around himself, and quietly depart. These women were intelligent enough not to owl him later.

When Lily died and he had returned to Hogwarts as a broken-hearted twenty-two year old, he was too devastated to even give in to the occasional witch’s proposition anymore. For six months after her death, his grief was such that he found he couldn’t stand to be long in the presence of any woman. Especially if they had red hair. Or green eyes.

Denied the career he wanted in Defense Against the Dark Arts, he had thrown himself into mastering Potions, spending long hours correcting ancient texts, testing and refining current recipes, and publishing new critical works.

Lily had always loved Potions.

Over the next five years he became a Master in the field — not yet out of his twenties and widely respected for his contributions — more breakthroughs than in the past hundred years combined. He was proud of his accomplishments, and he wanted to think Lily would have been proud of him as well. She had always complimented his intellect, seen the best in him. He had always wanted, still found himself wanting, to make her proud.

Unfortunately, his academic renown had attracted some ardent admiration from several intelligent
young witches, and five years of celibacy combined with five years of mourning Lily had made him angry, repressed, and…weak.

At a Potions Conference in Vienna he had surprised himself by allowing, once again, a witch to take him into her bed. A year later the Charms Mistress of Beauxbatons who had been chaperoning an exchange program had knocked on his Dungeon door late one evening. He had let her in and they had had several evenings together in the week she was at Hogwarts. But when the Beauxbatons carriage departed with her in it, Severus had again felt absolutely nothing.

He had allowed her to spend a few more nights with him over the course of the next couple years, whenever he was in France or she in Scotland. But when he got the startling impression she was developing feelings for him, Severus had immediately ended it. The French witch had hissed that he was “pisse-froid.”

And he was. But it was her mistake if she had believed otherwise. He had never misled any woman.

After that debacle, he had once again focused all his energy on his research and teaching work, on serving The Order of the Phoenix, trying to redeem himself in the eyes of Lily’s imagined ghost, to make something of his wretched life.

When Harry Potter had arrived at Hogwarts a year later, Severus Snape had already prepared himself thoroughly for the difficult road he knew lay ahead. By that point he had no time for distractions of the flesh anymore, even intermittent ones.

A loud snap from a log in the fireplace brought him back to the present.

Severus realized, as he sipped his Blishen’s in his chair, that the truth was he hadn’t been with a woman in over two years.

Because two years ago, he had permitted Narcissa Malfoy to bed him.

Of all his sexual experiences, this was the only one he could classify as a proper mistake. It had not been his desire, or his doing. He had always admired her regal, icy beauty and her intelligence. She had been desired by almost every Slytherin male at Hogwarts, but Lucius had quickly staked his claim. Next to the warm sunshine that was Lily, Severus had found Narcissa imperious and vain. In their school days, they had never been more than acquaintances, really.

He had seen her character grow for the better after the First Wizarding War, as his own had. He could see how much Lucius’s actions caused her pain, and how much she desperately cared for their son Draco. It was she who had asked him to be Draco’s godfather. Her maternal care reminded him of the way Lily had given everything for Harry, and he could certainly recognize Narcissa’s despairing loneliness after her separation from Lucius.

Severus knew Loneliness as if it were his own patronus.

At one Dark Revel, held in the Malfoy Manor two years ago, Severus had wandered upstairs to get away from the screams of the Muggle prisoners in the ballroom below. Lucius had been away on a mission to kill several Aurors and the rest of the Death Eaters were busy attending the feast in the Dining Hall, participating in the public torture in the ballroom, or otherwise engaged in all manner of degrading acts down in the Manor’s Dungeons.

Severus had walked along the upstairs long gallery, admiring the portraits of the Malfoy and Black families. He could not consider himself a true connoisseur of oil painting, but he could appreciate what was well and finely-done. Narcissa had appeared behind him, asked to speak with him, and
ushered him into a guest bedroom.

“We don’t have much time,” she had whispered as she warded the door and begun to undress herself in the dark room. Severus had merely stood and watched her, shocked. He had felt no desire for her. He had made no move to touch her. And she had never so much as flirted with him before. He watched as if he were seeing a piece of theatre, a scene that was happening to someone else.

It was all so absurd to be real, but at that point he was so, so tired. He never slept soundly anymore. His skin had gotten sallow and the circles under his eyes were now ever-present. Keeping Potter alive, keeping Dumbledore pleased, keeping Voldemort confident in his loyalty. All he did was what others wanted of him. It was all he was good for now.

Divested of clothes, Narcissa had walked up to him completely and unapologetically nude and wrapped her arms around his neck. She had looked him straight into the eye and begged him. “Please, Severus. I need this. I need…something.”

She had kissed him. Passionately. On the lips. Severus had barely responded to her touch. Was this also what I must do?

He had never lain with a married woman. It offended his code of honor. It was wrong. Lucius was, at least to the other Death-Eaters, one of his closest friends. And though Narcissa and Lucius had been separated, at least in terms of their sleeping arrangements, for several years, they were still technically married. Severus had tried to protest, push her away, explain why he couldn’t do what she wanted. But Narcissa Black had always gotten what she wanted, even as a girl. And Severus hated himself just enough to do this with her.

Somehow, several minutes later, Severus had found himself lying on his back on the guest bed, partially unclothed, Narcissa moving atop him. He had allowed her to take what she needed and he had closed his eyes and given in to the pleasure.

When all was finished, Narcissa had cried quietly next to him. “I’m sorry. It’s been impossible to bear, Severus.”

Severus had no words of comfort for her. Yet he knew exactly what she was feeling. Within minutes, she had dressed and was back downstairs waiting with a goblet of wine to greet her husband as he returned from the successful battle. The perfect hostess. She and Severus had never spoken or even alluded to that evening.

Months later, when Narcissa had come to him and begged him to make the Unbreakable Vow to protect Draco, Severus had finally understood just what the point of that evening had been. Narcissa was a true Slytherin. She would have made an excellent spy for Dumbledore.

Severus counted in his head. Six.

He had been intimate with six witches.

Six witches, and not one of them named Lily Evans.

They had each mattered so little to him, he realized this was the first time he had ever actually bothered to review them. In fact, he was surprised he hadn’t forgotten about one or two of them entirely.

And now, Severus scowled, against his will, there would be a seventh. Hermione Granger.

He lifted his crystal tumbler and smashed it into the fireplace.
Hermione reached Snape’s Dungeon door and whispered “*Lingua serpens*” as she tucked the Invisibility Cloak underneath her regular robes.

The door swung open into the stone foyer. She stepped in and moved along the hallway. As she passed along the archway on the left-hand side she could see into the large living room; Snape was seated in his chair before the lit fireplace on the far side, turned away from her.

She debated whether to continue straight ahead to her room or not. *We do have to converse…*, she thought, though her mind was still racing from her run-in with Lucius. She wasn’t sure how exactly to reveal this information to Snape.

She set the Invisibility Cloak on the floor of the hallway, tucked out of view, and stepped down into the living room. She glanced up at the aquarium window. Most of the fish were calmly floating or looked asleep, huddled near the kelp and rocks. The serene view did not match how she felt inside. Her guts were churning.

She cleared her throat. “Good evening,” she began, lamely. “How was your day?”

Snape barely lifted his head and did not turn around.

“Where have you been?” he muttered.

“I…I brought you something.”

She pulled out the box from her pocket and disenchanted it until it grew to its full size. She clapsed it in both hands and took a few steps towards him.

He continued to stare into the fireplace. She walked across the room and set the box down. It was wrapped elegantly with a silver and blue bow.

Snape eyed it cautiously. His expression betraying nothing.

“I wanted to get you a wedding present. To thank you…for…um, marrying me. Anyway. It’s the least I could do.”

She tried her best to smile at him, but she was nervous, quivering slightly. Snape lifted an eyebrow. He looked vaguely annoyed. Nonetheless, he reached for the box with one hand and undid the ribbon between two of his tapered fingers, slowly, then lifted the top of the box.

Hermione eyed him eagerly, trying to gauge a response as he lifted the gleaming silver cauldron out of its tissue paper. *Will he like it?* She searched his face for a response.

“I know silver’s melting point is a bit lower than copper’s and so it may not be as useful for certain more advanced potions with complex thermodynamics, but I thought it was…beautiful. And anyway, I heard you were down one cauldron thanks to young Mr. Chiltern.”

She smirked up at him, but he ignored her attempt at a jape.

Snape turned the silver cauldron in his hands. It truly was beautiful. Pounded and polished smooth, and rather expensive. He sighed when he saw on the bottom she had had something engraved. He looked more closely,
“To S.S. Always, H.G.”

Oh, God.

He sighed again loudly as he stood. Hermione bit her lower lip.

“Do you…not like it?”

“It is a beautiful piece, Miss Granger, thank you.”

“Hermione. Severus, please.”

Snape set the cauldron down on the end table.

“Yes, Hermione, of course. Not my student anymore, are you? No. Just my former student. We did sign a contract, after all,” he snapped, sarcastically.

Snape shifted his weight and gave a small stumble. Hermione tilted her head. Was he…but, no, he couldn’t be. Was Snape drunk?? He certainly seemed less in control of his faculties than usual.

Snape steadied himself and leaned forward, looming over her, his black eyes narrowing.

“It was a mistake to go to Hogsmeade. You could have endangered yourself.”

Hermione took a deep breath. There was no way she could explain her encounter with Lucius, not when Snape was half-intoxicated. He was unpredictable enough when he was sober! Did he regularly drink? It had never occurred to her that her private, steadfastly academic Potions Master could have a secret imbibing habit. Suddenly, she felt a bit uncomfortable. But it was too late to recede.

“I-I took the tunnel from the third-floor, and I wore Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. I was cautious.”

“His Invisibility Cloak? And how long have you had that?”

“Harry gave it to me as a wedding gift. He thought it might have…helped me at Malfoy Manor.”

“And you thought you would need it to sneak off, out of my sight?”

“No. I just…it made me feel more comfortable. I was trying to be cautious!”

“You should not have gone. Especially not to buy me a trinket. You life is worth much more than this.”

“A trinket?! That cost me half my savings!”

“I will reimburse you, and will provide you with all the money you require. A Pureblood wife is always given an allowance. I will owl Gringotts tomorrow.”

“That’s not the point. I don’t care about the money. I wanted to make a gesture, Severus. I was trying to do something nice.”

“Miss Granger—“

“‘Hermione!’ For Merlin’s sake! If you call me ’Miss Granger’ one more time I will fetch our contract and read it to you line-by-bloody-line!”
“Hermione, don’t you see that our sham of a marriage cannot be remedied by presents? Or are you so naïve you do not realise the seriousness of this situation?”

“Of course I realise it! I just don’t want you to hate me!”

Snape turned and took a step towards the fire. He put one hand on the mantel, looking deeply into the flames. Behind him, Hermione lowered her gaze to the floor. What on earth could she do? He was on an island, somewhere out to sea, far away from her. How could she ever hope to reach him?

“I do not…hate you, Hermione. I hate this situation. Surely it is not what you would have wanted for yourself, either?”

Hermione nodded in agreement. She let his words sink in for a few moments. It was true. She had to admit, she would never have wanted to marry Severus Snape if the alternative had not been Lucius Malfoy.

“No, I would not have wanted this,” she admitted, softly.

Severus lowered his head even more. There it was. The clear confirmation. She did not want him, just as he did not want her. He would be forcing himself upon her tomorrow after all; he felt the sickness rise in his stomach again.

He pushed it back down, straightened and turned back to face her. He inhaled and tried to compose himself. He pulled his tunic down, straightening it, then bowed slightly, formally.

“Thank you for the gift. As a Pureblood husband, I respect the care and duty a wife shows. However, I request you obey my instruction to keep to the Hogwarts grounds.”

“But—“

Snape raised an eyebrow, threateningly.

“Alright, I won’t go back to Hogsmeade. For now.”

Snape nodded, then without another word blew past her. He reached his bedroom and shut the door. Slam!

Hermione was left all alone in the silence of the living room. The silver cauldron left unclaimed on the end table.

So much for winning him over, she thought. She moved a hand to her neck and massaged it gently. Every time they spoke she always felt like a ball of stress afterwards. His way of treating her was so…what was the word?… inauthentic.

It’s like he only has two modes, she thought. He can treat me as his insufferable pupil, or he can treat me the way he imagines some fancy Pureblood husband treats his lady-wife. But why can’t he just drop all pretense, and try to relate to me wizard-to-witch?

Hermione was frustrated at how good Severus Snape was at hiding who he really was. She felt like he was besting her, and she had only just begun Operation: Win Severus Snape Over. She moved over to the fireplace and with a wave of her hand stifled the flames. She dimmed the lights of the room and stared into the Black Lake’s waters, pensively.

For all his heroic War service, Lord Severus Snape is a coward, she realised. I may have married
the one wizard pathologically incapable of authentic human interaction with me.

She turned and, scooping up the Invisibility Cloak and saying a brief goodnight to the fish, she headed towards her own room.

So much for being able to tell him about her encounter with Lucius. She felt let down by him, as both her former teacher and her husband. For all his cruelty and his airs and his rigid formality, he was letting her down.

She had wanted to tell him all about Lucius. She had wanted to hear his thoughts on the situation, to get some advice and affirmation that she had handled him correctly. But Snape had no interest whatsoever in her life. He had already made it clear — what she did with her time was of little interest to him. What had he said? She could floo wherever during the daytime. He didn’t care as long as they slept under the same roof and spoke for 15-minutes a day.

Hermione sat on her bed and tried not to cry.

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Inside his master bathroom, Severus washed his face and hands. His eyes had a glassy, bleary quality that always appeared when he overdid the Blishen’s. He needed to rest, but he couldn’t help but be tortured at Hermione’s words: “I would not have wanted this.”

Of COURSE she would not have wanted this — what young girl would want to marry her teacher? Unless it was one of those Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff ninnies who had had stupid crushes on him in the past. But even those girls, when pressed, would likely have admitted that they would rather die than marry a man like their Potions Professor. A girlhood crush was one thing — the reality of marrying someone twenty years older was something else!

He picked up a bar of soap and lathered his hands. As he pulled back his sleeves he caught sight of his Death-Eater tattoo — the snake and the skull. He lifted his forearm to examine it closer to the light.

Hermione would probably feel repulsed when she saw it. Not only was the image itself frightening, but Lucius Malfoy, of course, had the exact same tattoo in the exact same place. How could it be anything but triggering for her?

How could she not despise him?

She was buying him gifts and trying to turn him into some storybook lover, but he would never be able to live up to that. He would not be able to be her fairytale prince. Or whatever nonsensical fantasy most young girls had. He would not be able to provide her with romance. Snape looked at his expression in the mirror. Pale skin, a wrinkled forehead, dark eyes, a too-prominent nose, and thin lips reflected back at him. As a young girl she had had a crush on Gilderoy Lockhart. If that was her idea of a Prince Charming, how could she not be anything but sickened by the idea of his face pressed anywhere near her own?

And how dare she expect him to fulfill the ‘Prince Charming’ role? He had never promised anyone that. It was not his task to make the loss of her virginity something special.

Snape groaned aloud and gripped the sides of the porcelain sink, tilting his head down in frustration. He knew he could not prevent the bedding tomorrow, but at least there was one thing he could do.

He could inflict as little of himself upon her as possible. Better to maintain distance than to make her suffer. He would keep tomorrow night as calm and perfunctory as possible.
And he would certainly lay off the Blishen’s.

With that in mind, Severus continued to prepare for bed.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Cannot believe I have crossed 100,000 words. Thank you again for the kudos and comments! Apologies for the delay in updating.

Hermione awoke the next morning with a feeling of dread in her stomach.

Today was the day.

This was the last day she would wake up a virgin.

She brushed her teeth and washed her face, aware that she was being absurd to focus so much on the consummation that she and Snape would have to go through in the evening, but it invaded her thoughts at least once every five minutes. There was no way to be blasé about it.

Snape was already gone for the day when she left the Dungeons, and she thought it probably for the best that they didn’t cross paths in the morning. She headed to McGonagall’s office and tried to busy herself in her teaching assistant duties. McGonagall would disappear for an hour to teach a class and then reappear, and Hermione was tempted to broach the subject with the older witch, but ultimately she was too embarrassed.

Besides, I don’t want it to get back to Severus, she thought, remembering how angry he had been at finding she had spoken to Ginny about him. How dark and disappointed his expression was when he had glowered at her in the cold, empty classroom near Dumbledore’s office, and accused her of betraying his trust and being nothing but a shameless gossip.

She truly wanted to keep their relationship private and respect his wishes.... Still, every inch of her wanted to confess her nerves to Minerva or run to Ginny for last-minute advice. But really, how could they help her?

She knew the mechanics; she understood biology. It was the emotional and intimate aspects that made her anxious. She knew some witches treated sex as if it were no big deal, but Hermione knew the truth: it was a big deal!

She was going to allow Snape to see her naked, to be inside of her. How could it not be a big deal? Even if he didn’t love her, these were “firsts” for her, and it meant something to her.

She knew that it might not be particularly “modern” of her, but she felt that sex was an extremely big step, and she had always imagined exploring her sexuality only in the context of a long-term romantic relationship. The idea of “casual sex” was an oxymoron as far as she was concerned, and although she didn’t want to be a judgmental prude, she had always harbored silent judgments on the Gryffindor girls who had slept around. There was a girl who had graduated a couple years ago named Ursula Reinegar, who, it was rumored, had slept with four different boys from various houses in her last year at Hogwarts, some sort of attempt to “claim them all” before graduating.

Hermione knew it was wrong to judge, and she had simply smiled and nodded when that piece of gossip had reached her ears, but she couldn’t help herself. To have been with four different wizards
by the age of seventeen seemed incredibly shocking to her.

What was the point, really? She had loved Ron with her entire heart and still hadn’t quite reached the point in which they were comfortable exploring their intimacy beyond touching one another. She couldn’t imagine having sex with Ron and then three other wizards in quick succession. It did feel rather shocking.

But her knowledge of teenage romances were clearly irrelevant.

Here she was with Snape. An adult male wizard.

He was obviously not the romantic lover of her fantasies. But, he was a good man and honorable, and she felt like she could trust him. If she communicated to him her anxieties, she felt like he would at least pretend to listen and attempt to take them into account. He’s aloof, but deep down, he isn’t a total monster, right? Maybe he had some sort of code when it came to sex that he had developed from other witches. Obviously, he wasn’t a virgin.

And his experience didn’t matter that much, since they were going to have sex with each other. Snape’s past conquests wouldn’t be in the room, commenting. It was between herself and Snape.

Sex was a private thing. She really believed that. People could whisper about it and giggle about it and declaim platitudes about it. But, ultimately, it was something that happened between two people. And it was not the same between A and B as it was between A and C. It was personal to each couple. And how two people found their way to one another in the dark could never be truly understood by anyone else. Nor should it. She didn’t want to air her dirty laundry, but she desperately wanted to find a way to make things work in the bedroom between her and Severus, and she was tempted to ask Ginny about it. For both of our sakes.

It wasn’t that she desired Snape, or was even particularly attracted to him. He was…her professor. It was an extremely weird situation. She owned that. But she was committed to making this marriage work, even if they were not physically compatible at first. Compatibility can come with time, she thought.

She may not have desired him, but, she had to admit, there was no reason on her part as to why they couldn’t eventually be physically compatible. Severus wasn’t ugly, and she had always found the mean remarks of her peers regarding his features to be overly-exaggerated.

She thought he had a noble, regal bearing. Yes, his brow was strong and his nose was rather prominent, and he could do with a tad more hygiene, but he reminded her of the statues of Roman emperors that she had seen at the Tate. His features were sturdy and masculine, and that was enough for her.

It was true she had developed a serious crush on Gilderoy Lockhart in her younger years, but in general, she had never been much swayed by the traditionally attractive male form. She didn’t really like a plucked and prettified “Adonis”-type.

Character attracted her. And if Snape had a slightly better personality, she imagined it would be possible to make things work with him. He did have at least character.

Ronald Weasley had been the love of her young life, and he had been a relatively skinny, short, ginger boy. She had seen who he was on the inside, and fallen in love with him completely. His fabulous character had overwhelmed her. His devotion, loyalty, bravery, and sweet kindness towards her had made him 100x more attractive, and allowed her to fall head-over-heels in love for the first time.
And once in love, she had found that his features had become absolutely adorable and intoxicating. She didn’t need some sort of classically-handsome, six-foot-two ‘pretty boy.’ Ron had been more than enough to enflame her physical desires, and so too Snape was, physically, more than enough for her. She didn’t find him lacking. He was tall and trim and elegant, and those qualities were enough to arouse her interest.

And she did admire him, and think he was clever and brave. It was just the suddenness of their change in relationship that made her twitch with anxiety. It was simply too SOON. How did he expect her to act in his bed tonight?

How could she kiss him and behave with Severus Snape the way she had with Ron?!? When there was no real feeling between them? When he clearly found her physically repellant and personally annoying?

Hermione sat at her table in McGonagall’s office and tried to focus on her paperwork over and over again, but found herself overcome with these anxieties. She checked the clock. It was 3 o’clock in the afternoon. Just a few more hours until she had to return to the Dungeons.

She got up and walked over to a side table that had a large pitcher of water and some glasses and poured herself a cup.

No, it really wasn’t Snape’s body she found objectionable. Though it was almost always hidden in a tightly buttoned tunic and billowing black robes, she could tell he was tall and strong. Perhaps not beefy or built, but a completely acceptable figure of a man, and there was nothing about his physical person that turned her off particularly, except for the fact that his body language was so closed-off. True, he didn’t have the sensual allure of Lucius Malfoy, or the sweet-faced glow that Ron had, but she was surprised to admit to herself that she could see herself with him. His body was not frightening or repugnant to her. It was a nice, masculine form. That wasn’t the issue.

She downed the glass of water and replaced it, moving back to her desk.

No, she thought, as she sat down, the issue is he hates me. She felt like Snape was approaching their evening together like a schoolboy dragging his feet to an unwanted lesson, and it made her feel terrible.

She had imagined having sex so many times in the past few years, and even when she had considered that it might not be with Ron, she had always assumed that the man who bedded her for the first time would at least desire her.

She had had friends among the older Gryffindor girls who had admitted they had had sex and lost their virginities with boys they barely knew after the Yule Ball, and though these witches hadn’t been “in love” with these wizards, they had at least had a fairly enjoyable experience, knowing that the young wizards had been excited and loving and desirous towards them and treated them with respect.

Hermione had disapproved of the girls’ choice at the time, but now she understood how empowering it could be to choose when and with whom you first had sex. It enraged her that that choice had been stolen from her. You're pouting, Hermione, she told herself.

She sat back in her chair and pressed a hand into her cheek. What else can I do, really?

She was simply at a disadvantage. She still felt like such a silly girl when it came to sex. And Snape was clearly no silly boy.
He was an adult male wizard who had made it perfectly clear that she aroused no excitement in him. He always appeared either bored or angry in her presence. He didn’t love her. (That was obvious to anyone with eyes.) And he had even said he didn’t desire her physically. She remembered his “I see no difference” comment back when she had been a child. It was clear he had never found her remotely physically pleasing, even back then.

So, how on earth could she please him now as an adult?? She knew how Viktor had liked to be kissed, and she knew what Ron had enjoyed. As they had become more comfortable with one another, Ron had helped her move her hand over him in a few stolen evenings in the tent when Harry had been away, and had taught her the best way to stroke him until he came undone, but she couldn’t exactly claim her kissing and petting skills were so advanced that they would melt Snape’s heart. Besides, Snape might not even like what Ron liked.

She wished more than anything that she would be going to bed with Ron tonight and not Snape. But there was nothing she could do but move forward and try to make it work as best she could with Severus.

*God, just don’t be cruel; don’t treat me with disgust,* she silently prayed. After the abuse from Malfoy, she wasn’t sure how much more her heart could take.

Hermione looked at the silver wedding band on her left finger. It had been glowing slightly all day, almost as if it were counting down to their required consummation. *Disgusting Ministry,* she thought.

She sighed, and turned her attention back to work.

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Several hours later, Snape found himself pacing again in his bedroom.

He had arrived back at his rooms earlier than usual after finishing his last class of the day, and gotten his rounds covered for the evening.

He’d had an extremely difficult day. Concentration had been all but impossible and there were at least two occasions during the day when he thought he might be physically sick at what he would have to perpetrate against his former student this evening.

The silver band on his left hand had been glowing. He knew what it meant. The consummation could be put off no longer. If they did not go through with it, they could wake up as Squibs tomorrow, and the idea was not remotely amusing.

The marriage had to be finalized this evening with a physical consummation, and he was trying to formulate a plan for how to best get through it.

He knew Hermione was in her own bedroom. Neither of them had emerged for supper.

*Perhaps it was best to avoid small-talk,* he thought. *Avoid what is not necessary.*

He sat on his bed and put his head in his hands. *Merlin, I don’t want to do this. I would rather kill Muggles for the Dark Lord again than assault this girl. Lily would think me a monster. How can I do this?*

He rose and entered his bathroom, turning the shower on with a flick of his hand. *I can at least clean my person before forcing it upon her,* he thought angrily.

He stepped inside the warm spray and pressed his hand to his forehead.
How on earth was he going to perpetuate this…this unwanted act?

****

In her bathroom, Hermione sat in her large clawfoot bathtub.

She had resolved herself to the evening, and decided that the best way forward was to try to present herself to Snape in as pleasing a manner as possible.

She had left McGonagall’s office early and gone back to the Dungeons to prepare. She had taken off her clothes and looked at her body in the full-length mirror. Naked.

It was something she did very rarely, as she was always the harshest critic of her own naked form. Her breasts were nicely sized and round and she had a slim, narrow waist. But she always felt her hips and thighs were a bit too large, and there was a tiny bit of cellulite on her butt and on the side of her hips that she felt she could never get rid of. She thought it was a little bit gross. At least I don’t have any serious body acne, she thought, with a small smile.

Her skin was an ivory and pink shade. Not sallow and sickly like Snape’s paleness, but a warm peaches-and-cream pallor that she did think was generally quite nice. And other than the terrible scars on her arms, her body was not unduly marked. Her skin was so pale that her blue veins were clearly visible around her breasts and along her forearms and wrists, but otherwise her pale skin seemed relatively unblemished and pleasing. There was a softness to her skin, and she swallowed at the idea that Snape’s hands would be touching it soon.

Is this a body Snape will want?, she wondered, anxiously.

She had sighed and then slipped into the bathroom and filled the tub.

Now, she sat in the bubbles, scrubbing her skin and checking her body over again and again. Each mole, scar, pimple, freckle, and tiny indentation stood out to her and made her feel like some type of ogre. She wished she could fix all of it, but Snape would probably sense her attempt at glamours, and anyway, she was exhausted from all the time spent hiding her body away. She didn’t want to hide anymore. But… she certainly didn’t want him to find her physically distasteful.

She ran the loofah even harder over her skin, and then picked up her razor and began to shave her legs.

She knew she was being ridiculous, but at least she could somewhat control how she looked when he first saw her. She wanted to appear attractive— young and fresh and…I don’t-know, she thought, all those things women who are virgins are supposed to be. Pretty and alluring, I guess.

She stopped the razor as she approached the upper inside of her thigh. Oh God, should I shave my…?

Hermione had not really considered grooming preferences before. Ron had seemed to have no preference and had never expressed a preference. And he had made her feel so unconditionally loved that she had never even thought about trimming or shaving her more intimate areas. And anyway, he’d only touched her beneath her robes, never actually seen her down there. She had been too shy for that. And Ron had seemed to enjoy what he had touched.

But…would Snape find her pubic hair unattractive? Maybe this was yet another Pureblood custom she didn’t know about? She moved the razor lightly around her bikini line cleaning things up, but hesitated as she got closer. No, I’m not doing that, she thought. I am not going to make myself look
like a little girl, and if Snape is uncomfortable with my pubic hair, he can damn well tell me himself!

She set the razor down and rose from the bath. She wrapped a towel around herself, then moved back to mirror. She looked and felt clean and crisp, though her eyes could not help but be drawn to her scars. The twin ‘MUDBLOOD’ and ‘WHORE’ carvings. Still red and angry. Still so prominent.

They look awful, she sighed. No matter what I do with my life, I will always have these markings, and Snape will always have to see them. Hermione felt like she had to apologize to her husband.

“Sorry your wife’s body is so marred.”

She eyed the floor. It was an awful thought.

Marked as a ‘whore,’ and here I am a virgin on her wedding night!, Hermione thought, bitterly. Bellatrix had taken so much from her. Wherever she was on the Continent, Hermione hoped the Dark Witch was suffering.

Nothing else I can do.

She finished drying herself with the towel and then moved into her bedroom to change.

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Severus Snape sat on his bed and eyed the green Virility potion in his hand warily.

He had never had to take a potion to ‘perform’ before, but he was worried, and had quickly brewed it in his Potions Storeroom along with a few other potions earlier in the afternoon.

If he couldn’t perform, he would be endangering Hermione, as well as himself. Not to mention the sheer embarrassment. His disgust at having to bed the poor girl against her will had left him feeling completely deflated.

No, better to play it safe, he thought. He tossed the potion down his throat, and sat, waiting for its effects to take hold.

****

Hermione perched nervously in a pale pink nightgown on the edge of her bed.

She wasn’t sure whether she should leave the room and go to Snape’s, but it was past eight o’clock now, and she had heard him come home over an hour ago…

She hadn’t been sure what to wear, but the pale pink nightgown felt like a good middle-ground. Not like some sort of tacky lingerie, yet perhaps just sexy enough so Snape would appreciate the effort. She had rubbed some lotion onto her neck and arms, and pulled one sleeve down over her shoulder. She did want to please him, and this was her best attempt at appearing sexy.

She was nervous about the physical aspect of their joining as well, but she had taught herself the wandless lubrication charm that Snape had sent her a couple week’s ago, and after casting it she felt a sticky wetness between her legs. She had reached down to test it with her fingers — it was certainly providing more wetness than she had ever naturally felt herself produce before, and it was gathered all along her intimate areas, so she assumed that would make things easier.

She had read far too many biological manuals, however, and she knew that to prepare herself for sex, it was more than simply making sure her private parts were coated in lubricant. She needed to use her
mind, to *imagine* things to get herself in the mood. She knew that arousal would elongate her vaginal canal and continue to lubricate herself internally, making the whole thing easier, so she was trying her best to become mentally engaged.

The problem was that such a task seemed so painfully academic and unsexy. She leaned back on her bed and tried to think sexy-thoughts. Ron’s sweet moans in her ear and the memory of his lips on her neck. "I want you so much," Ron used to whisper to her over and over again. Hermione shifted and pressed her legs together. She had loved that -- Ron's sweet insistence that she was desirable.

She kept trying to focus, but her nerves were cutting through the reverie, and she was having a hard time. Images of Lucius would pop up, or she would suddenly imagine herself holding Ron's corpse in her arms and feel the tightness return to her chest. She switched her mind to thoughts of Severus. What was physically desirable about him? *Hmmm...his...height? His height is attractive,* she thought, struggling.

She continued to lay there, trying to concentrate, but she wasn’t getting very far in terms of conjuring erotic fantasies. Fifteen more minutes passed, and Hermione had heard nothing from the other side of the Dungeons and had done as much as she could to arouse herself.

*Maybe I’m supposed to go to his bedroom?*

She got up and moved to the door, but just as she reached it, she heard a loud *rap* upon it.

She sucked in a breath, and opened the door with a slow *creak*.

Snape stood before her.

He was dressed as he usually was in his long, black, buttoned-up tunic and black pants. The white collar of his undershirt barely poking through the top.

Suddenly, Hermione felt under-dressed in her nightdress. She had chosen it thinking he might find it attractive as she had always felt comfortable in it, but now she felt like she was at the disadvantage. *Should I have stayed in my everyday clothes too?,* she wondered.

Snape’s expression looked dreadful. He barely made eye contact with her as his obsidian gaze swept the room.

“May I?” he requested.

“Of course.”

She pulled the door wide and stepped back. Snape entered and moved to her side table, setting two Potions down. He turned back to her and held one out. It had a pink color and was in a small, clear test-tube.

“When you were betrothed to Lucius, we discussed pregnancy prevention. Take this.”

Hermione nodded. She had been concerned about avoiding pregnancy, but as Snape had seemed extremely against the idea, she had assumed he would provide the means.

Nonetheless, she was grateful.

“Thank you.”

She reached out and took the Potion and drank its contents down. It was a sickly sweet taste.
She cleared her throat.

“I wanted to ask…we had also discussed Lucius’s infidelity and…possible STI’s…”

Hermione could feel her cheeks grow pink, but she pressed ahead.

“I just…I mean, seeing as I haven’t done this and you have…I just wanted to make sure there was no possibility of…”

Severus lifted a hand to stop her.

“The potion also wards against sexually transmitted diseases.”

“Oh.”

Hermione breathed out slight in relief.

“Though I have never contracted, nor tested positive for such an infection.”

“Oh!”

Hermione breathed out another relieved sigh.

As curious as she was about Snape’s former intimacies, she knew she couldn’t expect him to reveal everything to her. Nonetheless, her physical health was deeply important to her, and she had been wondering if Snape was ‘clean.’ She didn’t have proof, but she did trust him, and it was a weight off her shoulders that there would be no risk of any type of infection from their coupling.

Snape moved to sit on her bed, keeping a foot between them.

The two of them sat side-by-side for a full minute.

Neither moving.

Neither speaking.

Lord and Lady Snape.
“I want to be clear, this is simply a duty,” Snape intoned, clearing his throat.

Hermione sat on her bed a foot away from him, her hands in her lap, her eyes downcast.

“Oh…um, yes. I understand,” she murmured softly.

“I don’t intend to add to your discomfort or take advantage of the situation.”

Snape glanced sideways at her. She looked so painfully young in her pale pink nightgown. He didn’t want her to think he would pounce on her like some sort of animal, some sort of creepy lecher.

It was a *consummation*, merely. Required by law. Required by the damnable arranged marriage. A *forced* marriage. A marriage that Hermione herself, and Dumbledore, had pressed him into! It obviously wasn’t *making love*. It wasn’t even *fucking*.

But he hoped she didn’t think he would take the opportunity to frighten her or attack her. He hoped she could remain calm as they did what was required. If she began to weep or beg him to hold off he was certain he couldn’t proceed, Virility potion or no. He was terrified she would become completely hysterical.

He eyed her, cautiously. She wasn’t crying. That was at least moderately encouraging. Hermione was simply looking downwards, not making eye contact. Obviously disappointed and dreading it, but no, not hysterical.

“Thank you,” she replied, awkwardly.

Hermione couldn’t bring her eyes up to meet his.

It was so obvious that he didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to touch her. Reluctant schoolboy had been the right metaphor. *He thinks I’m a chore*, she admitted, with a sigh.

She had been a fool if she had thought a nice bath and a soft, shimmery nightgown would be enough to entice him. *He just doesn’t find you attractive*, she thought. She exhaled, lost. What could she do to make this easier between them?

Before she could come up with an idea, Snape stood abruptly and moved back to the side table again, picking up the second potion vial.

“I wish you to be as comfortable as possible,” he declared.

He sat on the bed again stiffly and lifted the vial to her, his dark eyes revealing nothing. Hermione glanced up at it.

“This is a very mild lust potion. You may wish to take it. You have suffered a great deal of trauma, and this will assist your body in accepting the situation.”

Hermione looked at the bright red liquid in the vial with its tiny gold flecks.

She had never imagined that she would be under the influence of a *drug* the first time she experienced sexual intercourse. Why would Snape *suggest* such a thing???

Did he want her to be drugged out of her mind, responding like some sort of pornographic performer
to his every touch? Was he concerned that she wouldn’t respond to him in the manner in which he would prefer?

“Are you…are you taking it?” she asked, looking up at him squarely.

Snape straightened his spine. The girl was being absurd.

“Of course not! I intend to be fully in control of my actions.”

“Well, then, I won’t take it either.”

“Are you certain?”

Hermione took a deep breath.

“I don’t want to be under any kind of magical influence. I don’t want the experience to be dulled or unduly heightened. Especially my first time. I guess I’d just rather we do it…naturally.”

Snape bristled at her language.

There was nothing ‘natural’ about this bedding. He was sitting on her bed, hard as a rock between his thighs due to the damnably efficacious Virility potion, and struggling to find a manner in which to proceed with the consummation of their marriage that did not involve permanently damaging Hermione’s psyche.

He sighed.

“Very well.”

Snape placed the potion back on the bedside table and returned to the bed. Hermione watched his response closely. She realized that reminding him that this was her “first time” had probably been a mistake.

He was sitting a foot away again. His upper body was leaning forward, his stomach slightly collapsed in on itself. His hands were resting stiffly on his upper thighs, and he was staring at the wall straight ahead.

He didn’t look like he was going to take the initiative. Still, Hermione waited. Please, please help me, she thought.

The two of them sat in silence next to one another for a few more seconds. I can’t take this, she thought. She rubbed her sweaty palms against her nightgown. The nervous energy in the room was becoming unbearable. Hermione cleared her throat.

“Perhaps I could…,” Hermione began, awkwardly.

She glanced over at Snape. He was still staring straight ahead at the wall. His eyes were unfocused and he was lost in his own thoughts. He looked tortured. And more than the usual “tortured Snape” mien. Hermione flexed her toes into the carpet threads, nervously. What to do?

Should I try to kiss him? She had the sense that Snape wasn’t going to initiate anything, and she knew they had to begin in some capacity. If they could kiss and begin to touch one another it was possible that things could just progress naturally from there. She cleared her throat with a nervous “ahem.”

Slowly, she lifted her right hand and brought it to Snape’s jaw.
She touched the right-side of his face, lightly, just below his lips. He started, trembling slightly, but
did not pull away. It was an intimate touch, and yet Hermione was surprised that it didn’t feel as
awkward as she had imagined. His skin didn’t have any stubble. It had recently been shaved, and his
skin was rather soft beneath her fingertips. She felt he was shaking a bit, though it could be her
imagination. Wow! I’m touching Snape’s face! she thought. He really did have such a "man’s" face.
His sturdy, defined jaw was so different from Ron’s roundness.

Is he as nervous as I am?, she wondered. She turned his head towards her own a few inches at a
time. His dark eyes narrowed a bit and flashed a warning of suspicion as they met her own
chocolate-colored irises, but he did not pull his head away.

Emboldened, Hermione slowly…slowly…began to move her lips to his, scooting her hips towards
him to close some of the distance and leaning her upper body closer and closer…and closer…
Kissing was something she knew she could do. Knew she had some skills at.

As her face came within a few inches of his, she closed her eyes. Here goes, she thought. I’m going
to kiss Snape! Please, let this be fine. She pressed her lips outwards slightly, anticipating the contact.

Suddenly, she felt Snape’s jaw jerk away from her hand at the last second. She had only been a few
millimeters from his lips. She dropped her hand, surprised and embarrassed, and opened her eyes.
Snape had practically jumped another foot away from her and was staring at her in utter shock from
the corner of the bedspread.

“I—I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I just thought…you would want…”

“Your thinking was incorrect!” he chastised.

Snape pulled his tunic down and stiffened his spine. He didn’t need her taking pity on him, or trying
to pretend like there was anything normal about this horrific consummation.

“We are not required to kiss!”

Hermione bit her lower lip and stared back down into her lap, deflated once more. I don’t get it, she
thought. He doesn’t even want us to kiss?!!

“I’m just trying to start!” she exclaimed. He was putting all of this on her, when he hadn’t done a
damn thing to even begin. “I don’t know what you want!”

Snape leaned forward on his knees and put his face in his hands. Immediately, she felt guilty. It was
clear he was having a hard time with this situation as well. Still, she was the one who was a virgin!
She needed his guidance, and she was angry he wasn’t showing her the way. What the hell am I
supposed to do?, she wondered.

“Severus,” she murmured, touching his shoulder lightly, scooting a bit closer to him on the bed.

“I cast the lubrication charm you sent me. I think I am…relatively prepared. I’m just…I’m scared. I
need your help. I don’t know what to do. If you could just…guide me?”

She looked at him with her soft doe eyes, and Severus lifted and turned his head to the right again,
meeting her gaze. She was so young. So vulnerable. He couldn’t completely shut her out. He
groaned.

It was simply better that they got on with it. He had to make the choice to just get it over with, for
both of their sakes. She couldn’t proceed without him. She did need his leadership in this. His
guidance.
He nodded at her, resolved. It had to be done.

His dark eyes flicked down over her form for the first time since entering the room. Her form was slim and female, and the Virility potion was already proving more than effective. He’d make it work.

“Lay back and lift your nightgown.”

Hermione swallowed nervously and moved her hands to the hem of her nightgown near her ankles. She began to lift it up her body. She raised it over her calves, her knees, her upper thighs, and, shifting her weight, almost had it up to her waist, revealing her simple pair of silk panties, when she heard Snape speak.

“No, stop,” Snape commanded.

Hermione froze.

“There’s no need for that.”

Hermione stopped and let go of her nightgown. It fell back below her waist, gathered around her hips. She was uncertain what to do next. He doesn’t want me to get undressed? What does he want? Hermione wondered, confused.

Ron had always begged to see more of her flesh. Shouldn’t we both be naked? Hermione scooted up the bed and gathered her nightdress so that it stayed bunched around her waist. It was clear that Severus didn’t want her to completely expose herself. He didn’t seem to have any interest in her upper body or her breasts, and he hadn’t even glanced at her legs, much less appraised them.

She leaned back on one of her pillows, awkwardly pressing her legs together, and looked at Snape at the foot of the bed. He was looking away again, lost in thought. She was still wearing her underwear, though Snape’s glances thus far had only really landed on her face. Should I take them off? She thought. It was as if he was completely unaware that she existed from the neck down.

Please, just look at me, Hermione thought. Look at me.

“Nox,” Snape whispered, and suddenly the room was pitch-black.

Hermione lay silently on her back on top of the comforter of her bed. She was surprised how dark the room had become. She hadn’t anticipated Snape being a “lights off” kind of person. Perhaps he just wanted to touch her but not have to face who it was he was touching? This way he doesn’t have to see your scars, she thought.

Hermione swallowed nervously. Her skin was developing gooseflesh in anticipation and her palms hadn’t stopped producing their clammy sweat. She listened intently, trying to gather what Snape was doing.

She felt the mattress shift around her as Snape crawled on top of her from the foot of the bed. She heard the rustle of robes and sensed that he was unbuttoning his pants and loosening his tunic. She opened her legs slightly and felt his knees find a position between them. She could feel the fabric of his tunic on the inside of her knees and upper thighs.

He’d left his tunic on, and had only unbuttoned the bottom enough to free his hips from the material. From the waist-up, Hermione realized, he was completely clothed. As was she. This is so weird, she thought. After a few moments, Snape stopped moving and adjusting his clothing and she felt him
hover a little closer to her center. But he’s still far too dressed, Hermione thought. Oh, God, he’s not even going to get undressed!

Suddenly she felt a powerful anxiety, borne out of the fact that she couldn’t see him or know exactly where he was. She felt one of his hands on her hip reaching for the side of her panties, a couple fingers curling into the band on her hip, starting to tug it down. She froze.

“Please, stop!” she cried out, not meaning to sound so frightened.

Immediately the fingers paused. Hermione sucked in a breath.

“Sorry… I’m just really nervous.”

She paused and could hear Snape breathing a foot above her.

“I’ll…I will proceed slowly,” he said. She couldn't see his face, but his voice was reassuring and sounded earnest.

“This is just…it’s just weird and scary for me.”

“I understand.”

Hermione felt odd not being able to see him in the dark, but the timbre of his voice wasn’t unkind, and she did trust that he wasn’t going to be cruel to her.

Still, not being able to see him was nerve-wracking. It was clear to her all of a sudden that Snape intended to take her without ever allowing her to get a look at his body or private parts, or permitting himself to fully see her.

The idea bothered her, but she was too nervous at what was happening to attempt to ask him to turn the lights back on. He had recoiled so strongly from her attempt at a kiss, she couldn’t imagine how he would react if she requested they do this with the lights on. Or if she asked him to show himself to her!

Snape adjusted his body weight between her legs. He finished unbuttoning his trousers with one hand and pushed them down over his hips, allowing himself to spring free.

It was probably easier for her if they did this in the dark and if he kept as much fabric between them as possible. She was obviously terrified by what they had to do, and he couldn’t bear the idea of watching her pained face as he took her against her will.

Beneath him, Hermione trembled. It all felt like it was happening so fast!! There was no kissing, no foreplay, no touching. None of the things she had experienced with Ron that had allowed her to feel in touch with her sexuality. She was afraid of how vulnerable and open she felt, her legs spread around this essentially unknown person’s hips.

“Please if you could…try not to hurt me,” she whispered into the darkness.

Snape paused. Her pleading was devastating to him. He couldn’t feel more like a rapist.

“Just go really slowly. I’m... scared,” she admitted sheepishly.

“I will,” Snape promised.

He looked down into the darkness, and though he couldn’t see her features, he could hear her rapid breaths and feel the warmth of her inner thighs around his hips. He was disgusted with himself that
her proximity made him even harder.

Carefully, he tugged her underwear down her legs and ankles and tossed it to one side of the bed. Despite the pitch-black room, Hermione trembled from the feeling of being exposed. She lifted her knees slightly and flexed her toes into the comforter on either side of Snape’s body, nervously anticipating what would come next. She was trying not to panic at the feeling of his large form resting between the V-shape of her legs.

Snape balanced his weight on his forearms, placing his hands into the bedspread on either side of her, and leaned his lower torso down to press lightly against her core.

They needed to get on with it, and he had to sense whether or not she was ready.

For the first time, Hermione felt a man’s member press against her intimate areas. It was hot and thick and solid-feeling and filled her with anxiety. Wasn’t it going to hurt to have him inside of her? How on earth could she relax enough to allow him to penetrate her comfortably? It felt rather large, but of course she hadn’t even so much as seen him to get a sense of how well-endowed he was. She wished he had let her see him or touch him before all of this. It just felt like too much too soon. Too soon! I’m not ready!, her mind chanted.

Snape groaned as he felt himself press along her wetness. Her entire core was slick and felt incredibly wet and hot against him. It’s not real, he reminded himself. It’s the lubrication charm. Still, he couldn’t help but emit a deep, low groan. Child-bride or not, it had been so many months since he had felt the raw physical pleasure of connecting with a woman’s body. She felt like soft velvet and it sent incredible pulses of pleasure all along his lower half.

Best not to prolong this, Snape considered. Hermione was breathing in and out beneath him with a regular tempo, and though it was clear she was nervous, he couldn’t hear anything that sounded like crying or whimpering. At least that was something. He reached down to position himself at her entrance. He could sense the tension in her thighs as they tightened incrementally around him, but it was simply better to get things over with.

“T-tell me when you’re ready,” he gasped.

And before Hermione could respond, he pushed his hips forward, slightly, and Hermione felt the tip of him pressing inside of her, suddenly and insistently.

“Oh! Oh! Wait! Wait!” she begged. He was so much larger than she had expected, and although he was barely inside of her, she could feel herself being stretched.

Severus hissed at her request, but he dutifully froze his hips in place. She felt incredibly warm and tight, and he was almost shaking from the restraint it took not to hurt her. He paused with a low groan.

“Tell me when you’re ready,” he gasped.

He breathed out and paused. Though every second of delay was practically unbearable. He had been stopped like a statue for nearly half a minute when he felt a slight flex in her vaginal muscle that made him groan audibly.

“Oh, Hermoine whispered. “But please…please go slowly.”

He did. Moving an inch at a time, pausing. Allowing her to cry out or groan in pain and then catch her breath. Then they would pause again for a few seconds or a minute until she gave the okay, and he would press forward into her incredible softness an inch more.
It was agony for him.

Every instinct in his body told him to push forward roughly with a big thrust and plunge himself inside of her. Seat himself deeply. She was so warm and wet. And so incredibly tight. He couldn't recall anything feeling so good. But he refused to behave like an animal. *Hold back,* he commanded himself. *Hold back!* *Wait. Let her adjust.*

He didn’t want to hurt her, but he could feel the sweat begin to bead across his forehead at the monumental effort it took to resist what his biology was instinctually telling him to do.

He would freeze after each press inwards, and she would whimper and squeeze and flex around him, clenching and unclenching and murmuring little “ow”s and “ouch”s as she dealt with her pain and discomfort and tried to accommodate him better. *Let her do what she needs,* he thought.

He was afraid that she would begin to cry at any moment, and he steadfastly refused to be the monster she expected. She was so small beneath him. As she adjusted herself around him and breathed in and out deeply, he pushed his weight even higher up from her body on his hands, so that the only part of him touching her was what was required for their joining. As if by keeping his face away from her he could somehow ameliorate the pain he was causing her.

Each time she said “ow!” it was like a tiny knife into him.

Beneath him, Hermione felt the tears stream from the corners of her eyes. She was willing herself not to sob. She didn’t want him to have to hear that. Snape was obviously trying to be careful with her, but no matter how much she told her lower body to relax and open up, she felt like she was being impaled. He was just too thick and she felt that her insides were being pinched. She was just pressed so painfully wide.

She didn’t want to act like a whiny baby, but it really did hurt, and she was worried with every inch more it would only get worse. Was it too late to ask him to withdraw? When would he be fully inside of her? She moved her hands from the comforter to his forearms and squeezed his flesh just below his elbow after he made a particularly deep intrusion.

“Oh…ooh, oh, OUCH! OUCH!” she exclaimed.

“I’m…sorry,” Snape hissed above her, though she heard a small groan of pleasure follow his apology.

Hermione swallowed and willed her lower body to open up once more. Relax, she thought. Relax and open up, she commanded herself.

Her body wasn’t totally obeying her, but each thought did seem to make the pain between her legs a little less. She inhaled deeply and then exhaled slowly, trying to imagine the energy of her exhalation causing her entire lower body to quiet and spread open. Surprisingly, her visualization helped with the pain, and, as if sensing her tightness unclench, Snape shifted forwards suddenly, pressing his entire remaining length inside of her.

Hermione exhaled in surprise. “Ow!” she cried out again at the burning intrusion.

*There,* Snape thought, as he wiped sweat from his brow into his shoulder. *It's done.*

It was shocking, feeling how full she was, and how intimate it was to have him completely inside of her. His body was so close. She could sense every inhale and exhale Snape took, and every little shift and adjustment of his hips. It was powerfully intimate. She felt so full. *Merlin!*
She sucked in a big gulp of oxygen and tried to calm herself. She felt like she could spend ten minutes just adjusting to the feeling of him fully seated inside of her, but before she could even catch her breath, he was moving.

*Just get it over with,* Snape thought, as he withdrew and plunged back in. Hermione grasped his forearms with her fingers even more tightly.

“Oh!” she whispered as he moved backwards. “Ouch!” she murmured the next time he plunged forward. His movement hurt, but the wetness between them allowed for a sliding feeling that wasn’t completely unpleasant…. Snape somehow seemed insensible to her tiny reactions now.

He began to pick up the pace, moving in and out of her body with a patient yet deliberate speed. Hermione could barely adjust to the sensation. It felt so strange — this plundering and rubbing of her insides in a rhythmic back and forth motion. It hurt and felt like an invasion, yet at the same time felt like something she wanted to explore.

Yet Snape’s pace left no room for her own exploration. He moved backwards and forwards, rocking on his own, high above her somewhere in the darkness. He was remarkably quiet, with only the occasional soft groan indicating that he was remotely enjoying things.

Hermione felt like she could do nothing but lay there and allow him to do what he had to. She continued to try to relax her lower body and found the pain was a lot less when she exhaled as he moved forward and inhaled as he moved backwards. And just when she felt like she was adjusting to the utter strangeness of his solid and rhythmic plunging, he stilled and groaned above her and she felt something pulse inside of her.

Immediately, he was gone.

He withdrew from her body and she felt the mattress shift as he retreated to the foot of the bed. She could hear him attempt to gather his breath and she heard the clink of his belt as he refastened his pants.

She lay there, legs spread, half in shock at what had just occurred. She could feel a leaking wetness between her legs. She had no idea if it was blood or semen, and she was scared he may have actually injured her. *Don’t be absurd. You’re fine. It’s over, It’s done, and you’re ok,* she thought, sucking in a breath. Her entire body was shaking slightly and she realized she was a bit sweaty all over, her hair sticking to the back of her neck.

She closed her legs a little and moaned at the soreness at her core. She could almost still feel him inside of her, and she knew she would be sore tomorrow. She felt like she’d been battered, slightly, down there.

Hermione lifted her head, but in the darkness she couldn’t see Snape at all. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She had no idea what she could say to him. It was all just so…*strange and intense.* What had just happened. He had been inside of her, and so close to her, and yet she didn’t know what to make of it. There was a horrible distance between them. Not simply because she couldn’t see him.

Snape paused, sitting at the foot of the bed. He was finishing re-buttoning his lower tunic. He felt truly disgusted with himself. He’d thrust himself inside of her like some type of wild animal and taken his pleasure, done what was *required*. The girl was lying on the bed and hadn’t made a single sound since he’d finished. She was clearly in distress, probably trying to process his molestation of her person.
He wanted to say something — to apologize. But he had lied to her. He had promised to be gentle and promised to go slowly. But he hadn’t, in the end. He’d just given in and gotten it over with as quickly as possible. He’d ill-treated her. Any girl deserved a better first experience than this. Still, it was what it was.

He stood quietly. The only thing he could do to prevent her additional suffering was to remove himself from her presence as quickly as possible. She needed her own space to recover. With that in mind, he moved quickly to the door and opened it.

Without turning back, he slipped inside the hall and shut the door after him.

Hermione lay on the bed in her dark room in utter shock. He’d left. Just left. Without so much as one word.

She sat up, gingerly, shaking. “Lumos!”

She looked down at herself. Her legs were splayed beneath her. Her pink nightgown was still gathered about her waist. There was a small amount of blood and sticky, white substance issuing from her vagina. Snape’s…essence, she pondered with some curiosity, gently dabbing at it with the corner of her nightgown. Otherwise I don’t look too different down there, she thought, though she did almost feel like she had been punched between the legs.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and rose up, moving carefully towards the bathroom. She could feel more of Snape’s leavings dribbling down her upper thigh. Lovely, she thought, sarcastically.

In the bathroom she moved to her tub and turned on the taps again. Merlin, I really am so sore! Though she had already taken a bath, she hoped another one would ease the cramping sensations between her legs.

She slowly peeled off her nightgown and eased her body down into the warm water. It stung a bit as it made contact with her vulva, but it wasn’t too unbearable.

She sat in the water and pulled her knees into her chest, wrapping her arms around them. And there, in the quiet of her bathroom, suddenly she felt something primal swell up unexpectedly from her chest. She opened her mouth and was surprised at the loud sob that came out. Oh. God.

She buried her face into her knees and sobbed, loudly and openly. That had been it. What all the anticipation had been about. What all the poetry is supposed to be about. And it had all been a big, fat nothing.

Snape had treated her like she was nothing. She had felt nothing but anxiety and pain.

She didn’t feel closer to the man who had taken her virginity. She didn’t feel loved by him. She didn’t feel like some sort of empowered sexual creature. She didn’t even feel like she had learned anything about sex.

She felt NOTHING. It had all been for nothing. And Snape had made her feel like she was a nothing.

The way he had just…used her body…she felt like her heart was breaking.

Eventually, Hermione stopped crying. She pulled herself slowly from the tub and pulled on some cotton pajamas. She re-entered her bedroom and looked at her bed. She couldn’t bear to crawl back
into it. She was disgusted with the sight of her stained and rumpled bedspread. She yanked it off the bed and balled it up, tossing it into a corner.

Instead she transfigured one of her pillows into a small futon and laid down on top of it on the floor.

“Nox,” she whispered.

Instinctively, she curled herself into a fetal position. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine she was somewhere else…somewhere happy…

She remembered the way she and Ron would cuddle together on top of their sleeping bags sometimes in the tent when they couldn’t sleep. He would curl himself up around her, her back pressed against his chest, her head tucked under his chin, his arm wrapped protectively around her waist. That safety she had felt from him. That feeling of being cared for. Oh, Ron! Why aren’t you here? Why couldn’t it have been you? It should have been you! I’m so sorry.

And though Hermione had promised herself she was done with crying, the tears came once more.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Couldn't leave you all hanging after the last chapter, so here's a super-fast update! :)

****

Snape leaned over his toilet in his master bathroom, wiping the vomit from his lips with a small towel. He had never felt more repulsed by himself.

What he had done to that girl…

He was furious that it had been required. But he had not had any choice. He couldn’t allow them to become Squibs, and he had been at a loss at precisely how to handle it. Was he supposed to pretend to be some sort of romantic lover, when there was no desire between them at all? She was barely more than a child!

The idea of providing a child with sexual pleasure made him feel like a pedophile. However, he had a deeply unsettled feeling in his guts. Somehow he knew it had been a terrible mistake. He’d botched it.

Snape groaned. Why did it all have to be on his shoulders anyway? Besides, it was her fault after all they were even in this horrendous marriage! He hadn’t sought her out! She had begged him to marry her in the first place! He hadn’t wanted it! He hadn’t wanted ANY of it. And he certainly hadn’t wanted her body.

Yet, he couldn’t help but feel nauseated at the idea of taking her like that.

She had essentially been unwilling. And now he was a rapist. Plain and simple. Not to mention how awful her tragic attempts to do what she thought he’d want her to do had been— dressing up in that ridiculous nightgown, trying to kiss him! It was repugnant. It was like she was suffering from Stockholm Syndrome, acting like she was actually interested in the wizard who was required by law to penetrate her body once a week. She may have partially convinced herself, but he knew the truth. It was a crime.

She couldn’t seem to grasp how terrible their situation was — they were stuck together. Forever now. The best way forward was limited contact. To simply minimize the despair. That kind of stone-cold ability to do damage-control had served him well in Voldemort’s service. He would compartmentalize, as he always had.

He stood and washed his face in the sink. But there would not be a way to limit this type of interaction. Once a week. Unavoidable.

Snape patted his face dry and considered the likelihood that the Marriage Law would be repealed at some point.

He found it entirely probable, especially once a certain number of the leading Pureblood families had intermarried with Muggleborns. Perhaps in 5 years’ time it would be overturned and he and
Hermione could simply go their separate ways.

That would be the best case scenario, he believed. If he could just hold steady for a few years (and try not to kill the chit in the mean time), it was possible that his life would one day be his own again.

With that small comfort, Snape turned and retired to his bed, his stomach still roiling.

He took a few drops of Dreamless Sleep before laying down and slipping into oblivion.

****

Hermione awoke on her futon, shivering from the lack of blankets around her, a sharp painful throbbing between her legs. She sighed and pushed herself up to sitting.

She glanced over at her bed. *What a nightmare last night had been,* she thought. But there was not going to be a re-do. At least she knew what to expect from him now.

Snape had proved to her that what he wanted from their marriage was distance, so fine. That is what she would give him. No more of this absurd Operation: Win Severus Snape Over. He couldn’t be pushed into something. She would just have to hope things improved between them over time, slowly, on their own. *After all, we have our whole lives,* she thought, glumly. But she wasn’t going to be hopeful about it. Her eyes had been opened as to what kind of man Severus Snape was. Lucius, she hated to admit, had been quite possibly right. Severus Snape was probably incapable of love.

And, frankly, Hermione was sick of her life being an emotional rollercoaster because of men. First Ron (though obviously his death hadn’t been his fault). Then the awfulness with Lucius. And now Snape and his cold, terrible indifference.

She was sick of all the turmoil. *I just want to live,* she thought. She had graduated from Hogwarts and gotten a perfect NEWT’s score. She had succeeded academically despite extreme emotional duress. And it was high time that she focused on herself. She wanted a career, and she was going to go out and get one!

No more of this everything-revolving-around-Snape routine. *Screw him,* she thought. SCREW HIM!

She changed and left the Dungeons, not crossing paths with her husband, thank Circe, and arrived early to McGonagall’s office. The older witch smiled at her warmly as she entered.

“Good morning, my dear!”

“Good morning! Professor, I was wondering if we could discuss the Department of Mysteries again?”

McGonagall smiled and gestured to the chair before her desk. Hermione sat.

“I feel like I am ready to gain some experience at the Ministry. Do you think it’s possible they might have an apprenticeship I could do over the summer? At least if I interned the next few months I could gain some experience and decide if that is what I’d like to pursue. I just don’t think Hogwarts is…”

“…challenging enough?,” McGonagall teased with a smile.

Hermione pursed her lips. She wasn’t intending to be rude.

“No! Not at all! I just don’t think teaching is my path, and I…I need to get out of here, frankly!”
McGonagall chuckled.

“Hermione, of course you should move on to the Ministry! You’ve absorbed as much as we can offer you here, and a witch of your abilities and ambition should naturally go where you are drawn!”

Hermione smiled and stood, moving around the desk to the witch, and hugged her abruptly. McGonagall was surprised and more than a little moved. She wrapped her arms around the younger witch.

“Is everything all right, my dear?”

Hermione stepped back and nodded.

“Of course! I’m just…I’m so grateful to you,” she lied.

In reality, she wanted to tell the Scottish witch about her entire night with Severus, but of course that was completely out of question. The idea of discussing sex with Minerva McGonagall was ridiculous!

McGonagall sat back at her desk and pulled out a fresh scroll.

“I will write to Phillipus Mott, Head of the Department of Mysteries, immediately, offering your services. No doubt they will be able to use your abilities over the next few months. If you find the work and the department to your liking, I am confident they will offer you a full-time position in the fall. Your NEWT results speak for themselves.”

Hermione smiled as McGonagall scratched out the note.

“Thank you so much! I…I just feel a need to spread my wings a bit!”

McGonagall paused and glanced up at her.

“Entirely reasonable! I always knew Hogwarts could not long contain a talent such as you, Hermione! Though every day you are here we are most lucky to have you. You’ve been a tremendous help to me with the wee bairns.”

Hermione sat at her own desk and began to organize her paperwork. McGonagall watched her quietly for a few seconds before speaking.

“If it isn’t too personal, may I ask how you and Severus are getting along?”

Hermione paused and took a deep breath, looking up.

“He’s…challenging.”

McGonagall nodded with a smirk.

“He is that. Do keep in mind that his words and actions do not always reflect his true heart. He was a very sensitive young wizard when he was a lad. Be patient with him, Hermione. I am sure he will come around. My door is always open if you’d like to talk.”

Hermione nodded in gratitude. McGonagall’s kindness meant everything to her, especially in light of her difficult evening the previous night.

However, she couldn’t agree that Snape was entirely deserving of her sympathy or understanding at this very moment. *If I told Minerva the truth, she’d probably march down to the Potions Classroom*
and hex his balls off, Hermione thought.

Hermione smiled and turned her attention back to the Transfiguration paperwork.

****

That evening, Hermione whispered “Lingua serpentis!” and entered the Dungeons, (home sweet home, she thought with no small bitterness), to find Snape standing in the living room before the fireplace with a man she had never seen before.

He was short and bald and nebbish, and had something of a bureaucrat about him. He bowed stiffly to her as she descended into the room.

“Fitzherbet Radziwill, madam,” he said in greeting.

“Hermione Granger,” she replied.

As she approached he took her hand and squeezed it lightly. She pulled it back. All of this was simply much too formal for her taste.

“You must mean ‘Hermione Snape,’ of course, my girl,” the man responded, more than a little condescendingly.

It took an extreme amount of self-control for Hermione not to roll her eyes.

“Please, both of you, sit.”

Snape eyed Hermione curiously. It was the first time he had laid eyes on her since the previous evening. She didn’t look too traumatized—she still wore the same God-awful Muggle-clothes and she walked and talked in her typical ‘Miss Granger’ manner. That was a relief. At least she hadn’t descended into some sort of PTSD episode.

Snape sat on a dark blue settee and Hermione joined him on the opposite end. Mr. Radziwill sat in one of the green wingbacks facing them.

“Congratulations to you both on your marriage and its recent…finalization. I am here to assess how the experience has been for you both and to make any recommendation to the Ministry on how to improve the requirements of the Marriage Law moving forward.”

“I do have one recommendation,” Hermione piped up.

Snape shifted his gaze towards her. She was giving the nervous Mr. Radziwill a withering look and narrowing her brown eyes at him.

“How about you and the rest of the Ministry’s ruling class do away with this abominable Law and instead let everyone marry whom they bloody-well-choose?!!”

Radziwill clutched at the handful of folders and papers in his lap, clearly unprepared for such a direct verbal assault.

“M-M-Mrs. Snape, I am sure you understand that I myself am not responsible—“

“—No, no, of course, I get it. You don’t bear the blame, solely. But consider who you work for, Mr. Radziwill. Do you find their political decisions sound? You are here to enforce those decisions, after all, so I can only conclude that you believe 100% in this revolting law?”
Snape raised an eyebrow. Her display was not going to end in any kind of victory, but he had just spent ten minutes making uncomfortable, polite small-talk with Mr. Radziwill before Hermione had arrived, and it was rather enjoyable to watch her turn up the temperature on the tetchy, mole-like, yes-man sitting before them.

“M-Mrs. Snape—“

“—In fact, that is Lady Snape to you. You do realize that the absurd Marriage Law has elevated me, a 19-year-old, to the peerage?”

“Yes...y-yes, of course. Lady Snape. Lord Snape.”

Radziwill bowed his head slightly to each of them. He pulled a piece of paper from a folder and cleared his throat.

“Perhaps we should get to the questionnaire?”

“Fine!” Hermione shrugged.

“Have you been able to maintain daily contact and conversation?”

“Yes,” Hermione responded.

“And you, Sir?”

“Yes,” Snape intoned with a sigh.

“Have you in good faith worn your wedding bands consistently since your vows?”

“Yes,” Hermione responded.

“Yes,” Snape admitted, glancing at the silver band on his left hand. Funny he hadn’t even thought once about removing it.

“I see you are co-habitating. Have you been spending your evenings together in this domicile, and do you plan to continue your cohabitation, no matter where your future domicile is?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, rolling her eyes.

“Yes,” Severus responded, quietly.

“Finally, and forgive me as this is intrusive. Were you able to physically consummate your marriage within the past week, and do you intend to faithfully maintain, at minimum, a weekly consummation schedule?”

“You should know that by now,” Hermione retorted. “Isn’t the Ministry keeping surreptitious tabs on our behavior? Your monitoring isn’t exactly subtle!”

She lifted her left hand up and pushed her ring towards Radziwill’s face.

“I admit the Ministry is keeping certain records, but I assure you all such information that is gathered is entirely confidential. It is merely to make sure the marriages are successful.”

“Consummation does not equal a successful marriage, Mr. Radziwill!”

Snape glanced over at Hermione in surprise. It was entirely true. The idea that the Ministry could
ensure the longevity of these marriages by enforcing regular consummation was remarkably backwards.

Though he knew that the longevity mattered little to the Ministry. It was the procreation of mixed-heritage witches and wizards they were after. The more half-Pureblood/half-Muggleborns that were born the better, as far as the Ministry was concerned. Snape would have to be extra careful when he brewed Hermione’s birth control potion moving forward. Neither of them could risk the Ministry’s suspicion in that regard. It must appear that they were attempting compliance and simply were unsuccessful. Snape believed he could make them believe it was due to Hermione’s youth…perhaps for a few months at least.

Snape cleared his throat.

“What my wife is intending to convey, is that we both understand and respect the Ministry’s hope that these Pureblood-and-Muggleborn marriages will lead to a generation of young witches and wizards unaffected by the past’s bitter division over bloodlines. We both desire our issue to live in a world in which blood status is immaterial.”

Radziwill smiled, evidently quite pleased with Snape’s reply, and nodded, making a small note on his paper. He tucked it back into his folder and stood up.

“Thank you both. I realize this is not easy. As one of our first couples, I thank you for your obeisance to the new law.”

Snape stood and bowed low.

“No, thank you, Mr. Radziwill! Your time is obviously valuable and we appreciate the visit to our home.”

Hermione looked at Snape like he was slightly mad. She had never witnessed Snape feign gratitude or obedience before. It was entirely disturbing, and yet rather shockingly believable. Suddenly, she understood how he had been such a tremendously effective spy. Though she knew him well as a difficult, stubborn, narrow-minded git, looking at him in that moment, he seemed entirely genuine, respectful, open-hearted, and looked at Radziwill with an almost friendliness that Hermione would have never even believed him capable of conveying. Snape was a damn fine actor!

Radziwill smiled.

“I appreciate it, Lord Snape! These in-home visits haven’t been too peachy!”

Snape gave a small chuckle.

“Oh, I can imagine!”

Snape escorted Radziwill over to the fireplace with a few more pleasantries. Radziwill picked up some floo powder and with a final bow, he disappeared into the network.

The second Radziwill was gone, Hermione stood and rounded on Severus.

“That! That was a God-damn joke! What was all of the bowing and scraping for?”

“We must seem to play along. I believe we have bought ourselves several months just based on his report. It is likely, however, they will schedule another at-home visit once we repeatedly fail to become pregnant. I give us six months before we see the return of Mr. Radziwill.”
“And what shall we do in the meantime?”

“In the meantime, I will continue to brew you a birth control potion. You need only ingest it once a week. As you did…last evening. Our having a child is out of the question.”

“Of course it is!,” Hermione retorted. “That’s the last thing I want!”

As they were each reminded of the previous night’s events, they both looked in opposite directions. Hermione glanced over at the aquarium window. What on earth can I say to him?

He’d been so terrible to her. There was no way she could connect with him, and frankly, she didn’t care one iota what his feelings were on their awful experience. He’d treated her like she was nothing. Not touching her. Not even looking at her. The way he’d fled once he was done. He was lucky she was even speaking to him.

I give up, Hermione thought. Suddenly, Snape piped up.

“I took the liberty of leaving a Healing Potion on your bedside table next to the Dreamless Sleep. I thought perhaps you might be experiencing some…soreness.”

Hermione glanced over at him. He was almost hanging his head, as if in shame. Good, she thought. He should be ashamed. He was after all the cause of the achy soreness between her legs that she’d been trying to ignore all day.

“Thank you,” she replied, coldly. She turned towards the hallway.

“If there is anything else you need—”

“—I’m fine. I think you’ve done enough!”

Without stopping to look back at him, Hermione moved into her bedroom and slammed the door. Her forgiveness couldn’t be bought with some stupid Potions, she thought.

She tossed her book-bag onto her bed and began sorting through the papers, trying to ignore all thoughts of Snape. She reached in and pulled out today’s copy of The Daily Prophet, as well as a few magazines McGonagall had given her. The day had been so busy she hadn’t had time to look at them yet.

As she set the magazines aside, her gaze fell onto the headlines of The Prophet. Her mouth fell open.

Plastered across the top ran the headline:

“LUCIUS MALFOY PLEA BARGAINS: IMMUNITY IN EXCHANGE FOR INFORMATION.”

Below, there was a picture of Lucius moving from a chauffeured car onto the front steps of the Ministry, flanked by Ministry officials, all of them surrounded by journalists and paparazzi.

His handsome face was serious this time, determined. No winking, no playing to the cameras.

Hermione sat on her bed and began to devour the article.
Chapter 38

Who needs sleep, right? ;)

****

Hermione read quickly. Though the details were sketchy, it appeared that Lucius had willingly admitted to aiding and abetting Bellatrix and agreed to hand over a list of her safehouses and contacts in Europe in exchange for complete immunity and the removal of his name from the Marriage Law draft.

The Aurors were apparently closing in on Bellatrix’s location. Lucius Malfoy was on long-term probation, but free now to return to his life, and was back at Malfoy Manor.

*He’s gotten away with everything!*, Hermione thought, outraged, throwing the paper down on her bed.

She thought about going to the Ministry tomorrow and filing her own charges, but then she considered the possible headline:

**MEMBER OF THE GOLDEN TRIO, HERMIONE GRANGER, ASSAULTED AND MUTILATED BY MALFOY AND LESTRANGE.**

*Oh, God*, Hermione shuddered. She didn’t want to have to go through that kind of media circus. The idea of the world knowing her personal business and the torture her body had endured was a complete nightmare. Not to mention how much Snape would resent her if he was dragged into some kind of media sideshow. He considered her simple presence in his *quarters* to be an outrage to his privacy! If she brought the entire Wizarding press down on their heads he would never, ever forgive her.

Furthermore, she was positive that starting her career at the Ministry with such furor wouldn’t be remotely beneficial to her long-term ambitions. Bitterly, she knew that beginning her political career with such a bombshell court case, despite the fact that she was a victim, would hurt her career prospects, not to mention the emotional pain of having to be cross-examined about her sexuality. No doubt Rita Skeeter would LOVE to plaster all the salacious details of her torture at Lucius’s hands on the front page of the Daily Prophet. The dinners, the ring, the kisses. *No*, Hermione thought, *I’m not discussing all of that in public!*

She just had to hope the Aurors could track Bellatrix down sooner rather than later.

****

Two days later, Hermione found herself entering the lift in the Ministry Atrium and descending to Level 9.

She had a 9 o’clock appointment with the Head of the Department Phillipus Mott himself, and she had risen early to ensure she made it on time.
She and Snape had managed to have a not-completely-awful breakfast encounter. She mentioned that she had her interview and was heading to London (not that he even took note of her elegant skirt-and-blouse combo or the fact that she was wearing a full face of make-up).

But he had been able to strangle out a less-than-enthusiastic “I wish you good luck,” before heading off to torture the Third-Years, so that was one positive note. At least we’ve ‘interacted’ enough for the day, she thought. And they hadn’t really argued since the night of their at-home visit with Mr. Radziwill, and for that, too, she was grateful.

She was nervous, and not only about the interview. She hadn’t been in the Department of Mysteries since she and the other members of Dumbledore’s Army had been ambushed there by Death-Eaters, and she felt a sadness spring up in her heart anytime she found herself back somewhere she had last been with Ron. She tapped the fingers of her slightly shaky left hand against the wool of her skirt and tried to breathe deeply through her nostrils.

The lift stopped and the doors opened, and Hermione emerged into the Entrance Chamber to the Department, with its black-tiled walls and black marble floor lit up by bluish-white wall sconces. It had seemed so ominous to her when she had been here before, but today she found it beautiful and thrilling. This was truly a special place to have access to. She stood before the dozen doors and requested Mott’s office. The room rotated until the correct door opened before her.

Hermione entered and found herself in a long corridor, office doors on each side. Witches and wizards in robes that vaguely resembled Muggle lab coats walked the hallway, a couple of them nodding at her in friendly acknowledgment. She moved along, peeking into the rooms as she passed them.

In one, a wizard appeared to be interviewing a dragon-like creature. In another, two witches were huddled over a massive device that looked like a time-turner the size of Big Ben. A third room was simply full of odd maps stacked floor to ceiling, many more of them pinned to the walls with thumbtacks, bits of string connecting various places.

As she continued to walk, Hermione glanced up at the ceiling of the hallway. It was enchanted to show the night sky, even though it was bright daylight outside. The constellations were lit up and seemed to be dancing around one another. Hermione smiled. This was definitely her kind of place.

At the end of the hallway was a door with “Phillipus Mott” stenciled on it. Hermione knocked and minutes later she was seated in the wizard’s office, a cup of tea on her lap brought by an extremely gregarious secretary. Phillipus Mott was newly appointed to his position, but had been at the Department for almost twenty years. He was mid-forties and had kind eyes and a neatly-trimmed beard.

“Professor McGonagall explained your interest in the Department, and I hope you understand that this interview is simply a formality. We’d be absolutely delighted to have you apprentice with us over the summer, Hermione, in the hopes you decide to join our work here. Your reputation and your NEWT scores speak for themselves.”

Hermione grinned from ear to ear. After feeling so small the past few weeks, it was incredible to hear someone treat her with so much respect.

“Thank you, Sir! That is most kind of you. When can I start?”

“As soon as you like. As you know, most of our work here is extremely confidential, so we cannot give you unlimited access to Levels 9 and 10, but as you have been in some of the Rooms before, we could certainly have you start out in one of those you’re familiar with. We will require you to sign a
Hermione nodded, pressing her lips together. Mott continued.

“Forgive me if this is too personal!”

“No, not at all,” she said.

“I understand you were originally contracted to Lucius Malfoy, but you married Severus Snape instead.”

“That is correct.”

“The better choice, by far! Lord Malfoy, as I’m sure you know, has been granted immunity and we have been working with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to interview him and get to the bottom of Bellatrix Lestrange’s seeming ‘return from the dead.’”

“I-I see. I wanted to say…I mean, I won’t be able to work with you on getting information from him, unfortunately, if that’s what you’re going to ask.”

Hermione stood, firmly decided. “I understand if that means I cannot apprentice here.”

“Oh no! Please!” the older wizard said, gesturing her to sit. “Of course we aren’t asking you to do that. I completely understand the awkwardness of the situation.”

Not that awkward, Hermione thought, sarcastically, he just beat me black-and-blue and is now acting like he’s in lust with me. No big deal.

“I simply wanted to inform you in case you saw him in the building.”

“Thanks. That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“And you feel comfortable with that?”

Hermione sighed. The answer was “no,” but what choice did she have? She wasn’t going to reject an amazing apprenticeship and never set foot in the Ministry again simply because Lucius Malfoy might be lurking around the building. The platinum-haired Pureblood didn’t have a monopoly on London!

“Of course. I am here to focus on learning more about the Department and its research, and to contribute in whatever way I can.”

“And we are thrilled to have you here!”

Hermione took another slow sip of tea. “If you don’t mind me asking, do you think Bellatrix may have made a Horcrux?”

Mott nodded and smiled. “Clever inference. We’ve certainly considered it, and of course it’s a strong
possibility. We’re trying to learn everything we can about her skills in the Dark Arts and how she was trained. We have reason to believe Necromancy may be involved.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “I thought there was no practical application!”

Mott chuckled. “If you spend any amount of time here, you will learn that there are many classifications of ‘impossible’ magic that are, in truth, not only possible, but happening all around us on a near-constant basis.”

Hermione nodded and set down her teacup.

“I can’t wait to begin! Where shall I start?”

“The Hall of Prophecy.”

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That evening, Hermione sat at a table at The Three Broomsticks with Harry and Ginny, a pint of butter-beer in front of each of them. The bushy-haired witch was rambling excitedly about her day.

“It was in-cred-i-ble! There’s still a lot of damage from the Battle, and many of the prophecies have escaped the room and are floating throughout the Department or were too heavily exposed to various airborne bacteria to restore, but it’s bloody amazing what they have been able to salvage. That’s essentially what I’ll be doing. Capturing, analyzing, restoring and categorizing. Isn’t it interesting?”

“Are you supposed to be telling us this?” Harry asked, smiling.

“Yeah, aren’t you going to have to kill us now?” Ginny winked.

Hermione laughed, loudly. “Well, seeing as how we’ve all been in that room, and are responsible for most of the damage, I don’t think I’ll get in trouble for revealing the company secrets.”

Harry and Ginny both smiled at their friend. She looked happy, all lit up and chattering away, her quick brain flitting from idea to idea. She looked like her old self.

Hermione stopped, noticing they were looking at her funny.

“What?”

Ginny shook her head, lightly. “No, it’s just…we have been so worried about you, ‘Mione, and you seem…”

“…You seem okay!” Harry exclaimed, with a relief.

“Yeah, I think I… I think I am okay,” Hermione replied. “So, tell me about you! How’s the NEWT preparations going? How many are you taking? What are your summer plans after graduation? We have so much to catch up on!”

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Hermione entered the Dungeons happily a couple hours later. She’d had a wonderful time with Harry and Ginny. For the first time in a long time, she had felt like her old self again. She had really forgotten how wonderful it was to have friends.

As she moved past the archway, she saw Snape standing by the aquarium window, his arms folded in front of him, facing away from her. He was wearing his outer robes. Hermione assumed he had
either been going to or coming from his rounds. The dark wizard turned to face her. He looked furious.

“And just where have you been?”

Hermione groaned, inwardly. Not another argument. Not now. Not when she’d had such an amazing day.

“I met Harry and Ginny in Hogsmeade.”

“The very place you promised not to venture alone.”

Hermione sighed.

“I wasn’t alone. It was safe.”

“And have you forgotten our contract’s addendum? We are to interact over supper whenever possible.”

“We ‘interacted’ at breakfast. I am sure the requirement has been fulfilled for the day… I’m tired, Severus. I’m going to bed.”

Hermione kicked off her heels as she spoke. Her feet had been aching in them for hours. She was going to have to invest in some elegant flats. *The Ministry probably wouldn’t love it if I showed up in trainers,* she thought with a smirk.

Snape’s eyes flashed in anger, his thin lips curling into a sneer.

“You seem to forget that contractually I am responsible for your safety! You did not think it prudent to owl me to let me know you had evening plans on the very day you ventured to London on your own for the first time? How was I to know you had not been attacked?”

“I’m sorry. I…I guess I didn’t even think of it.”

“Well, at least we are in agreement that your behavior was thoughtless!”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and stepped down into the living room in her stockinged feet.

“Look, I don’t need you to give me a hard time, okay? I get it. You don’t approve! But I believe you also said that you couldn’t care less what I do during the daytime?”

“As long as it does not involve you placing yourself in danger, yes!”

“Just admit you were actually a tiny bit worried about me!”

Snape’s nose twitched slightly. She was being ridiculous, as usual. Always trying to confuse duty with emotion.

“It is not about worrying or not worrying. I cannot protect you if I don’t know where you are. Thankfully, Madam Rosmerta owled me the moment you entered her establishment.”

“What?!!?”

Snape lifted his chin, smugly. “She has always been a most loyal informant.”

“Oh, Merlin! You’re…you’re actually spying on me? I just…I give up!”
Hermione turned and stepped back into the hallway. She turned and looked back at her husband in disgust.

“If you’re so concerned with protecting me, maybe you should start to think about how to protect me from yourself!”

With that, Hermione walked into her bedroom and closed the door. Snape stared after her. His eyes were still ablaze with anger but her comment had cut him to the quick. The familiar queasiness rose up from his guts. No, there was nothing he could do to protect her from himself. Snape angrily swirled his robes around himself and headed out for his rounds.

Hermione flopped onto her bed. At least I was able to nip that one in the bud, she thought, dejectedly. What is the score now? Snape 20 to my 15? Who can even keep track?

She exhaled with a groan and pulled herself up, and moved to her desk. She noticed a small scroll tied with a green ribbon sat upon it. It must have been delivered by owl earlier in the day.

She opened it, carefully.

Hermione,

I did it for you.

And you were right about my need to repair my reputation.

You are constantly in my thoughts. May I see you?

Yours,

Lucius

Hermione immediately balled up the scroll and, taking out her wand, cast a quick “Incendio!”

She watched, relieved, as the flames burned up the paper until it disappeared into thin air.
Chapter 39

A few days later, Hermione sat at her desk in the Hall of Prophecy, chewing on the end of her quill, struggling not to think about Lucius Malfoy.

She and Snape had fallen into an easy routine the past several days. She rose early now, dressed in her work clothes and did her hair and make-up. She would gather her briefcase and open her bedroom door, moving into the living room to find Snape sitting at the kitchen table eating a breakfast of porridge, his aquiline nose stuck deep in a book or Potions journal. She would pour herself a glass of juice or grab a piece of fruit and sit across from him.

The conversation was always initiated by her, but he would at least participate in the back-and-forth for a few minutes. She would ask him about what he was reading, or ask general questions about Hogwarts, the Ministry, or what his opinions were on whatever headlines were in The Prophet that day. He wasn’t effusive in his replies, but she could tell he was making an effort to reign in the cruelty. After a quarter of an hour, she would rise and, wishing him a good day, would head to the fireplace and floo to the Level 8 Atrium of the Ministry.

They no longer saw one another in the evenings. Hermione stayed in her bedroom if she wasn’t visiting with Harry and Ginny in Gryffindor Tower, and Snape was usually in his study or his lab.

Hermione had thought little of Lucius in the days since burning his letter, until this morning.

She had landed into one of the gilded fireplaces in the Atrium as was quickly becoming her routine, and begun to make her way to an elevator when she stopped dead in her tracks. Heading towards her, flanked by two Ministry officials, was Lucius Malfoy. She had turned and quickly moved away, but could feel his eyes boring into her back. There was no way he didn’t see her.

Now she sat at her desk, tucked away in a corner of the Hall of Prophecy, trying to run a diagnostic spell on a prophecy she had re-captured minutes earlier. She had made some decent progress the past few days, and had managed to re-create the magical shelving to contain the prophecies, even subdividing them into categories based on the nature of the prophecy. Looking at the thousands of prophecies bouncing wildly around the ceiling and sticking to the floor and walls, she knew it would take her the entire summer to recapture and reorganize them all.

She was desperately trying to focus, but knowing Lucius was in the same building as herself had her all riled up. She checked her watch. It was almost half-past noon. She had promised to meet Ginny to help her go wedding-dress shopping at 1pm. Harry and Ginny had decided they wanted to marry as soon after graduation as possible, and they were already well into wedding planning (to the delight of Molly Weasley).

She hated to admit it, but she was also nervous because it was Friday.

Tomorrow she and Snape would have to consummate again. She thought about asking Ginny for advice, but was still too embarrassed. Ginny had respectfully not inquired about her physical relationship with Snape again…and Hermione hoped she would be able to sort all of that out in time.

Hermione tapped her quill against her lips. She had begun to enjoy the silence of the large Hall of Prophecy. Occasionally witches and wizards would pop in and out and ask her if she knew the location yet for a specific prophecy, but by and large she had been left to her own devices. Mott stopped in most days and was very encouraging about her progress, and he had allowed her to spend some time in a few of the other Rooms, learning more about how each one worked. She had loved
the autonomy, but today the silence was a curse. It seemed to amplify the thoughts in her head. She stood and gathered her briefcase. Mott wouldn’t mind if she took her lunch break early.

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“What do you think?” Ginny asked, pushing the dressing-room curtain aside and stepping into the large tailor’s shop, wearing a floor-length cream wedding dress with lace sleeves. Hermione was staring into space, lost in her thoughts.

“Hello? Earth to Hermione?”

Hermione shrugged. “Sorry, Gin. That looks great!”

The red-headed witch plopped down beside her friend, tulle flouncing up over the sides of the chair.

“What’s wrong? Is it Snape?”

“No. Well, sort of.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say to Ginny. She felt like discussing Lucius with her was only going to cause Ginny more pain. The name “Lucius Malfoy” alone was a deeply painful reminder of what they had both lost. She certainly didn’t want to explain to Ginny that she had seen him at the Ministry, or that he had sent her messages.

“You can tell me anything.”

“I know.” Hermione smiled and took a deep breath.

“I guess I’m just thinking about having to consummate the marriage again this weekend.”

Ginny arched an eyebrow.

“How did it go? The first time, I mean?”

Hermione turned to her friend. She could feel a lump in her throat. Ginny tilted her head slightly, sensing Hermione’s distress.

“Oh! My poor Hermione!” she whispered, flinging her lace-covered arms around her friend.

Hermione hugged Ginny back as a couple tears fell from her eyes. After a few seconds she broke the embrace and wiped at her eyes, looking around the shop. None of the other dozen or so witches and wizards who were trying on clothes or being fitted behind various screens were paying them any notice.

“I don’t know why I’m being so emotional.”

“You’re absolutely allowed! What did Snape do to you? He didn’t hurt you, did he? I’ll absolutely murder him if he did!”

Hermione shook her head.

“No…he’s not like that. It’s just…there is no love between Snape and I, Gin. It was so disappointing. Kind of sad and… mechanical. I guess I thought he and I would be closer afterwards, but we aren’t.”
Ginny nodded, thoughtfully. She couldn’t imagine being with anyone but Harry, and she absolutely adored him with every fibre of her being. The idea of making love to the cold fish that was Severus Snape made her skin crawl. Poor Hermione!

Ginny patted Hermione’s hand.

“You’re so wonderful, ‘Mione. I don’t see how Snape won’t see it in time. Honestly, I think he is probably just one of those people who was born missing a compassion-chip. But I can’t imagine he won’t eventually come to love you.”

Hermione nodded, smiling wistfully.

“In the meantime, I think you shouldn’t put so much pressure on yourself when it comes to the bedroom. I mean, I know you’re used to succeeding at everything your first time out…”

Ginny winked at her, and Hermione gave her a playful shove. Ginny laughed.

“…But, honestly, you know how much I love Harry, but it even took us awhile to figure out what works for us. Not to reveal too many specifics!”

Hermione covered her ears in mock horror.

“Please, don’t.”

Ginny laughed and gave Hermione a big hug again.

“I think it just takes all couples some time. And besides, this wasn’t really something either of you wanted. Just be your fabulous, sweet self and eventually you’ll have Snape following you around like a lovestruck puppy.”

Hermione smiled at the thought. It was absolutely ridiculous, the idea of Snape as a lovestruck anything. She knew her troubles were far deeper, darker, and more complicated than she was able to reveal to Ginny, but it helped to at least confide in her friend a little.

Ginny stood up and twirled. “Now, do I look like a marshmallow in this thing, or what?”

Five minutes later, the girls exited the shop. Ginny hadn’t found anything she loved, but she put a few options on hold.

As she and Hermione rounded the corner, chattering away about floral bouquets, bridesmaid dresses, and invitation stationary, they failed to see a tall figure exit the tailor’s shop.

Lucius Malfoy stood on the Mayfair sidewalk and smiled. He placed the flesh-coloured Extendable Ear in his pocket, and considered everything he had just overheard.

Sad and mechanical. He was pleased that Severus had disappointed her so.

It would make seducing her easier.

He had had much time to think in Azkaban, and he had been enraged by the outcome. The way Severus had stolen Hermione right out from under him.

It wasn’t that he actually cared about Hermione. No, of course not. That would be absurd.

It was that he knew something that Severus didn’t know he knew. In fact, he had known for some
time; Narcissa had made it a point to tell him in a note sent with the divorce papers. Just to drive the
knife in deeper.

Severus Snape had *fucked* his wife, Narcissa Malfoy.

And now, Lucius smiled, he would place the cuckold horns on Severus’s head. There was only one
thing that would be sweeter than seducing Hermione away from Severus.

And that would be to make her fall in love with him.
Saturday night, Hermione waited quietly at the foot of her bed.

She had foregone the pink nightgown this time and was wearing a simple black satin pajama set that consisted of a loose tank top and shorts.

She had taken a long relaxing bath, trying to soothe her anxiety. The achy soreness between her legs had finally dissipated a couple of days earlier, but she was nervous that the pain would be the same as before. She had dried and brushed her hair, rubbed some lotion onto her chest and limbs, and then cast the Lubrication charm. She had pulled her comforter off her bed and she now sat on top of her white sheets, nervously skimming her fingertips along the cotton.

She had decided not to try to kiss Severus again or make any “moves,” but she did hope he might be a bit more open than the first time. She hoped he might not turn the lights all the way off. Maybe this time they could spend some time touching one another? Maybe even take their clothes off? They’d been married two weeks now. And they hadn’t had an argument in almost four days. Some progress!, she thought with a smile. It seemed like Severus was tolerating her existence in his Dungeons much better now, though they weren’t exactly friends yet.

Still, when she thought of his body -- his tall form leaning back in his chair in front of the fire, his dark eyes staring thoughtfully into the flames -- she did find herself curious about him, drawn to him.

It surprised her how much she wanted to touch him. She wasn’t in love with Severus and he didn’t exactly inspire lustful thoughts, but the idea of him being inside of her again but not having the ability to at least touch his shoulders or chest, or even his upper arms seemed like agony to her. She closed her eyes for a moment and imagined what her fingers would feel like in his hair, or what his pale skin would feel like against her. Cold, she imagined. Just like him. The only parts of him she had ever touched had been his hand, his forearm, and his...last time, his jaw. They had all been cool to the touch, but not unpleasant.

Living in the Dungeons with him made her feel like she was living with a ghost. She had a husband; they shared a home, and had even shared the most intimate thing two people can share. But she felt like they were living on completely different planets. He was still such a stranger.

What was Dante’s definition of hell again? Proximity without intimacy, she reminded herself. That was exactly what their first consummation had been like, and she hoped this time would be different.

She had passed Snape in the hallway when she had returned from having dinner with Harry and Ginny in the Great Hall, and he had nodded to her before disappearing into his own bedroom. As if to say, “I will be with you shortly.”

An hour had passed and he still hadn’t knocked on her door. Once again, Hermione wondered whether she should go to him. And once again, just as she was about to jump up, a rap sounded.

“Come in,” she said, clearing her throat.

The door opened with a creak. Snape stood there, fully dressed as before. Hermione rose up and he moved towards her and closed the door behind him.

She shuffled a few feet forward until she stood before him awkwardly.
She wondered what exactly she should say. What exactly she could do. She had a sudden unusual impulse to pull the straps down off her tank top. She wanted to present herself to him somehow. Let him know he could remove her clothing if he liked. Maybe he would lean down and take the invitation to kiss her neck. They didn’t even have to kiss on the mouth if that was what made him uncomfortable. But she liked having her neck kissed, and if he did that she could wrap her arms around him…and then maybe something could happen...

But Hermione made no such motion. She felt like she was locked-in, a statue inside her own body. Her hands just twitched nervously at her sides. She tried to smile shyly up at Snape, attempting to make eye contact, but his obsidian gaze was looking past her. He wasn’t seeing her. He looked dreadful, like he was about to be sick. It made her stomach tense up to see how unwilling he was. After a few seconds, he cleared his throat.

“Take this.”

Hermione looked down. As before, Snape held a pink potion out to her.

This time, however, he said “Nox” almost as soon as she had swallowed it and set the empty vial down on her nightstand.

Hermione paused in the darkness. She could hear him breathing a few feet away from her and heard a “clink” sound as he began to unbuckle his belt beneath his tunic. She could feel the nervous energy wash over her again, and she put her hand to her heart. It was beating like a frantic rabbit’s.

“What…what would you like?” she whispered, berating herself for sounding so meek. She hated herself for how much she wanted to please him. For how frozen she felt.

Snape sighed, audibly, in the darkness. As before, his extreme reluctance was painfully obvious.

“Please, lay back on the bed and try to make yourself comfortable,” he muttered. He didn’t sound angry, just miserable.

Hermione did so, sliding her pajama shorts and panties down her legs and gently tossing them onto the floor. She thought about pulling her tank top off as well, but she was nervous what his reaction would be if he found her unclothed. She couldn’t handle the humiliation if he requested she re-dress herself before he would continue.

She could feel herself start to tremble as Snape descended upon her, nudging her legs into a V-shape and sliding his knees between them.

There was so many things Hermione wanted to say to him:

*Can we please have the lights on? Why won’t you look at me? Will you let me look at you? Why don’t you want to touch me? Why can’t I kiss you? Do I disgust you?*

But she was paralyzed. Her voice was caught in her throat. She held her forearms to her chest protectively, her scars facing down, as Snape placed a hand gently into the mattress on either side of her body. She tried not to cry out when she felt his member against her sex. There was enough wetness from the lubrication charm and she could feel him move along her slit, coating himself in it.

Snape said absolutely nothing this time. Within seconds he was slowly, oh-so-slowly pushing inside of her. She bit her lip. It stung and was not comfortable in the slightest, but it wasn’t as searingly painful as the first encounter had been. He took his time entering her, stopping when she moaned in pain or said “ouch,” but there were far fewer “ouch’s” this time.
He was still completely clothed but for his unbuttoned lower tunic and pants slung down over his hips. Hermione could feel the woolen cloth against her inner thighs. She hated the feeling of the itchy fabric on her skin, a hated emblem of their emotional separation.

*It’s worse this time,* she thought. Not the pain, but the experience. *How is it actually worse?*

She breathed in and out deeply and tried to focus on opening up and relaxing, as she had the first time. It was difficult to adjust herself around him when she was so wound-up and anxious. Once again he felt almost unbearably thick between her legs, and she winced at the intrusion.

Snape paused again once he was fully inside of her, and Hermione could feel tears falling from the corners of her eyes. It really wasn’t from physical pain this time.

*I hate this,* she thought, suddenly. *I think I actually hate sex.*

Within seconds, Snape was moving. He rocked slowly and methodically back and forth, keeping his grunts to a minimum. Hermione closed her eyes and tried to pretend this wasn’t happening, but it was happening. *He’s just using you,* she thought. *He’s just using your body. It’s like you aren’t even here.*

She felt sick. She began to count his thrusts, willing it to be over soon. It was clear Snape wanted it to be over quickly as well. He moved like some sort of robot above her, occasionally exhaling heavily but otherwise completely silent. Finally, after a couple minutes of sped up thrusting, with a stuttered groan he stilled and collapsed down onto his right forearm.

Hermione felt the buttons of his tunic press into her arms that were still tightly crossed. She considered raising a hand to his face. She wanted to touch his jaw again, but she couldn’t bear it if he lashed out at her, rejected her.

So she lay there.

A few seconds later, Snape rose up and removed himself from her body. She felt him slip out of her and then felt the leaking wetness between her legs and the accompanying soreness.

In the darkness, she heard Snape re-dress himself as she lay on her bed. She was biting the inside of her cheek, suppressing the urge to weep. *Don’t cry when he’s still here,* she willed herself. *He’ll hate you even more.*

She heard the mattress springs squeak as Snape stood up, and heard his footsteps move to the doorway. At the doorway, he paused.

“I’m sorry,” she thought she heard him whisper, solemnly, quietly.

And before she could accept that she hadn't imagined it, he opened the door and slipped out, leaving her alone in the darkness.

Hermione rolled onto her side and curled into fetal position, pressing her face into her pillow to stifle her loud sobs.

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Hermione had tossed and turned all night.

She had taken a shower some time after Snape had left, washing herself between her legs carefully, then laid back down in her bed. Unable to sleep, she had risen a couple hours later and run herself a
hot bath, scrubbing frantically at herself once again. She wanted to wash off any trace of Severus Snape.

She rose just before dawn and dressed. She had to get the hell out of the Dungeons. She couldn’t bear to cross paths with him. How could she just go back to “Good morning” and “Hope you have a good day” over pumpkin juice in the morning when the broken state of their marriage was so apparent.

Severus might be content to live a lie, but Hermione knew she could not pretend that things were fine between them, or that she could move forward like this. Why does it all have to be on his terms?

He didn’t want to talk, so they barely spoke. He didn’t want her in his bedroom, so she had her own. He wanted to have sex with no intimacy, so they just ‘did their duty’ in the dark. He didn’t want to live in London, so she was trapped in his dreary Dungeon suite. How is he okay with this??

Hermione was furious. What about what she wanted out of a marriage? Out of life? She had tried everything she could think of to win him over, and he had thoroughly rejected her.

She grabbed her robes and a warm cloak and headed out. She left the Hogwarts gates and headed towards Hogsmeade. For the end of spring, the air was remarkably chilly, and she pulled her robes tightly around herself. She knew Snape would be displeased that she was venturing outside alone, but she couldn’t care less about his desires at the moment. You don't get to have it both ways, she thought. You can't worry about me and then treat me like dirt when we're alone together!

The fresh morning dew on the grass shone in the dawn light. Birds were chirping in the trees, and it was a brilliant morning. But Hermione took no joy in it. Her mind was roiling with self-loathing and her heart felt so very heavy. She knew she was also to blame.

Why did you allow him to just use you? Why can't you communicate with him? She had been berating herself for hours. Because I’m scared, she thought. I’m scared of him, and what he thinks of me. She knew it wasn’t very 'Gryffindor' of her, but her courage was completely failing her.

Her marriage was not a marriage, and unless she took some bold action, it didn’t seem like it would get better anytime soon. Ginny’s advice was naive. Snape was never going to fall in love with her, because the way their marriage was going, he didn’t even have to look at her! All they did was mumble absurd platitudes about the news and the weather for a few minutes each day. She didn't think it was possible, but she had even less hope for their future than she had when they had first joined in the Room of Requirement.

After some time, Hermione reached Hogsmeade. The streets were empty, which wasn’t unusual for so early on a Sunday morning. Hermione was gasping for a soothing, hot cup of tea, but saw that Madam Puddifoot’s Tea Shop wouldn’t open for another half-hour. She pressed onwards, leaving the village High Street and entering the forest around the village.

Finally, she arrived at Hogsmeade Station. The station itself was locked, so she sat on an empty bench outside of it and looked at the railroad tracks. There, in the quiet of the morning, she wanted to cry again. It was the perfect place for it. No one was around. But Hermione felt numb now. She was wrung out. She wished the Hogwarts Express would come, but instead of taking her to London it would take her somewhere far, far away.

Honestly, what would the Ministry actually do to her if she tried to separate from Snape? But she had read the contract and she had experienced the power of their magical binding. She knew that the further away from Snape she went and the longer they were apart, the weaker their magic would become. The consequences weren’t simply about legality. She and Severus were entangled — their
magical strength was as one. Without one another’s proximity, they would weaken until… what? *Would a separation eventually kill us?* Hermione shuddered. She didn’t want to consider it.

She sat in silence, listening to the birds chirp in the trees for a few minutes, before rising and trudging back to Madam Puddifoot’s. The village was coming to life now, and Hermione got a hot Earl Grey to takeaway and then strolled through the street, window-browsing with her warm tea in hand. It was good to get out. She stopped at Ceridwen’s and looked at the various cauldrons in the window display. There was a gleaming silver one just like the one she had purchased for Snape. *Fat lot of good that had done,* she thought.

Hermione sighed. Cynicism didn’t suit her. She took a sip of her tea.

Turning, she headed back in the direction of the Castle, unaware of the blonde wizard following her. Lucius Malfoy kept his distance, curious as to why she was about so early on a Sunday.

He had come to the village on his own business, and it had been an unexpected but most welcome sighting to glimpse the slender form of Hermione Granger strolling leisurely down the High Street. He followed her at some length, but lost sight of her as she turned into an alley.

He approached, well-aware that she would be waiting there, wand drawn. He had perceived from a slight change in her body language that she had realized she was being followed approximately thirty seconds earlier. *Good, let her think herself clever.*

He rounded the corner and, sure enough, Hermione stood, legs apart, one hand on her hip and the other pointing her wand straight at him. Her tea set down on the ground. He widened his eyes in a pretense of shock and raised his hands, slightly.

*“Why are you following me?”*

*“I simply noticed you in the street. At some point, don’t you think we should have a chat? We’re practically co-workers at the Ministry now.”*

*“Co-workers? Hardly. You’re being pumped for information, that’s all. And frankly you’re bloody lucky you aren’t in Azkaban.”*

*“Au contraire. I am willingly working with multiple departments to build psychological profiles of all the former Death-eaters, and to track down Bellatrix’s whereabouts, as well as the whereabouts of many of my former associates.”*

*“You’re selling out the renegade Death-eaters?”*

*“I am… making amends.”*

*“You can never make amends for everything you have done!”*

Lucius shook his head, pensively.

*“No. I cannot.”*

Hermione snorted. *“I am not buying this penitent routine for one second!”*

*“I understand your skepticism. I am not pretending to be a completely changed wizard, Hermione. However, I can say that what I told you in my messages and in our last meeting is true. I have thought of you constantly and I do desire you, and it is you who has influenced me to take this course
of action.”

Hermione paused, staring into Lucius’s cerulean irises. She knew better than to trust a single thing he said. She shook her head and sighed.

“I don’t understand. Why don’t you just want to be done with me? Don’t you hate me?”

Lucius smiled widely, his eyes twinkling.

“To my immense shock, I do not. I enjoy you.”

Hermione grimaced. She did not like the way he phrased that.

“Well, I don’t ‘enjoy’ you. I want you to leave me the hell alone! No more messages. And stay out of my way at the Ministry!”

Hermione turned to go.

“Hermione!”

“What?”

“I mentioned once that Severus only knows how to serve, not to love. That is true. And it is also true that perhaps I only knew how to serve as well. I lost Narcissa and Draco because I could do nothing but serve the Dark Lord. He made us what we are. You don’t understand how purposeless all of us are now.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“You are un-be-liev-able! Am I supposed to feel sorry for you that your side lost the War? Poor little purposeless Death-eaters? You’re pathetic!”

“Not at all. But I am trying to explain why I have been pursuing you so...vociferously.”

She cocked her head, slightly. Curious.

“I want to at least try to make amends to you, Hermione. It will give me purpose. I want to serve you.”

Hermione swallowed.

“And just how on Earth do you think you can do that?”

“By helping you.”

“But what?”

“Anything. With your work at the Ministry. With tracking down Bellatrix…. With Severus.”

Hermione glanced around the street and then back to Lucius.

“How could you help me with Severus?”

“He is a cruel husband, I imagine. I know him better than anyone. I can advise you on how to please him.”

Hermione laughed, coldly.
“Trust me, there is no ‘pleasing’ him. I’ve tried.”

“What have you tried?”

Hermione’s face tightened. “It’s none of your concern!”

“But it is your concern. I can see the anguish you carry. It’s written all over you, my dear. I can ease your burden.”

Hermione furrowed her brow. She knew she was falling for a trap here, but he was right. Her shoulders felt like they had the weight of the world on them.

“How?”

“After what we have shared, there is nothing you could say to me that would embarrass me or you. I know you, Hermione. I understand what you were hoping for in a marriage. I know your fears, your desires, your sexual history. I will speak frankly to you, and you may say anything to me, and ask anything of me.”

Hermione searched his glittering aquamarine eyes. It was true. Lucius knew more about her intimate affairs (and Snape’s) than anyone else, and she simply couldn’t discuss these things with Ginny. It was so lonely trying to handle Snape on her own.

Lucius looked down at the brown-haired witch. He could see she was somewhat considering it. He lifted his chin slightly.

“Let me make you a promise. Meet me tonight in the flat near Honeydukes. You may take my wand, handcuff me again if you like, and I will speak to you as honestly as I can about Severus. When we are finished, you have permission to obliviate me, if you must.”

Hermione arched an eyebrow. She hadn’t thought about that as an option. She didn’t like the idea of confiding in Lucius Malfoy. In fact, she hated the thought of spending more time in his presence, but if last night had been any indication, her marriage to Severus was a complete and utter failure, and wouldn’t improve on its own.

*It actually cannot get any worse,* she thought.

“Give me your wand now,” Hermione demanded, holding out her other hand.

Lucius paused, and then reached into his sleeve and handed his wand to her. He hated the idea of her grubby hands upon it once more, but if this is what it took to win her trust, he would allow it. She tucked it into her sleeve.

“8 o’clock. I’ll give you your wand back after we meet. Don’t you dare try to pull anything.”

Lucius grinned, flashing his pearly-white teeth at her. He bowed low and reached for her hand. Hermione took a step back. She didn’t want his lips anywhere near her.

Lucius took a step back and gave her a deep, formal bow, then raised his torso up to his full height, his blue eyes staring deeply into hers.

“I will do *everything* I can to serve you, Hermione. Thank you for agreeing. Until 8 o’clock.”

Lucius turned and exited the alley. Hermione put her own wand back into her sleeve and leaned against the alley wall. She exhaled. She was relieved that she hadn’t experienced any PTSD
symptoms. *I think I held my own,* she thought.

*He’s lying, that much is obvious,* Hermione continued to ponder. *But why? What does Lucius have to gain from pretending to ‘serve’ me? Does he want the publicity? It would look good for him.*

She imagined the headline:

**REPENTENT LUCIUS MALFOY ASSISTING GOLDEN TRIO MEMBER HERMIONE GRANGER TO BRING DOWN WAR CRIMINALS**

It was reasonable that he would do almost anything for good PR. She knew it bothered his vanity the way the Wizarding World spat upon the Malfoy name now. And she remembered how bruised his ego had been when he had realized she assumed he was going to rape her in the Hogwarts Dining Room.

He clearly wanted redemption of *some* kind. He *needed* respect. It was a Pureblood obsession. Even Snape had that annoying quality.

*Well, he isn’t going to use me to get it,* Hermione thought. *If anything, I am going to use him!*

She turned and exited the alley, making her way back to the Castle. She had to formulate a plan.
That night, Hermione and Lucius stood face to face in the living room of the second-floor flat Lucius kept in Hogsmeade.

He had been waiting for her for some time when she had arrived. She knocked on the door and he had swiftly opened it. He had changed and was dressed relatively casually (for him) in black pants, a white button-up, and an embroidered red vest. His blonde hair was tied back at the nape of his neck with a black ribbon. He bowed low to her, and opened the door wide.

The room was a bit more elegantly furnished than Hermione had remembered. Did he actually redecorate for me? Good grief. Numerous candles were lit, flickering away atop several candelabra placed around the room. The full moon shone in through the French windows.

Lucius certainly has a flair for the dramatic, she thought, recalling the Louis XIV-style he preferred.

She removed her outer robes and lay them over the couch. Beneath she wore the same Muggle clothes she’d had on earlier in the day — jeans and a jumper. She couldn’t care less if he disliked them. From her robes she pulled out her wand and tucked it into her sleeve.

Hermione also pulled out a vial and held it out to Lucius.

"Veritaserum."

Lucius gave a surprised, inquisitive hum. He had not been expecting this. Hermione stared at him with a determined, forthright expression.

“Take it. Otherwise, I won’t believe a single word.”

She had once again raided Severus’s Potions Storeroom. But she needed this potion tonight. Damn the consequences.

Lucius’s eyes had widened slightly and he was now staring at the colourless liquid.

He would have to be cautious not to answer her interrogatories too quickly. He had experienced the truth serum’s effects before. Voldemort had often employed it, and as long as he formulated his answers carefully, he believed he could pass any “test” she threw at him, and manipulate his answers to suit his purpose.

He stared across from her. Her clothing was abysmal, comme toujours, but her eyes were bright and suspicious. He enjoyed how focused she always was. He wanted to massage her upper back and force her to relax. She would be so easy to sublimate if only she would allow a bit of relaxing,
physical touch in their interaction.

He slowly sat in a sofa chair and took the potion from her slightly shaky hand. With a flourish he uncorked it and drank it down.

“It really does taste like water, doesn’t it?” he smiled, tossing the vial aside.

Hermione stood above him, and swallowed nervously, ignoring his attempt at humor. She pulled out her wand.

“Coniungere manus!”

The magical handcuffs appeared around Lucius’s wrists. This was her chance to get some answers, and Hermione wanted to get right down to business. She sat on the couch across from the chair and set her wand down on the armrest. She narrowed her eyes at the blonde wizard, suspiciously.

“Why did you say Severus is incapable of love?”

“Have you met Severus Snape?”

Hermione gave an exasperated face.

“Answer me.”

Lucius breathed out. “Because for as long as I have known him, he has only ever loved one person.”

“Harry’s mother? Lily?”

Lucius nodded. Hermione tapped her fingertips nervously against the fabric of the couch.

“Do you think… do you think he could ever love me?”

Lucius smiled. The Veritaserum was actually making this easier.

“No. I truly do not believe Severus Snape could ever love you.”

Hermione turned her face away and looked out the French windows into the night sky; there was a stabbing pain in her heart. She knew Lucius couldn’t lie under the effects of the serum. It was so immensely painful to hear him confirm her deepest fear.

Her marriage was hopeless after all.

Lucius Malfoy had known Severus for twenty-five years. They had both served Voldemort (or at least pretended to) for almost two decades. He probably knew Snape better than anyone else in the world besides Dumbledore and McGonagall. And Lucius’s honest opinion was that her husband would never love her. The finality of it made her heart sink.

She sucked in a big breath and turned back. There was a marked pain in her eyes, Lucius noted.

“Do you think it’s because… there’s something wrong with me?”

Hermione’s cheeks flushed, and she lowered her gaze to the floor. She knew the question was pathetic, and she hated revealing her insecurities to Lucius, but she needed his brutal honesty. Besides, she could always obliviate him afterwards.
Lucius stared at the young witch. She was biting her lip, eyes downcast. So needy, he thought. So very uncertain. He found her insecurity alluring. And surprisingly sad. He felt an unusual impulse of empathy, looking at her despondent body language. He quickly shook it off.

“There is nothing wrong with you,” Lucius spoke, softly. Hermione glanced back to him, her eyes wide. Nothing?

“But, according to you, I’m a Mudblood. Don’t you think it’s wrong that I practice magic?”

Lucius exhaled. Why had he said that? Why had the serum allowed him to say that? Of course it was wrong that she practiced magic! That was what he believed.

“I find nothing wrong with you physically, Hermione. In fact, I find you desirable, as I have told you before.”

Hermione swallowed and sat closer to the edge of the couch. Her knees were almost touching Lucius’s. If she was so desirable, why didn’t Snape desire her? The fact that he didn’t was torturing her. She breathed out slowly.

Don’t ask him what you want to ask him, a voice in her brain said. Don’t do it! But she couldn’t stop herself.

“W-what about me do you find desirable?”

The corners of Lucius’s mouth turned upwards. This was perfect. He gazed at her, his blue eyes sparkling with pleasure.

“You are forbidden fruit. I have never touched a Muggleborn. I have been taught that your kind are lesser creatures. I have enjoyed being feared by your kind, but when I was with you…hurting you… it was the first time I became sexually aroused by a Mudblood.”

“Were you ‘turned on’ because I was in pain? Afraid? Do you... ‘get off’ on pain?” Hermione tried to maintain her serious line of questions, but she knew her ears were turning pink.

“No. I was…I believe I was…”

Lucius’s smile faded. He was struggling, suddenly. He felt like something was bubbling up that he didn’t want to say, wasn’t sure of how it would emerge. He tried to contain it, to shape it, but words were flowing too easily now. His tongue was loose and languid.

“I was turned on because you challenged me and because you took my punishment with so much courage.”

What the hell was that, Lucius wondered! Hermione exhaled, relieved and surprised. He admires my courage?! She pressed on.

“Weren’t you ashamed?”

“Yes. I was taught that a Pureblood should never desire a Mudblood.”

“But you did desire me?”

“You know I did. And do.”

Hermione reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a small green box. Lucius recognized it
immediately. Hermione opened it and pulled out the Malfoy ring Lucius had given her. Its diamond sparkled brilliantly in the light, the emerald chips in the engraved snakes’ eyes shining.

“Do you remember this?”

“Of course.”

“I thought about throwing it into the Lake.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you remember what you made me say to you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to ask you something similar.”

“I am ready.”

His eyes were excited. He seemed to want to tell the truth to her. Hermione was nervous to ask this question, but she needed to. She didn’t know exactly why, but she needed reassurance that she was worth more than a brief, mechanical tumble in the dark.

“What about me do you admire? Physically?”

Lucius breathed in, considering what to say. It had to be the truth, but he didn’t want to scare her. He wanted to lure her in, entice her. He straightened his spine and leaned toward her a few inches, placing his elbows on his thighs. His handcuffed hands dangling between his knees.

“You’re a pretty girl, Hermione. With make-up and elegant clothes, you could even be considered beautiful. Your face is fine and your figure is pleasing. But those are ordinary things. Common to many witches. Anyone would find them admirable. What you really want to know is what I admire about you. What is unique to myself.”

Lucius leaned in a couple inches closer.

“Personally, I like the way you taste. I like the way your neck felt under my tongue. I loved its softness and how it reveals your emotional state. I love how much tension you hold in your body. I see those muscles in your neck right now, those poor tendons that struggle to connect shoulder to spine and I simply want to suck on them and nibble them until you coo and melt in relief. I admire your lips. Their softness and uncertainty. The sweetness when you pressed them to mine.”

“S-stop,” Hermione whispered.

“Stop it,” Hermione warned, again. “I…I didn’t! Not really…. ”

She had wanted to humiliate him, but he seemed to grow more powerful with each admission. He loved saying this to her, and it was making her feel like she was trapped underneath him once more.
Her cheeks were inflamed.

“Merlin, just *look* at you. You’re so *ready*, girl. It is bewitching how deep your need is, and it deeply arouses me. If these handcuffs were not restraining me, I would be tempted to take you into that bedroom, right over there, and spend hours showing you precisely how to take your pleasure. I would teach you how a wizard properly *takes* a witch.”

Lucius leaned back and exhaled, his blue eyes flashing at her in triumph.

Her eyes were blown wide and she was pink-cheeked and breathing heavily. Victory.

But then she did something rather unexpected. Hermione looked down and closed her eyes and leaned forward, burying her face in her hands. His shoulders heaved slightly, and Lucius realized she was crying quietly.

Hermione wasn’t sure she believed in Hell, but she was fairly certain she was in it. Her skin felt all prickly, and she knew she was aroused. She could feel the heat between her legs, beneath her jeans. Lucius Malfoy was obviously attempting to seduce her, and though she didn’t *want* him, Merlin, she wanted *someone*.

*Ron. Ron, I want you!*, she thought, bitterly. *I want you! I don’t want Snape. I don’t want Lucius. I don’t want you to be dead. I don’t want any of this.*

She exhaled and wiped her burgeoning tears away. Lucius probably thought she was a manic depressive, he had seen her cry enough times. But she wasn’t going to hide her raw emotion from him *now*. After all, he was the cause of most of it.

She rose and took Lucius’s wand up, setting it down on the credenza along with his ring-box, then put her robes back on. Lucius watched her quietly.

She pointed her wand at him and removed his manacles. She shook her head, lightly.

“This was a mistake.”

“No,” he uttered softly. “This is what you need.”

Hermione shook her head again.

“Just stay away from me.”

“Very well. But I shall be here at 8 o’clock every night. I will agree to any terms, and I swear I shall not so much as attempt to hold your hand unless you ask me to. It would be enough for me just to talk. Come to me if you need to discuss Severus.”

Hermione gathered her robes around herself and opened the door. She turned back to the blonde wizard, who was still sitting in the armchair.

“I don’t need anything from you,” she said, frowning in disgust. With that, she went, the door shutting firmly behind her.

Lucius sat in his chair and smiled.

*Oh, but you certainly do*, the wizard thought. And *you’re just beginning to know it.*

****
Hermione was staring at her feet as she walked along the Hogwarts corridor, heading for the Dungeons. Far from getting any kind of relief, her meeting with Lucius had filled her mind with confusion.

She felt profoundly guilty that Lucius was still able to create such feelings of lust inside of her. It made her feel helpless, and it made her feel like she was spitting on Ron’s grave. It made her feel like she was being disloyal to Severus. *Not that he deserves my fidelity,* she thought.

Even though she knew she would never give in to these feelings, the fact that they existed at all made her wonder if something was actually seriously wrong with her. Maybe she should be visiting her therapist at St. Mungo’s regularly. Maybe she just wasn’t quite right in the head.

So engrossed in her thoughts, she didn’t register the heavy footfalls behind her until a booming voice called out.

“Curfew was an hour ago. May I ask just where you think you’re going?”

Hermione stopped, her face draining of all colour. She turned around slowly, and let her cloak’s hood fall away.

Her husband stood at the other end of the corridor, all billowing black robes and sneering face. As he recognized her, he quickly darted his eyes about, making sure no one else was around.

He closed the distance between them and without another word, grabbed her by the arm, dragging her towards the Dungeons staircase.

“Let me go!” she struggled, freeing her bicep from his grasp and wheeling about. He narrowed his eyes at her and wrinkled his brow.

“What have you been?” he hissed at her. “I assumed you were in your chamber!”

“I had business.”

“At five to ten?”

“What do you care where I go and what I do?”

Snape maneuvered her until her back was against the wall. He loomed above her, all dark, steely eyes.

“How do you think it reflects on me, girl, to be handing out detentions to Fifth-Years for breaking curfew, when my own wife doesn’t abide by the rules?”

Hermione’s eyes widened in rage. She was sick of him treating her this way.

“Girl?!”

She took a step in to him, so that they were practically nose-to-nose.

“Don’t you dare call me ‘girl’ ever again! I am not a ‘girl’ anymore. *You* have seen to that. Twice now, in fact! I am a woman, and I will go where I want, when I want, and what I choose to tell you or not tell you is none of your concern!”

She turned to flee, but he placed one palm against the wall, boxing her in.

“You forget that you have taken an oath to obey me and that you are legally my property! So yes, I
am entitled to know where you are and what you are doing!”

“Oh, get over yourself!”

“Don’t you dare show disrespect to me.”

“You seem to be under a misapprehension! I have no respect for you!”

Snape curled his lips back and clenched his jaw, his entire frame beginning to quake with rage.

“Don’t you dare!”

“Oh, I dare!”

He stepped in to her, threateningly, but she just held his gaze. He had never seen her so defiant, so furious.

“Don’t you know that I hate you? I hate you, Severus Snape. I hate you!”

With that, Hermione ducked under his arm and fled the corridor. She ran all the way to their quarters and straight to her bedroom, slamming the door and casting a locking spell on it.

She grabbed the Dreamless Sleep on her bedside table and quickly put four drops of it into the glass of water next to it, swiftly glugging the entire thing down.

She only had time to remove her outer robes and toss them onto the floor before the powerful potion kicked in and she found herself slipping into unconsciousness.
Chapter 42

Hermione opened her eyes the next morning, groggily lolling her head slowly from side to side. She was still wearing her Muggle wrist-watch, and glanced down at it.

Holy moly! She jumped up. She was supposed to be at the Ministry ten minutes ago! I am so, so late!

She scrambled into her bathroom, splashing water on her face and giving her teeth a quick once-over with her toothbrush, then quickly changed into a blouse and long skirt. She flung open her bedroom door and made a beeline for the living room fireplace.

As she stepped into the large chamber, she paused. Snape was sitting at the kitchen table.

He looked up at her. He had dark circles under his eyes and his body language was even broodier than usual, his shoulders hunched inwards.

“I-I’m late,” Hermione stuttered in explanation as she jerked to a halt.

She felt guilty. She didn’t really hate him, and she was a little bit embarrassed and even appalled at her behavior the previous evening. But she also felt he had no idea how cruel he could be, how much suffering he had caused her and was causing her. Anyway, she didn’t have time to talk.

“I’ll be home by six o’clock for dinner.”

The dark wizard gave a simple nod. He watched, wordlessly, black eyes tracking her across the room as she stepped into the fireplace and floo’d to the Ministry.

Alone again, Snape leaned back in his dining room chair and stared into the abyss of the Lake on the far-side of the room. He’d slept little the previous night. He was well aware that he had made Hermione hate him.

Of course she would hate me.

He had known that was going to be a certainty the day he had married her. He was never going to be anyone’s ideal husband.

He had tried to reign in his anger and minimize the pain he inflicted on her body in doing their repugnant ‘duty’, but her continued defiance only served to remind him that she cared absolutely nothing for him. She didn’t care if she embarrassed him or endangered herself. She didn’t care if she made a mockery of his vows to her. She didn’t care that he was entrapped by her for the rest of his life. She was, deep down, still the spoiled Gryffindor Princess. Shortsighted and selfish. Perhaps a part of him hated her as well.

But then he thought about her eyes.

He thought about her eyes quite a lot now. A vision of them would appear before him as he was mid-lecture in the middle of the day. Her eyes were large for her face — they stood out among her pale features, small nose, and pert mouth. As a girl they had been wide and trusting. As a teenager they danced with intelligence and revealed everything she was thinking. There was still a fire in them now, still that raw intelligence, but last night he had seen something new in them.

Even without legilimency, he had noticed the profound suffering in them. She was suffering deeply now. More than he had seen when she had been abused by Lucius. More so than he had witnessed
in the weeks immediately following young Mr. Weasley’s unfortunate death.

In her eyes, quite plainly, was pain. The pain of having the life you wanted for yourself snatched away from you, he assumed. She had never wanted this marriage or this life. She had wanted Ronald Weasley and he had been taken from her. She had wanted love, and it had been denied her. She had probably wanted a say in her future, and had wanted to keep her innocence awhile longer.…

*Those, too, have been striped from her. By me. No wonder she hates me.* He hated himself.

****

That night, Hermione waited at the dining room table.

She checked her wrist-watch. It was half-past six. She wanted to apologize to Snape for what she had said. She had intended to prepare a meal for them, but had found she had no appetite.

Finally, she heard the front door open and heard Snape’s boots in the foyer. He appeared in the archway and paused. They looked at one another. He seemed uncertain whether to approach.

“Please, Severus, sit.”

He removed his outer robes and set them over a chair and came closer, then lowered his body into a seat so that he was across from her.

Hermione stared down at her hands, clasped together on top of the polished wooden table. She’d been thinking of what she had said all day. It had been almost impossible to focus on reviewing prophecies. The events the previous evening had gnawed away at her.

“I apologize,” she began, softly.

“There is no need,” he murmured.

Hermione glanced up. He was staring at her. Those fathomless black pupils so totally and utterly inscrutable. She couldn’t tell if he was barely tolerating her or wanted to engage.

“I have been remiss in my duty as your husband,” he spoke after a moment of silence.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small scroll, sliding it towards her. It had the seal of Gringotts on it.

“What is this?”

“I have opened an account for you. A substantial monthly allowance will be deposited for your use. You may spend it freely.”

Hermione looked down at the scroll in disbelief.

“I don’t need money, Severus.”

“Your apprenticeship at the Ministry barely pays you more than a stipend. It is part of our contract that I provide for you financially. In exchange, I request that you give me notice if you intend to leave the Hogwarts grounds past dark.”

Hermione sighed and nodded. *If only he would act more like her husband than her guardian.* If telling him where she was at all times would avoid ugly confrontations like last night, Hermione was willing to give him a damned Marauder’s Map to track her movements.
“Very well.”

*Is he giving me money because he feels guilty about the consummation? Oh God, is he basically paying me for sex?*

Hermione hadn’t thought she could feel any worse about their bedroom dealings, but somehow Snape managed to find a way. She sighed. *He really does have a knack for the wrong thing at the wrong time.*

Snape cleared his throat.

“I would like to make a proposal.”

Hermione looked up at him again.

“What kind of proposal?”

“It is clear we are having difficulties with the contract requirements. Specifically, the daily interaction. I propose we substitute our attempts at conversation with reading aloud.”

“You mean we would just read to one another once a day, instead of actually talking?”

Snape nodded.

“This way we do not have to converse. We can reduce the likelihood of argument between us. I believe it is the best option to fulfill the requirement of interaction in the long-term.”

Hermione felt like she was being stabbed through the heart with an ice-pick. She leaned forward on her elbows and stared deeply into Snape’s eyes.

“Is this what you want? Truly?”

“It is.”

She looked down again, crushed.

Snape pressed his lips together. He couldn’t understand her disappointment. Surely she didn’t want to converse with him, although she had always been a ‘talker’ as a girl. She could indulge her loquaciousness with Ginevra Weasley and Harry Potter to her heart’s content. He wasn’t saying she couldn’t talk at all. He certainly got no pleasure from their idle chatter in the mornings about the weather, and if she did, then she wasn’t deserving of seven ‘OUTSTANDINGS’ on her NEWTs after all.

“Alright,” Hermione agreed. “What would you like us to read?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

*No, Hermione thought. It really doesn’t to him, does it? It’s all just ticking a box.*

“I have your book on Midlands Mites in my room. I’m almost done with it. I could read it aloud while you eat?”

Severus nodded. “That is acceptable.”

Hermione fetched it. She read aloud to him for fifteen minutes. When the time was up, he promptly rose, moving his dish to the sink with a wave of his hand.
“I have work to do. Good evening.”

He turned and entered his lab, closing the door behind him. *A room I still haven’t even seen the inside of,* Hermione thought sadly as she closed the book.

There was so much about Severus Snape she still knew *nothing* about.

She sighed and headed back to her room.

****

Hermione allowed the days to bleed together now.

She would wake up, dress, and join Severus at the dining room table for breakfast. Rather than exchange pleasantries, one of them would pick up *The Daily Prophet* or lift a book from the small stack they now kept permanently off to one side and read aloud.

They took turns, dividing up the time.

After precisely fifteen minutes, Severus would rise, give her a nod, and depart to teach his morning classes. She would floo to the Ministry.

Evenings they spent apart. Nothing had changed, fundamentally. *Except now we literally do not even speak,* Hermione thought.

Hermione threw herself into helping Ginny with the wedding planning. The Hogwarts graduation ceremony was only two weeks away, and Harry and Ginny were planning a big wedding in a tent on the Hogwarts grounds the following Saturday night. The entire school was buzzing about it. It was going to be a graduation celebration and the wedding-of-the-season rolled into one, and the entire Seventh-Year class was invited.

Hermione was so happy for Ginny and Harry, but the more time she spent helping them plan — evenings up in Gryffindor Tower making seating arrangements, selecting music, brainstorming centerpieces and party favors — the more the *ache* over her own loveless marriage grew.

In the evenings she would lie in her bed and think about Ron. Sometimes she would take Dreamless Sleep so she wouldn’t think about him. She didn’t know if Snape was still tracking her intake, but she didn’t care.

She had avoided Hogsmeade completely, and hadn’t seen Lucius at the Ministry all week. He hadn’t owled her. *Maybe he’s going to let me go at last,* she thought. But she knew that wasn’t the truth. Lucius Malfoy was a very patient man.

Saturday night arrived again, and their third evening as man-and-wife was a re-enactment of the first two Saturdays.

The bath. The lubricant charm. Waiting on the bed. The knock at the door. Snape fully dressed. *Nox.* The quick consummation. This time Snape didn’t apologize before he left. He simply slipped out of her room as quickly as possible.

Hermione lay on her bed, legs still spread, feeling the trickle of Snape’s essence; she felt completely numb inside.

There was no pain between her legs this time, though the pressure of Snape’s body inside hers was a bit uncomfortable still. And there had, in fact, been a moment in which the feeling of fullness had
been rather nice, but then she had been reminded of the strangeness of the situation, and Snape’s unwillingness, and any fleeting feeling of pleasure quickly ebbed.

The pain in her heart was so heavy.

How could she continue in this way? How is Snape okay with this? It was even worse now that they didn’t actually speak to one another except for “Hello” and “Good evening” and the reading aloud. True, they didn’t argue. But they didn’t communicate at all now. Hermione thought the relief at not arguing would have made things easier, but to be completely cut off from even broaching conversation with Snape had made things ten times worse.

Several times she would have a question pop into her head about the book she was reading aloud to him, or the book he was reading aloud to her, and she would have to bite her tongue, reminding herself that Snape did not want to converse, and was no longer her teacher.

He was under no obligation to answer her academic questions and clearly would take no joy in discussing her intellectual interests. She didn’t want him to see her as a nosy, inquisitive, little chit. She wanted his respect. So she bit her tongue. Tried to abide by his new rules.

She felt like Snape had built a massive fortification between them, and Hermione couldn’t imagine it was possible for a human being to feel any lonelier than she felt lying on her bed — her husband having just had sex with her as quickly as possible and then fleeing her presence as expeditiously as he was capable.

He’s taken what he wanted, Hermione thought, bitterly, though she knew Snape didn’t want to have sex with her. He continued to call it a duty. He doesn’t want to have sex with me so much that he cannot even do it with the lights on! He cannot even bear to see who it is he’s screwing! She felt nauseous, but breathed in deeply through her nostrils.

She knew there were many different types of pain in the world. Some of them she had experienced.

But perhaps, for a woman, to not be loved or desired by one’s husband was the worst.

How am I going to survive this?, Hermione wondered. This cannot go on forever.

****

Hermione was still thinking about Saturday night on the following Monday morning when she sat at her desk in the Hall of Prophecies when the doors at the far end opened and Phillipus Mott entered followed by Lucius Malfoy.

Hermione stood as they approached. Both Mott and Lucius gave her a small bow.

“I am terribly sorry to disturb you, Hermione. I know this may be uncomfortable for you, but Lord Malfoy has recently revealed an interesting piece of information about Bellatrix. The Aurors have requested we look into it. It seems that we may be in possession of a prophecy concerning Bellatrix. If we can locate it, it may help them track her down.”

“I see.”

Mott coughed and looked between Lucius and Hermione. Hermione was avoiding eye contact, while Lucius’s pale blue eyes simply fixated on her like a cat that has located its prey, a small curl playing on his upper lip.

“I realize this may not be ideal, but if you would be willing to work with Lord Malfoy to locate the
specific prophecy, I believe that would be most expeditious. He will not be permitted to enter the Hall without your presence, and rest-assured his movement in the building is always tracked.”

“I believe Miss Granger knows how to keep me in line,” Lucius offered, smirking.

Mott hesitated. Hermione’s expression seemed uncertain.

“But of course it is your decision entirely, Hermione.”

Hermione finally looked over at Lucius. He looked entirely smug. Hermione tossed her hair and looked back at Mott.

“Do you know why I am uncomfortable in Lord Malfoy’s presence?”

Mott swallowed. “I…um…err…I suppose because of your former betrothal…”

“Lord Malfoy assaulted me during our betrothal.”

Mott’s eyes grew to the size of dinner plates.

“What—?!”

“It’s true.”

Hermione began to walk in a slow circle around Lucius.

“You see what you have here is a specimen of a Pureblood wizard. One who likes to believe he is a gentleman. But the truth is he is simply a pathetic bully. He tried to make me do what he wanted by grabbing my body, slapping me, torturing me, threatening me. The bruises have only recently healed. So, Mr. Mott, you can see that this makes the situation far more than ‘uncomfortable.’ Everything I am saying is true, isn’t it Lucius?”

Hermione stopped at Mott’s side. Lucius clenched his jaw. Hermione could see a flash of anger in his eyes. She knew he was embarrassed, exposed. Good.

“Isn’t it true you assaulted me, Lucius?”

“Is it, Lord Malfoy?” Mott asked, eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Everything she is saying…is true.” Lucius gave a deep nod and continued.

“I make no excuses for it. My behavior towards her was appalling. I treated Hermione as if the War was still on and she was an enemy I had to subdue. I did not treat her as a Pureblood wizard would treat his future wife. And I now see that it was an unforgivable mistake.”

Mott took a step back in shock.

“It was more than a mistake, Malfoy! She has every right to go to the Aurors immediately and file charges!”

Hermione turned to Mott.

“Sir, I have considered it, yet decided against it. For now. I would prefer to simply move forward in my career and with my marriage to Lord Snape and forget all about my brief regrettable engagement to Lord Malfoy. In fact, I am sure I will eventually forget all about him altogether.”
Mott looked at her, concerned.

“Are you sure you can proceed? I’m not sure I feel comfortable leaving you here with Lord Malfoy to work. It does not feel appropriate, and I don’t want you to be at risk, Hermione.”

Hermione took a deep breath.

“No. I want to be the one to bring Bellatrix to justice. I want her to go to Azkaban for the rest of her life. I will find this prophecy, and I will give the Aurors every bit of help I can to make sure she is captured swiftly.”

Mott nodded. “What do you require?”

“I wish to make a request. I want Lord Malfoy to make an Unbreakable Vow to me. First, I wish him to vow that he will do his best to help me locate Bellatrix Lestrange and find this prophecy. Secondly, I wish him to vow that he will never touch my person without my express permission. If he agrees to both terms, I will allow him to assist me.”

Lucius’s eyes widened at this. Mott turned to the platinum-haired wizard.

“What say you, Lord Malfoy?”

Lucius fixed his gaze on Hermione. Her brown eyes dared him to say ‘no.’ He weighed the pros and cons quickly, before smiling his cat-like grin once again.

“I will do whatever is necessary to assist. I wish to make Miss Granger—“

“—You mean, Lady Snape.”

“Yes, of course. I wish to make Lady Snape as comfortable as possible in my presence. I would never harm her person again.”

Mott looked at Lucius suspiciously, then to Hermione.

“And you are alright with this, my dear?”

“If he will take the vow.”

“I shall take it.”

Hermione turned to Mott. “Will you officiate?”

Mott nodded and took out his wand. Slowly, both Hermione and Lucius raised their hands and clasped them together. Right-hand to right-hand.

Hermione shuddered at the feel of his cool, pale skin against hers. Those elegant fingers she now knew so well. He seemed a little awkward, uncertain. Perfect, she thought. Exposing him to Mott had given her the upper hand. She was about to win.

She stared into the sparkling eyes of Lucius Malfoy and began:

“Will you, Lucius Malfoy, to the best of your ability, assist me to locate any prophecy related to Bellatrix Lestrange and assist me in finding her whereabouts?”

“I will.”
“And will you swear to never harm my physical person again, to never again so much as touch me without my permission?”

“I will.”

Mott’s wand issued a thin red streak from its tip, which wound itself tightly around Lucius and Hermione’s right forearms as they spoke. Like a piano wire, it tightened about their hands, and Hermione felt a tingly pulse throughout her entire forearm.

After a few moments, the red flame dissipated, and both Hermione and Lucius unclasped their hands, breathing heavily. Mott replaced his wand in his sleeve.

“Are you alright?” Mott asked Hermione.

She nodded and glanced at Lucius. He seemed shaken, but otherwise normal.

Mott turned to Lucius Malfoy.

“I expect you to act appropriately around Hermione. Though you are bound not to touch her, she shall report to me daily on your behavior. If you so much as make her remotely agitated, I will report as much to the Aurors. Your probation is contingent on how well you assist Hermione. I shall return in a few hours.”

Mott gave a suspicious glance at Lucius and an encouraging nod to Hermione and then spun around on his heels and exited, leaving them alone.

“Well done, girl,” Lucius murmured after the door had been shut.

Hermione took a few steps away in annoyed silence, and then turned about. Lucius was standing tall in his elegant frock-coat. He began to remove it slowly, revealing a green vest and cravat. He began to roll up the sleeves of his white button-up.

“I suppose this shall be quite hard work?” he asked with a smile.

“Oh, shut up,” Hermione replied.

“I must admit, I didn’t see that coming. Very good, Hermione. But please, know I had no intention of using this opportunity to assault you. I’m not interested in bending you to my will anymore. I’m interested in pleasing you. In us finding some mutual pleasure.”

Hermione snorted. “I don’t believe that for one second.”

“I made a vow to you on our wedding day. Don’t you recall? You didn’t have the chance to repeat it, but I made that vow. I told you that day that I had only made the vow once before — to Narcissa — and that I took it very seriously. And I do. I take all vows seriously. Including this Unbreakable Vow. I may not have acted properly towards you, but I have never broken a single vow I made to you.”

“Well, now you won’t be able to act improperly. If you attempt to touch me without my permission, you risk death!”

“I am well aware,” the blonde wizard replied, softly.

Hermione turned back to her desk and cleared some of the papers to one side.

“What kind of prophecy are we looking for, exactly?”
“Rabastan confided in me once that his brother Rodolphus had told him of a prophecy concerning he and Bellatrix. It had been made just prior to Voldemort’s return. Sybill Trelawney was the seer.”

“What was this prophecy about?”

“He wouldn’t tell me, except that it had caused a rift between Rodolphus and Bellatrix, and that Rodolphus believed that Bellatrix might become too powerful.”

“Professor Trelawny’s prophecies are not exactly known for being consistently accurate. Frankly, her Divination class was a bit of a joke.”

Lucius smiled.

“Perhaps. But I believe she has been right when it counted, wouldn’t you agree?”

Hermione nodded begrudgingly, and gestured to several thousand spherical crystal balls with bluish-grey mist swirling about inside of them over in one corner.

“I’ve got many of the salvaged prophecies roughly categorized by age now. Those are the most recent ones. When was the prophecy made, exactly?”

“I don’t know, but I would venture about five years ago.”

“I can start with the ones from 1993 and work forwards. We should look for the ones labelled ’S.P.T.’ Unfortunately, Trelawny has made numerous prophecies, so we’ll have to scan almost all of them to learn the content. It’s sort of a mess down here.”

Lucius nodded in agreement. “Then perhaps we should begin?”

Two hours later and Hermione and Lucius were deep in their system of analyzing prophecies. Hermione would record the label associated with the prophecy, if it had one, and then tap her wand against the crystal sphere. A series of words and images would appear, and she would note them on a scroll. She would then create a new label, then hand the sphere off to Lucius, who would put it in its appropriate place in the ever-growing stacks.

Hermione hated to admit it, but having Lucius assist her was helping her move twice as fast. Each time images appeared of a Death-eater, or the name of an individual she didn’t recognize, she would ask Lucius and he would often know who it was. She’d identified prophecies regarding many Wizarding families: Kararoffs, Pettigrews, Rookwoods, Rowles, Selwyns, and Carrows.

She would then cross-check with images of the wizards to confirm. So many names and family members she did not recognize, but Lucius did, and he was right every time. If there was one good thing about Pureblood families, it was that they were all obsessed with geneology and family dynasty, Hermione thought. Everybody knows everybody!

Hermione set her quill down and stretched her limbs, feeling a bit achy from being hunched over the desk for so long. It was approaching lunchtime. Lucius returned from one of the aisles where he had been placing a sphere.

“Are you tired?”

Hermione glared at him. “I’m fine.”

“We can take a break.”
“No, thank you.”

“Come. It must be lunch-time. Surely, you believe in eating?”

His blue eyes twinkled. Hermione relented. She quickly wrote down a lunch order and slipped it into a pneumatic-tube along the wall. She watched as it disappeared along the pipes.

“We can get food delivered. It’s best we continue.”

“What did you order us?”

“Sandwiches.”

“Sand-wiches?” Lucius pronounced each syllable with utter disgust, as if Hermione had ordered fried roaches.

He took a few steps closer and sat upon one corner of the desk.

“You look rather stressed. May I suggest we take a proper meal outside?”

“Your presence is the most likely cause of my stress,” she retorted. “Go file these prophecies.”

Lucius frowned.

“Would you prefer I do not assist you?”

“No. But I would prefer you don’t talk to me while doing so.”

“That is absurd. Come. Let me treat you to lunch at the Savoy.”

Hermione looked up at him and rolled her eyes. “Do you think I would be seen out and about in London with you? You’re out of your head, Malfoy! We’d just be giving Rita Skeeter ammunition.”

Lucius smiled. “Very well. Not in London, or at the Manor, I suppose. Would you take lunch in Hogsmeade? Neutral territory, as it were? It should be relatively quiet now.”

Hermione knew this was a terrible idea, but she was feeling cooped up, and the Hall’s cavernous echoes were beginning to grate on her.

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A few minutes later they had apparated to Hogsmeade. The cool air and sunshine felt good on Hermione’s face.

Hermione followed Lucius into a small restaurant Hermione had never been in before. *Le Petit Cochon* was a charming establishment that sold a variety of French foods — most of which were not remotely tempting to the average Hogswarts student— escargots, bouillabaisse, and something Hermione wasn’t entirely certain was not made of frogs’ legs. It was rather upscale — white tablecloths and elegant-vested waiters. A thin-lipped concierge with slicked back hair stood behind a tall desk with a reservation book open in front of him. He frowned as they approached.

“A table for two.”

“Ah, Monsieur Malfoy. *Je suis désolé, mais je ne peux pas vous asseoir.*”

“*Et pourquoi pas?*”
“*Le propriétaire. Il ne le permettra pas.*”

Hermione strained to understand with her smattering of French. Malfoy was apparently displeased.

“But you have *plenty* of tables,” Lucius responded, gesturing. “Monsieur Lapotaire, the owner, is a very old friend.”

“*Ouai, mais...* I am afraid Monsieur Lapotaire’s son is the new owner. And he does not... he won’t allow... *c’est-à-dire...* erm...”

Suddenly, a large, scowling man descended the stairs near the front door.

“It’s all right, Raoul. I’ll deal with this.”

The concierge gave a guilty nod and scuttled away.

“I’m sorry, Lord Malfoy, but we do not have a table for you.”

“Nonsense. I had a private dining room upstairs on retainer for the past decade. Your father—“

“—I am not my father, Lord Malfoy, and I do not share his views. Former Death-eaters are no longer welcome in this establishment. We do not want *your* kind here. I suggest you leave before you cause a scene.”

A look of pure hatred crossed Lucius’s face, and for a moment Hermione worried he was going to take out his wand and hex the owner. Indeed, he lifted his arm and began to move his other hand towards the sleeve. Hermione quickly leaned forward and grabbed Lucius’s sleeve, lightly.

“It’s alright. Let’s go.”

Shocked into silence and still simmering with rage, Lucius followed her out.

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Ten minutes later they were in the living room of Lucius’s Hogsmeade flat. Hermione had popped into Dafydd’s Delicatessen to get them lunch. It was sandwiches after all. She sat on the couch eating her chicken-pesto. Lucius faced away from her, staring out the open French windows into the street below.

“You might want to eat something. I only take an hour.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Don’t pout. So what they kicked you out? You can’t expect the average wizard to respect you now, what with everything you did in the War.”

Lucius turned back around, his eyes contemplative.

“I am not *pouting*, my dear. I was just thinking of the irony. I believed that Muggleborns were not fit to be in my presence, and now it appears that there are some Purebloods who believe I am not fit to be in theirs.”

“Lapotaire’s family is Pureblood?”
“Indeed. And old French Pureblood family. Slumming it in Hogsmeade retail, if you ask me. Yet Pureblood.”

“Everyone ought to be judged on their actions, not their blood status. And it is your own choices and your own actions that are causing people to judge you now, Lucius. You deserve it, frankly. No one wants to be friends with a murderer and a torturer.”

“Hmmm, perhaps…”

Malfy sat across from her.

“I really did think it was exceptionally clever the way you outed me in front of Mott,” he spoke with a sly smile.

“Well, I can’t have everyone at the Ministry thinking you’ve turned a new leaf. I know what you really are.”

“And what am I?”

Hermione took a deep breath, putting her lunch down. She leaned back at the couch, studying his pale visage thoughtfully. He couldn’t hurt her now, couldn’t even touch her without risking death. There was nothing to prevent her from landing the brutal truth upon him. If he wants it, then fine, I’ll give it to him.

“You’re broken, Lucius. Your wife and son are gone. You’ve lost the War, and you’ve lost the respect of your peers. You think helping me and the Ministry will repair some of the damage — and it might — but you will never again command the power and respect you once had. And for someone with an ego as enormous as yours, it’s a hideous thing to consider.”

Lucius stared back at her, his blue eyes flickering slightly. He stared at her a long time. Hermione swallowed. His gaze was unnerving.

“I do believe… you are… correct.”

Lucius leaned back in the armchair and lifted one arm onto the armrest, bending it at the elbow so his hand could lightly stroke his chin. He gazed off into the middle-distance, thoughtfully.

Hermione went back to her lunch. She stole a few glances at him every now and then but he kept the same position — lost in thought. She could feel something in her heart go out to him. Stop it, _Hermione, don’t you dare feel sorry for him. You know what he is capable of! He’s probably just playing the sympathy card._

After some time, Lucius looked back at her.

“How are things with Severus?”

Hermione sighed.

“Can we not discuss this?”

“Certainly, though I do believe I am in a unique position to advise you.”

“Why do you care?”

“You were honest with me just now, Hermione. I don’t think it will surprise you that no one has been so honest with me since the War ended. I did not see your value before… I believed that you
were not worth anything simply because of your blood status. I see my mistake. You’re worth a great deal. I know Severus, and I know that he will not see you as anything more than an inconvenience. I want to try to help you. You deserve a better husband.”

“Well, I can’t change my husband!” Hermione snapped.

“No, but you can try to change your marriage,” Lucius countered.

“And how could I do that?”

“Sex.”

Hermione felt her ears turn pink.

“You’re a lovely, sensual young witch. I was able to discover a great deal of physical chemistry with you, and that was even while I believed you were nothing but a filthy Mudblood. You should be able to experience the same with Severus.”

“But he can’t love me. You said as much.”

Lucius snickered slightly.

“Oh, Hermione, there is such a difference between sex and romantic love.”

“I know that. I’m not an idiot. It’s just…that wasn’t what I…”

“It wasn’t what you wanted?”

Hermione shook her head, sadly.

“I understand. You wanted Mr. Weasley. You wanted a marriage with both romantic love and satisfying sex. There is nothing wrong with that. That is what most young witches and wizards want.”

Hermione felt a lump in her throat. She couldn’t talk about Ron with his killer! She stood up.

“It’s time we go back.”

“We have plenty of time.”

“I’d rather…I’d rather not discuss my marriage with you. And if you so much as mention Ron’s name again, so help me I will go to the Aurors and press charges!”

“Hermione, I will respect your wishes. But I am the reason you rushed into this marriage with Severus, and now I see how much you suffer because of it. I know I can help you to enjoy it, and to build a stronger connection to your husband.”

“I have no intention of letting you have sex with me, if that is what you mean by ‘helping’ me.”

Lucius laughed.

“I have to admit, that would be the most efficient method of instructing you. And I would eagerly take advantage.”

“Of course you would,” Hermione rolled her eyes.
“Now, you’ve always been a top-student with a desire for knowledge. Do you think I know my subject or not?”

Hermione looked at him — his entire lower body was languid and loose, draped over the armchair, while his upper body had a poised, feline energy. He was so undeniably sexual.

“I am sure you do,” she sighed, making a slight face.

“Well, then, let’s see if we can help you use your ‘feminine wiles’ to bring Severus closer to you.”

Hermione sat.

“Do you swear this conversation does not leave this room?”

“I swear. Now…you mentioned that you had tried to please him, but he didn’t respond. I know you had very limited experience before you came to his bed.”

Not even his bed, Hermione thought, tapping her fingers on the couch cushion uncomfortably and nodding silently.

“I am assuming Severus took the lead and showed you the way?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, we do it the way he…prefers, but he obviously sees it as nothing more than a duty.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s told me as much. And he…he does the bare minimum.”

Lucius cocked his head to the right and leaned forward a little.

“Have you orgasmed yet?”

Hermione felt her face redden and she put her hands into her palms.

“Oh, God!” I can’t do this. This is so embarrassing!

“My apologies for the vulgarity, but I do need to understand.”

Hermione snapped her head back up.

“No, if it makes you feel better, I have not had an orgasm yet!”

“It does not make you feel better. I would like you to orgasm. I would love to give you one myself,” Lucius said, giving her a small smirk.

“Well, that is certainly not happening!”

“Alright, alright, calm down.”

Lucius leaned forward and reached his hands towards her.

“May I touch your hands?”
Hermione nodded, and she watched as Lucius took one of her hands in between his and began to gently massage it.

“I truly don’t want to humiliate you.”

“It’s a bit late for that.”

“Has Severus tried to please you at all? When you’re in bed together?”

“No.”

“I see.”

Lucius’s strong hands worked over her small ones. He frowned and slightly furrowed his brow.

“He keeps me at arm’s length,” she whispered.

Lucius nodded and suddenly stood, holding his hand out to hers. She took it and he lifted her to standing, then moved her over to a simple wooden chair and seated her in it.

“I have several ideas, though all of which may require some physical touch. I will ask your permission every step of the way. I believe that you must try to find your own pleasure in your encounters with Severus. You must try to enjoy it. He will respond more to you as you respond.”

“I’ve tried…but he…he doesn’t even want to kiss me!”

Lucius took this in.

*Severus Snape really was a damned fool. She was so pliable and starved for affection. Honestly, for a kind word and a few kisses she’d probably be down on her knees every night like clockwork.* He considered that charming image for a few seconds, before shaking it off.

“Step 1, when you go to him, you must be prepared.”

Hermione shrugged.

“I use a lubrication charm and I bathe.”

“No, I mean you must ease your body into feeling sexual. Before your next consummation, I want you to give your entire body a massage. Don’t even focus on the area between your legs. Massage your lower back, your thighs, your bottom. Rub some soothing balm into your muscles. Just connect with yourself. You are, by nature, a rather tense individual, Hermione. I personally find it extremely charming, but you must learn to quiet your brain and allow your body to take over.”

“I…I guess I can do this.”

“Good. May I massage your upper back with my hands?”

Lucius stood behind the chair.

“Alright, but only my shoulders, and you must be gentle.”

Suddenly she felt his hands on either side of his spine. They were strong and covered almost her entire shoulder blades. She exhaled as his thumbs found the sore spot in her trapezius.

“See? Your muscles are *so eager* to relax. They just need the stimulation and the permission.”
Hermione gave a small nod. She closed her eyes and leaned back into his hands. He massaged her through her blouse in silence for a couple minutes until he could feel that she had relaxed quite a bit. He removed his hands and walked around to face her. Hermione’s eyes fluttered open.

“Do you feel how you are in a different head-space?”

She nodded. She felt almost droopy, she was so relaxed.

“Step 2, we need to make sure that you are positioned in a way that is likely to provide you with maximum pleasure.”

“Oh, um…”

“What?”

“We haven’t tried… we aren’t really…I mean, it’s only been a few…”

“Are you saying it has been the same each time?”

“Yes.”

“Missionary?”

“Um. Yes.”

If Hermione didn’t look so nervous, Lucius would have thrown back his head and laughed uproariously. Of course, Severus Snape would completely waste this opportunity and simply go with missionary every time. It was beyond ridiculous.

“Have you asked him for anything different?”

“No! I don’t think I could…and I mean… it’s… it’s fine, I guess.”

“But you’re aren’t receiving much satisfaction from it?”

“Not really.”

“Show me.”

Hermione jumped out of the chair.

“Okay, this is really way too far. Look, I appreciate the advice. I will try to relax and make the sex better, but I’m not going to have sex with you, Lucius. I told you that! I think it’s time we head back now.”

Lucius put up both hands and laughed.

“I don’t mean let’s have sex, Hermione. I just meant show me your body positions. Clothes on!”

“I’m not—”

“—all I need is permission for my hips to touch your inner thighs. I won’t touch you with any other part of my body.”

“Alright, fine!”

Hermione walked over to the dining room table on the far side of the room and hopped up,
demonstrating.

“Look, it’s exactly what you’d imagine. I’m just lying there, like this. And my legs are apart and then he’s on top. There? Do you get it?”

Lucius examined her thoughtfully and moved towards her. Hermione moved towards the center of the table and tilted her head up, watching as Lucius placed one knee on the table and crawled up and over her. His blue eyes never breaking eye contact.

He settled between her so that his hips rested between her inner thighs. Hermione sucked in some air. Lucius’s handsome face was only inches from hers. She felt a small twinge of pleasure between her legs. Annoyed, she cleared her throat.

“So, I mean, that’s it.”

“And is he positioned like this?”

“Well, no. He’s…he’s never that close.”

“What do you mean?”

“His face. His upper body. He keeps it…away from me.”

Lucius leaned back on his haunches so that his upper body was no longer horizontal above Hermione.

“Like this?”

Hermione nodded.

Lucius looked down. Hermione had been right, Severus really was doing the bare minimum.

“Most witches do not orgasm from penetration, as I am sure you know. For the act to become more pleasurable for you, you must feel friction against your clitoris. In this position, you can see that my pelvis is too far from yours. They need to touch.”

Hermione leaned up at her elbows and looked down. Lucius was right. There was a huge amount of distance between them.

“But if he doesn’t want to, what can I do about it?”

Lucius smiled.

“Wizards are very susceptible to suggestion in the bedroom, Hermione. If you’re comfortable, I want you to raise your legs up around my hips and cross your ankles. Try to pull me towards you.”

Hermione took a deep breath and gently lifted her legs up, then wrapped them around Lucius. She could feel some wetness now between her legs and a flutter in her stomach. Oh Merlin, just his proximity is doing this to me!

Slowly, she pressed her thighs around him, and locked her ankles around his back, then pulled her knees inwards. Lucius fell forward, supporting his weight on his hands by her shoulders. She felt his pelvis press against her own, her skirt riding up around her hips between them. Oh, it feels so good!

“You see, in this position he must press against you as he thrusts, so there will be much more sensation for you.”
Merlin, I can already feel some of it, Hermione marveled, as Lucius gave a tiny demonstrative push of his hips.

“It’s better like this, isn’t it? More intimate?” Lucius whispered.

Hermione nodded. She could feel herself breathing a bit heavily in and out of her nostrils.

“Step 3,” Lucius murmured, gazing down at her. “You must learn to be an active participant.”

“What do you mean?”

“As a wizard moves in and out, you will derive more pleasure if you bear down.”

“In what way?”

“May I touch your hand and fingers again?”

Hermione nodded. She watched Lucius, still lying above her, their pelvises connected through their clothing.

Slowly, he folded down every finger into her palm except her index finger.

“Feel the difference.”

Lucius raised her hand, and without so much as a warning, slipped her index finger into his mouth.

Hermione’s eyes opened wide. Lucius was moving her hand in and out of his mouth, languidly. She could feel the wet, sticky warmth of his tongue and inner muscles upon it. And while she knew it should disgust her, she couldn’t draw back. She could only watch. He pulled her hand back.

“Now, see how this feels.”

Lucius moved her finger towards his mouth again and moved it in and out once more.

This time, he sucked his cheeks inwards, so that she could see the hollows. There was a gripping suction on her finger now and it took more effort to remove from Lucius’s mouth. After a couple seconds, he pulled it out, and gently began to wipe his saliva off her finger with a handkerchief from his pocket.

“Did you feel that difference?”

Hermione nodded. She was speechless. She could feel all the blood in her head upon her red cheeks.

Lucius looked down at her and smiled. He didn’t expect much in the way of follow-up questions to Lesson #3.

“You must see what feels good to you. I suggest that when he thrusts forward, you think of opening yourself up like a flower. When he pulls backwards, that is when you should try to tighten up around him, almost like you want to keep him inside. But you will find naturally what feels best. Is that clear?”

Hermione nodded.

“I think one final lesson, and then we’ll be getting back.”

“Al-right.”
Though he hated to remove himself from her, Lucius was certain he had reached the limit of what he could get away with today. He slid backwards off the table and reached out a hand to help Hermione down. Blushing, she pushed her long skirt back down and leaned against the table.

“Step 4, enjoying sex is also a mental exercise, and I believe this step will be very important to you, especially. Arousal happens in the mind. You must have a thought or a phrase that you can repeat in your brain. Something that turns you on. A sexy idea you can come back to when you feel self-conscious or anxious.”

“I don’t know what that would be.”

“What have your thoughts been like during sex so far? Would you say they have been pleasurable?”

“No.”

“Then, let’s change that. Let’s choose something simple. You feel Severus does not desire you, but I want to let you in on a little secret: all wizards desire young, sexy women. He may not have wanted a marriage to you, but rest assured that when he is inside of you, there is an animal-part of his brain that is incapable of not enjoying it. It is pleasure beyond your imagining how good it feels, Hermione. Whatever his brain tells him, his cock will always love to be inside you.”

Lucius smiled down at the chestnut-haired witch. Her lips were pressed together, her chest heaving lightly, her pupils wide.

*It is so wonderful having this effect on her,* he thought. *She may not be quite ready yet, but oh yes, quite soon, she will let me have her.*

Lucius reached into his vest-pocket and pulled out a pocket-watch. He looked up at the aroused witch, his face almost bored-looking.

“I suppose we should head back to that dreary Hall now. Shall we?”
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

A few quick notes:

1) Sincere apologies at the delay. 18 days! I’m a monster.
2) Will aim for once-a-week going forward, but work has gotten VERY busy so cannot guarantee.
3) I am NOT abandoning the story. I will see it through to the very end. Promise.
4) I am keeping the “M” rating for now, but let me know if it should be changed to “E” (don't wish to offend!).

Finally, THANK YOU for all of your lovely comments!

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Hermione wandered the Hogwarts’ grounds at dusk.

It was almost dark now, but she was still flustered, and couldn’t manage to head inside. She didn’t want to stay out past dark. Severus would be furious again if she returned late, and she truly did not wish to break her promise to him.

But she needed the cool air and the twinkling stars and the wide, dark-purple and red sky disappearing along the horizon. It calmed her.

The rest of the day had been a mixture of embarrassment and agony. After they had returned to the Hall, she and Lucius had resumed their system of analyzing and testing the prophecies. The only difference was that she felt a tingle throughout her body when their fingertips grazed each others as she handed him the next orb. She had permitted that touch under the Vow — it was necessary, after all, as they went about their work.

Lucius’s words were ever-present in her head. She knew she had been manipulated. It felt incredibly wrong.

She had floo’d back to the Dungeons immediately after work at the Ministry, then left for the grounds before Snape could return from teaching.

Now, she walked along the green grass and tried not to think about handsome, devilish, insistent Lord Lucius Malfoy. He made her sick. Her own weakness made her sick. She thought of him kneeling between her legs, leering down at her with his shining blue eyes.

*It is more about the ‘win’ for him. He doesn’t care about you. He’s just like Snape. You are just a toy for him. Lucius simply thinks it would be amusing to bed you. He’s probably bragging to the remaining Death-eaters over a whiskey at his club right now about how close he had gotten to seducing that pathetic little Mudblood bookworm ‘Miss Granger.’*

Hermione sighed and kicked up the leaves as she walked.

She knew she was simply being drawn into his orbit because she was lonely and insecure in her
marriage. Lucius was a Slytherin to his core. He wanted to take advantage. Why are you allowing him to?, she wondered.

She knew she didn’t care for Lucius Malfoy…but how had he been able to make her feel such things? It was profoundly unsettling. It made her skin crawl. Lust was a confusing idea for her. It made her feel morally feeble. If I were a better person, I wouldn’t be so drawn to Ron’s murderer. I should be able to control myself.

Only Ron had made her feel comfortable with her desires in the past. Had helped her feel worthy of physical love. He had helped her overcome her physical shyness. It had taken her so long to even work up the courage to be sexual with Ron, and he had been so patient and encouraging. She remembered how she used to be so timid and quiet and Ron would whisper to her, “We can do anything you want to do. Or we can do nothing at all.” And he would kiss her on the tip of her nose.

In hindsight, she wished they had moved faster. She wished she had given herself to Ron. He had been the only one to make her feel truly sensual.

And now Lucius had achieved the same. Had made her feel warm and tingly all over, so full of electrical charge. It felt so unfair. Her beloved and her beloved’s murderer, eliciting the same reaction in her body. It shouldn’t be possible! Especially not after all the physical abuse Malfoy has put me through!

Hermione felt a tightening in her stomach. Maybe I am just a Mudblood whore. God! Stop it! Stop that! Don’t think that way.

She walked by Ron’s memorial. The gleaming white, carrara stone reflected the fading beams of the sunset. She looked at the large lettering, engraved on the plaque at the top, that read “Ronald Weasley, 1980-1998. Gryffindor.” The comfortable, carved seats. The pretty benches.

She wanted to stop — to run up the steps, and wrap her arms around Ron’s headstone at the top and say, “I am so sorry. I don’t know what is wrong with me! I didn’t mean to betray you!”

But she didn’t do that. She felt as if his memorial was silently judging her. Would Ron forgive me?, she wondered. Her queasiness was not subsiding.

You laid down on a table and spread your legs for Lucius-freaking-Malfoy!, her brain whispered. What the hell is wrong with you? Maybe I am damaged beyond repair, she wondered.

Maybe I have Stockholm Syndrome? Maybe I am too weak? Maybe I just cannot fight Lucius? Maybe I don’t even know myself? Maybe I just want to not think anymore. Lucius can help you do that, the Devil on her shoulder whispered.

No! No! You have to tell Severus. You need to confess everything, and explain Lucius’s actions at the Ministry and how lost you feel, and how he has taken advantage! Severus will help you. He’ll guide you, even if he will be furious.

With that in mind, Hermione turned back to the Castle, and headed straight towards the Dungeons.

She needed advice, and, more than that, she needed a husband’s counsel and protection.

Severus might disapprove of her, might tear her self-confidence and self-worth to tatters, but she felt he wouldn’t abandon her. And if she felt vulnerable to Lucius’s charms, she knew Severus would help her sever that connection. Perhaps Severus would speak to Lucius on her behalf. Tell him to lay off the seduction, at least.
She didn’t find Snape in the Dungeons, nor in his Potions Classroom, and a quick locator spell revealed he was in Dumbledore’s office.

Ten minutes later, Hermione approached Dumbledore’s office, but stopped just outside. Nervous as to whether she should knock. *Will I be disturbing them?* She definitely didn’t want to explain her situation with Lucius to Dumbledore.

She was just about to lift her hand when she heard a voice inside.

“It is clear Bella wants to continue what Voldemort started,” she heard Snape say.

“Tom’s ideology was never going to die with him,” she overheard Dumbledore concur.

“There are rumors Bella has contacted former Death-eaters.”

“Have you sensed anything through the Mark?”

“Not concretely, but I do believe she is working the network.”

“I believe she had been in contact with Euphemia Rowle. She recently returned from a visit to the Continent, and has a long relationship with both the Blacks and Rabastans. It would only be natural.”

“I shall see if I can uncover more of Euphemia’s relationship with Bellatrix.”

“Thank you, Severus.”

Hermione stepped back into the darkened hall. *Why was Severus not discussing these developments with her?!* She felt herself grow angry.

*Who the heck was Euphemia Rowle? And why would Bellatrix be contacting her from abroad?*

Hermione vowed to find out. She stepped into the shadows as Snape exited Dumbledore’s office.

If her husband wouldn’t confide in her, then there was no way she was going to confide in him.

****

The week passed quickly. Hermione hadn’t had much of a spoken conversation with Severus since she had overheard his chat with Dumbledore Monday evening.

Frankly, the week had been terrible.

Severus hadn’t so much as bothered to include her in this new development— his theory of Bellatrix’s efforts to contact other former Death-eaters, or her relationship with Euphemia Rowle. Hermione had tested him — probed gently for new information about Bellatrix and waited to see if he would explain things. Snape had revealed nothing.

“I have no news,” was all he said.

*You’re a liar*, Hermione had thought.

They had continued with their farce of a marriage — “Good morning” and the 15-minutes of reading aloud, and then the disappearing into their professional commitments.

Tuesday. Wednesday. Thursday. Friday.
It all bled together.

Hermione had been careful with Lucius. On Tuesday, she had asked him not to speak with her unnecessarily, and she had refused to have lunch with him each day, though he always asked.

Each day, she felt his eyes on her — always appraising her, considering, searching. His presence was always so intense. The Hall of Prophecy was a massive room, but sometimes it seemed as if it was a small closet that contained only herself and Lucius Malfoy’s eyes.

He was obedient. Strangely, terribly obedient. He stopped pushing entirely. As if Monday hadn’t happened. As if she had never explained everything about the emotional turmoil of her loveless marriage and terrible sex-life.

He worked hard for her — identifying prophecies, shelving them, offering her advice. But he didn’t once broach any of the taboo subjects they had previously discussed. It was odd.

Friday evening when they had finished for the day, he had asked if he could kiss the back of her hand.

“What?” Hermione had asked.

“Because I want to,” he replied.

She nodded.

Lucius had leaned down and placed a tender kiss on the back of her second knuckle. The skin had suddenly felt quite warm.

“It was a pleasure to assist you this week, Hermione. May your enjoy your weekend.”

He hadn’t emphasized “pleasure” or the word “enjoy.” There was nothing creepy or overly sexual about his well-wishes. It was almost…elegant…refined.

He had pulled back and lifted up his eyes, studying her face. Poor girl, he thought. He could see she was anxious about her next night with Severus. He shook his concern away — all the better for her to suffer. The more she suffers, the sooner she will let me into her bed. At that thought, he had smiled widely and left the Hall.

Hermione had floo’ed back to the Dungeons and taken five drops of Dreamless Sleep.

She knew it was a terrible idea, knew she was possibly developing an addiction.

But an addiction to Dreamless Sleep was certainly better than entertaining an addiction to Lucius Malfoy, former Death-eater and Ron’s cold-blooded killer.

****

That Saturday night, Hermione carefully washed her body with a loofah in her claw-footed bathtub.

She thought about Lucius’s advice. Should she try it?

She felt like her shoulders were about level with her earlobes. The stress of minimizing contact with Lucius at work and then trying to maximize contact with Snape at home was getting to her. In addition, her mind had been spinning with theories about Bellatrix and the former Death-eaters. Though their consummations had all been terrible, Hermione was dreading tonight’s the most.
You have to relax, she thought. It’s unavoidable, so the best you can do is try to make it better for yourself.

She took a deep breath in through her nostrils and exhaled through her mouth, then reached over and turned the hot water tap on again. Within seconds, the heat from the water increased and she leaned back into the bubbles and closed her eyes. She did love a long, hot bath.

She allowed her hands to drift under the water towards her stomach, and she lightly caressed her abdomen, then moved her hands up to her breasts, cupping them gently under the water.

Don’t let Severus make you feel like you aren’t desirable, she thought. Lucius wants me. Ron wanted me. I’m soft. I have curves. I’m… womanly. I can be desired. And I deserve to feel good.

She considered some of the points Lucius had made in the flat in Hogsmeade. Arousal happens in the mind, he had said. He also said I need to coax myself into feeling sensual. I need to relax and get out of my head. Hmm…

Hermione sat up and turned off the tap and pulled the drain. She dried her wet hair, brushed it, and slipped on a short, purple silk nightgown.

This makes me feel sexy, she thought, as the silky material fell about her hips. She decided against underwear.

She entered her bedroom and pulled the comforter and sheets down. She slipped underneath the cool sheets. She wasn’t sure how much time she had before Severus knocked, but he always knocked, so she knew he wouldn’t simply barge in.

She laid on her back and resumed gently palming her breasts, this time through the silk negligee. She was gentle as she touched herself. Mostly allowing her fingers to lightly skim below her nipples. Just relax, she thought, moving her hands lower.

She continued to touch herself and explore — as Lucius had instructed, avoiding her most intimate area between her legs, and instead gave herself a thorough massage of her hips, lower back, stomach, and upper thighs. She had never done that before. In the past, all her efforts at masturbation had been focused on touching herself there, on trying to arrive at a destination, and being disheartened when she couldn’t make it happen.

She’d never really paid the rest of her body any attention, and she was amazed at how nice it was to simply explore — to not be focused on forcing an orgasm that never came. When she finally grazed her vulva with her fingertips fifteen minutes later, she was shocked that she was so throughly wet. Her fingers dipped lightly at the entrance to her vagina and she could feel herself coated in her own lubricant, her outer lips puffy with anticipation.

She bit her bottom lip. She was rather surprised that she was even capable of creating such a response in herself just from an easy massage. This kind of response had only ever happened when she had pushed herself against her pillow, or those handful of times when Ron had touched her clitoris or grinded against her in one of their marathon make-out sessions.

No need for the Lubrication charm…, she thought with a shy smile. She wondered if Snape would know the difference. Can he feel it? Hermione lightly spread her wetness along her labia. This feels good, she thought. She pressed the heel of her palm against the top of her vulva, and let out a small moan as she pressed her hips against her hand. Merlin, I think I want this, she thought. I want to have sex tonight.
The knock at the door caused her to quit her explorations. She wiped her hand against the sheet and sat up, swallowing heavily.

She was nervous, as she always was. But it was more about anticipation than fear. She knew Snape would probably behave the same way he always had. But Hermione was going to try her best to make tonight better for herself.

“Come in,” she whispered.

The door opened and Snape entered, closing it behind him. He handed her the contraception potion and Hermione downed it without a word.

If he enjoyed the way her body looked in the curve-hugging purple silk, his face gave nothing away. He looked as impassive as always, though less tortured than he had in the past.

*Perhaps we could both have some pleasure from tonight,* Hermione thought.

“Nox,” Snape commanded. The room fell to black. Hermione waited patiently on the bed as she heard the clink of Snape’s belt and heard the rustle of robes.

Seconds later he was crawling on top of her. She spread her legs widely for him, and felt his cock slide along her vulva as he settled into place. She heard Snape give a soft groan at the contact. Hermione pressed her lips together to suppress her own quiet moan.

*Lucius said I cannot imagine how good it feels for him. He doesn’t want me, but he wants this.*

*And...I do, too,* she realized, surprised. She didn’t feel disgust at Severus’s body pressed against hers. She loved the way his maleness was heavy and hot against her folds. She lightly pressed her hips up and was rewarded with a sharp feeling of pleasure as his cock slid along her clitoris.

Severus reached down with one hand and positioned himself. Was it his imagination...or did she just...? But he brushed the idea aside, and focused on the task at hand.

Soon he was inside of her, moving in and out. He tried to maintain the efficient pace he always had, and desperately tried to suppress his groans so she wouldn’t have to hear his cries — wouldn’t have to endure his enjoyment when he took her without her consent.

He moved quickly, and Hermione was already out of breath. It felt *incredible* — so much better than it ever had. He was still large and the plunging had been a little uncomfortably insistent at first, but within seconds she felt she had adjusted to accommodate him, and now there was just the deep pleasure on a wonderful sliding, *friction.*

It was just all happening so fast. She knew she couldn’t ask him to slow down, to allow her to catch up. She was too lost in the pleasure of it. She tried to remember Lucius’s advice and lift her legs up and around his hips, but her body felt like it was weak. Her knees splayed open. They were too overcome with pleasure to move. Hermione reached down and gripped her bedsheets, unable to stop herself from letting out a moan.

Severus paused, above her. *No, no, no!* Hermione thought. Within a few seconds, he resumed as before, and she bit her inner cheek so as not to let out any more sound. She didn’t want him to stop.

She could feel him speeding up, knew he was close. It would all be over soon — and she couldn’t bear for the delicious sliding to cease.

Suddenly, she heard Severus moan loudly, and she couldn’t stop herself from moaning as well. He
didn’t stop this time, just continued, driving himself closer and closer.

_He does enjoy this. He does. It’s not possible for him not to. He...he...what had Lucius said? Oh, Merlin...he...he loves to be inside of me. His cock wants me. He wants me. He wants me!_

_I need him...I need...I need to see him._

Suddenly in the darkness, Hermione couldn’t stop an overwhelming feeling. _I want to look at him._ She needed to _see_ that he wanted her. Needed to see he enjoyed her body.

And just as Severus began to stutter at his peak, Hermione heard the words tumble from her own lips, almost without her permission.

_“Demi-lumos!”_

The room lit up — not too bright, but about the radiance of a few candles. Enough to _see:_

His rich jet-black eyes blown wide.

His mouth hanging open in pleasure.

A bead of sweat on his temple.

His brow furrowing and contracting as his body shuddered in waves of pleasure.

He stared down at her — his black eyes finding her brown ones as the last wave crashed over him. He looked both deeply vulnerable and commandingly masculine.

It was the most erotic thing Hermione had ever seen.

But within seconds, the expression has disappeared. And it its place was the clouded, furious sneer of her former Potions Professor.

He practically leapt off her. Withdrawing from between her thighs, turning around and refastening his pants and tunic before she could glimpse his body.

He stood and wheeled about. She closed her legs and sat up.

_“I-I’m sorry,”_ she stammered. _“I just…wanted to see.”_

_“See what?”_ Snape spat. _“An unwilling husband? Perhaps you thought it would be amusing to tell Ginevra Weasley what the Greasy Git looks like in bed?”_

_“No! God, no! I just…I don’t know…I don’t want to do this in the dark anymore.”_

_“Considering our arrangement, it is the most appropriate way of discharging our duty. Please remember not to confuse this repugnant duty with real intimacy.”_

With that, Snape left, slamming the door behind him in fury.

_Fine, _Hermione thought. _Darkness it is. _But she laid back and thought about the discoveries she had made this evening. About herself. And about Snape.

_Severus Snape may hate me, but he is not just a cold fish. There’s something underneath that, she thought. She’d seen it now. He had his own sensual side._
And Hermione vowed to drag it out of him, one Saturday night at a time.

She intended to fight for her marriage.
Monday morning Hermione found herself knocking at Mott’s office door in the Department of Mysteries.

“Come in!”

She entered.

“Am I bothering you?”

Mott stood up from his desk and smiled warmly. “Not at all. How goes your work with Lord Malfoy? Any success?”

“No, we haven’t found any prophecies related specifically to Bellatrix. I did have a question, however. I have reason to believe she is in contact with former Death-eaters, and specifically a woman named Euphemia Rowle. Do you know anything about that?”

Mott frowned. “Euphemia Rowle? That name doesn’t sound familiar. Where did you hear it?”

“Nevermind. I just thought…perhaps Bellatrix had been in touch with some of her old contacts.”

“Please, sit.”

Hermione did. Mott got up from the desk and moved around it, leaning one hip on the edge of it. A serious expression on his usually avuncular face.

“This is confidential what I am about to say to you.”

“I understand.”

“I told you before that we had reason to suspect Necromancy was involved with Bellatrix’s activities on the Continent. The reason for this is that the bodies of many of the former Death-eaters have been…disappearing.”

Hermione’s eyebrows arched.

“Disappearing?”

“Yes.”

“You mean…grave-robbing?”

“It would appear so.”

“You believe Bellatrix is doing Dark Magic with the bodies of her former comrades?”

“It’s possible.”

“But, when a witch or wizard dies, their magic returns to the Earth!”

Mott shook his head, with a wistful smile.

“That is what they teach us in school, Hermione. But here at the Department, we know that that is not always the case. There are certain…forms of Dark Magic one can do to sever that magical
connection. To disconnect one’s magic from the larger World. Permanently.”

Hermione gasped.

“But that would be like...I don’t know. Like how many Muggles believe our souls go to Heaven when we die. That would be like being stuck in Purgatory, wouldn’t it? Neither here nor there? For all eternity? Why would a wizard do such a thing?!"

“Power. Some will do anything, even jeopardize the future of their very souls in the next World to achieve their aims in this one. Ambition and a steadfast ideology are a dangerous combination.”

Hermione shuddered. It was too awful to consider.

“Do you believe that Bellatrix or others may be attempting to harvest the remaining magical energy from these corpses?”

“It’s likely.”

“What is being done to prevent this?”

“Many of the larger crypts are being monitored, but we do not have the resources to guard every cemetery and burial vault in the Wizarding World, and Lord Voldemort had many, many followers.”

Hermione rose.

“I appreciate your confidence, Sir.”

Mott nodded, thoughtfully.

“It is right you should know. I should have told you sooner. Please, Hermione, do let me know immediately if you discover anything in the Prophecies that could possibly be related.”

“I will.”

Hermione left the office and walked toward the Hall of Prophecies, deep in thought.

Does Snape know about the body-snatching? And if so, why wouldn’t he tell me?

Hermione entered the Hall to find the tall, lean form of Lucius Malfoy standing high on a ladder and re-arranging several orbs.

“You’re early,” she muttered. She was in no mood to deal with him and had been hoping for at least an hour of quiet time to contemplate all Mott had said before Lucius’s arrival.

Lucius turned and smiled down at her.

“I don’t want to disappoint my boss. She’s terribly strict,” he retorted with a smirk.

He slid down the sides of the ladder and landed elegantly on the floor in front of her, then bowed low.

They moved over to her desk and sat across from one another, as was their way now.

Hermione stared at him thoughtfully, chewing her bottom lip. Surely Lucius would know about the corpses disappearing. He had to. Was he involved in this? Somehow helping harvest the magic from the dead to strengthen himself and Bellatrix? It was entirely possible.
Still, he was pretending to help her, to be on her side. Perhaps she could use him. She cleared her throat.

“Where are your ancestors buried, Lucius?”

Lucius paused in the middle of analyzing an orb. His blue eyes flicked up at her.

“Why are you interested, my dear?”

“Just curious.”

“The Malfoys have all been interred in the Malfoy Mausoleum at Highgate Cemetery for the past sixteen generations.”

“I thought Highgate was a Muggle cemetery?”

“It was an ancient Wizarding burial ground long before, and what is visible to the Muggles is only a small fraction of it.”

“I see.”

“It is where I shall be laid to rest someday. And where in fact, you, had we become man-and-wife, would have been interred as well. Imagine. We could have laid side by side for all eternity. Isn’t that romantic?”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Are many of the Pureblood families buried there?”

Lucius nodded. Hermione glanced away.

“I’d be curious to see it.”

“I must say your sudden interest in the macabre is most unusual, but I am sure a field-trip can be arranged.”

“Would you take me there tonight?”

Lucius smiled.

“I would be delighted. Though it can be a little…unsettling in the evening hours.”

“T’m not afraid of creepy places. We shall go after work. At 6pm?”

Lucius nodded.

“I would be happy to escort you. And what, in exchange, shall you do for me?”

“Don’t push it, Malfoy.”

Lucius chuckled.

“Fair is fair. I am doing you a favor by playing tour guide, so I’d like something in return.”

“If you say a kiss, I am going to throw up my breakfast, and I’d really rather not.”

“So very testy. No, I am not interested in forcing your body or your will anymore. I told you that. I
“Wish you’d believe me.”
“Your track record isn’t exactly strong.”
“No, I suppose not. How about we simply dine together? I’d enjoy your company.”
“Not in public.”
“No, of course not. It’s in both our interest to stay out of *The Prophet*. You’re right in that respect.”
“Not the Manor, either. I don’t exactly have charmed memories of that place.”
“The Hogsmeade flat? It is becoming our neutral territory, isn’t it?”
“Fine.”
“Excellent.”
He gave her a seductive, cat-like grin.
“A brief dinner, and then we’ll go to Highgate.”
Hermione nodded.
This was probably a terrible idea.

****

Lucius left the Ministry early to make preparations for their supper, and Hermione quickly dashed off a note to Severus.

*Severus,*

*I’ll be working late at the Ministry, and do not anticipate returning to the Dungeons until 9pm. Per our agreement, I wanted to let you know so you wouldn’t worry.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione*

She had almost written “home” instead of “the Dungeons,” but had crossed it off. The Dungeons were certainly not her home. It was essentially her dormitory, her prison. Snape’s suite in which her existence was still merely *tolerated*.

She wondered if their marriage would be better if he had agreed to move to London from the outset. They could have purchased a house together, furnished it together, and done all of the right steps to meld their lives in a way that made each of them happy. Even sharing the same bedroom would have made things easier. Hermione thought often about Snape lying in his own bedroom, only feet away from her. Didn’t he ever get lonely in his own bed?

She checked the time. It was almost 6pm. She quickly left the Hall and took the elevator to the Ministry Atrium. She entered one of the larger fireplaces and with a quick handful of floo powder, found herself stepping outside the smaller fireplace in Lucius’s Hogsmeade flat.

The flat was dark.
“Lumos!”

Hermione looked around. Lucius was nowhere to be seen, and there was no meal on the dining room table near the French windows.

Odd.

She glanced about and noticed a massive bouquet on a table by the sofa. It was ostentatious and very “Lucius Malfoy.”

Two dozen long-stemmed red roses. They were beautiful, of course, but Hermione didn’t need him treating her like they were courting. She hoped he knew better than to think she was a silly girl whose head could be turned by flowers and gifts. She sighed, wearily, and walked over to flowers.

She reached out and took one in her hand, but before she could bring it to her nose, she felt a sharp tightening in her belly button and could sense the room around her growing blurry.

An overwhelming feeling of nausea took over as everything began to spin, faster and faster, until suddenly she was in an all-too-familiar tunnel and she felt the flat drop away and there was nothing beneath her feet.


She came to lying flat on her back staring up at a shimmering ceiling inlaid with gold leaf.

She blinked, confused, and stared up at the elegant neo-Byzantine design. Suddenly, she regained her senses. A portkey! But where was she?

She jumped up, and pulled her wand from its sleeve. The room was empty but for a table for two set in the middle, a set of gilt candlesticks flickering upon it, a sumptuous meal laid out.

Lucius’s doing, she thought, annoyed.

Suddenly he appeared from behind one of the Corinthian columns that circled the room. His hands were raised so as not to startle her. He was dressed elegantly as always, in white shirtsleeves and a hip-length embroidered gold waistcoat, buttoned to the nape of his neck. His hair was tied back in a black ribbon and he wore a pair of pressed black dress-pants and black-leather shoes.

“I’m sorry, Hermione. But I was sure if I had asked you for permission, you would have said no.”

She pointed her wand at him.

“Where the hell am I?”

“The Savini.”

“What is this place?”

“Calm yourself, my dear. We’re in Piccadilly in London. You’re perfectly safe.”

“If you think the way to earn my trust is to portkey me without my permission, you’re mad!”

He took a step forward.

“Stupefy!”
Lucius fell backwards to the ground and raised a hand to shield himself. *Why isn’t he drawing his wand?*, Hermione thought.

“Please. I apologize for the manipulation, but I wanted to surprise you. You agreed to share a meal, and that is all that will happen here.”

She looked around the room, suspiciously. It was large and absurdly opulent. The walls were decorated with ornamental tile work and elegant arches rose between the columns. Above her hung brilliant chandeliers encrusted with rhinestones.

She slowly put her wand away as Lucius climbed to his feet and dusted himself off.

“It’s stunning, isn’t it? One of my favorite restaurants. I don’t know about you, but I am sick of feeling like a prisoner in the Wizarding World. I spend my days in the Ministry and my nights at the Manor. I have been shunned, and for someone with my taste, and yes, my ego, you can imagine it has been difficult to endure.”

Hermione glared at him.

“You will never take me *anywhere* without my express permission ever again! If you do, I will go to the Aurors, so help me. And I will do *much* more than *stupefy* you!”

Lucius nodded.

“You are right to be angry, but tell me, aren’t you tired of being cooped up as well? When was the last time you were able to enjoy life outside of the Ministry or away from Hogwarts?”

Hermione looked down, sadly. It had probably been with her parents. Months and months ago. It almost felt like another lifetime.

She shook her head.

“I will stay for the meal, but then we shall go directly to Highgate.”

“Very well.”

Lucius gestured towards the table. Hermione sat.

She suddenly felt extremely under-dressed for the room in her simple navy pencil skirt, black ballet flats, and cream-coloured blouse. She didn’t put much effort into her work-clothes. Not only was it not in her nature to put energy into something as insipid as *fashion*, but she didn’t want Lucius to think she was making any effort on his account when she showed up at the Hall each day. Simple and practical were her buzzwords.

Lucius sat across from her. She looked about the empty restaurant. There were plenty of tables against the walls, but they were all empty.

“Where is everyone?”

“I bought out the entire restaurant for the evening.”

“Where’s the staff?”

“They were paid well to prepare the meal and leave. Just because we cannot be seen in public together doesn’t mean we shouldn’t get to enjoy public places. I have the money so we may as well spend it.”
“You know, you aren’t even particularly good at pretending to have changed. You really are a snob, aren’t you?”

“I pretend nothing. I have taste and respect for finery. I always have. And I have always done everything I could to get exactly what I want, cost be damned.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

“Well, that is certainly true.”

She looked down at the plate before her — a lamb wellington and peas and mash. She reached for her glass of water and took a long sip.

Lucius picked up a bottle of claret and poured himself a glass.

“Would you like some?”

“No, thank you.”

“Don’t trust yourself around me, hmm?”

Hermione furrowed her brow. “Don’t be ridiculous. I just prefer not to have anything alcoholic.”

“Well, cheers to your company, anyway.”

Lucius lifted his glass and clinked it to her water goblet. He took a large sip from it. Hermione watched his handsome, pale visage in the candlelight. He seemed troubled or distracted.

“Have you received an owl from Draco lately? I am curious if he or Narcissa have heard from Bellatrix, since they are in Germany.”

At the mention of his family, Lucius took another long drink from his wine glass. He set it down with a sigh, and patted his lips with his cloth napkin.

“If they have, they certainly wouldn’t tell me.”

“You don’t speak to them? Not even to Draco?”

“Narcissa has painted a very clear picture for Draco of the kind of man I am. And he has renounced me, fully.”

“What do you mean?”

“He is no longer my son.”

“But of course he is.”

“At Durmstrang, he goes by Draco Black.”

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“Draco Black?!? But, that’s ridiculous. I’d never met anyone so proud of his bloody surname as Draco. As a boy, he’d never shut up about the gloriousness of being a Malfoy.”

“Well, he certainly doesn’t find our family patronymic glorious now.”

Hermione took this in.
“What did Narcissa say to him about you?”

“She told him the truth. That it was my choice to serve the Dark Lord, and in making that choice I dragged our entire family into Hell.”

“But Draco wanted to take the Mark. He was a true believer.”

“He was just a child. And he desperately wanted to make me proud.”

“I am sure there is a part of him that still does.”

Lucius leaned forward, shaking his head.

“You don’t understand. You’re still so naive, Hermione.”

“Try me.”

“Divorce can be very ugly. There is nothing uglier than love turned to hate. And some parents will do anything to manipulate their children. To win them to their side. Narcissa told Draco that I attacked her.”

“What…what do you mean?”

“Draco believes that I raped his mother and tortured her until she served the Dark Lord.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open in surprise. She glanced down at her plate. Was it true? Or was this merely a play for some sympathy?

She took a bite of her meal and glanced back up at Lucius. He was loosening the buttons at the top of his neck. He had leaned back in his chair and was staring into space across the room. He looked deeply unsettled.

She cleared her throat.

“That day…that day in the Hogwarts’ dining room. When you could have…you could have…”

Lucius looked over at her. His pale blue eyes seemed full of regret. And…shame? Lucius gave a small nod, his lips thinning out as he pursed them together.

“Yes, I could have if I had wanted to.”

“Did you seriously consider it?”

Lucius exhaled slowly.

“As much as I hated you. As much as I looked at you and saw an emblem of everything that had gone wrong in my life, of all the disgusting lesser-thans that had impeded the progress of Purebloods, I was never going to rape you, Hermione. What I told you that day was true. I have committed many atrocities in my life, but I would never do that. In the past, with Muggleborn captives, it’s true I used the threat of rape as a tool to gain compliance, but I would never stoop so low as to use follow through with such a repellant tactic, and of course not with my own Pureblood wife. Never.”

He picked up his wine goblet and took another long sip.

“Did you love Narcissa?”
“I did. Very much.”

“Why did she leave you then? If you weren’t violent?”

“She left me because she no longer loved me or respected me. But it was not I who dragged her into the Dark Lord’s service. She had been just as willing in the beginning. It was only after Draco’s birth that she became afraid. And by then there was no going back. She expected me to find a way out for us. But there was no way out. The only way forward for the Malfoy name was to rise through the ranks. Once a side is chosen in War, there is no return.”

“But what about Severus?”

“What about him?”

“He turned away from the Darkness. He turned back to the Light. You could have, too.”

“Severus had nothing else left to lose. He had already lost Lily. I would have done anything to protect Narcissa and Draco. If I had turned against the Dark Lord and been discovered, I would not have been the one to pay the consequences. Voldemort would have forced me to watch as the most unspeakable atrocities were committed upon my wife and son. I could not risk it.”

Hermione took another bite of her meal.

It was always so difficult to know whether Lucius Malfoy was telling the truth or not. But if she had to place a bet, right here in this moment, she would bet that he had just spoken with some veracity.

She could feel her heart go out to him a little bit. She knew it was her flaw to be so tender-hearted, and it was unnerving to feel sorry for this man who had abused her, had grabbed and manipulated her body.

To see the world from his eyes — he was just a man who had to serve a monster so the monster would not eat his family. Still, Lucius had gone willingly into Voldemort’s Army. There were ideas, Dark things, that he had been drawn to. That his soul wanted.

She had to remember that.

They ate in silence for a minute. Lucius peering intently at her behind his lovely aquamarine irises. Eventually he spoke again.

“You’re a rather extraordinary young woman, you know.”

Hermione made eyes contact with him.

“I suppose. Dumbledore told me no witch has ever achieved NEWT scores like mine.”

Lucius smiled, amused.

“No, not because of your academic record, you silly witch.”

“Compliments really don’t mean much to me, Lucius. So you don’t need to—“

“—Butter you up? No, I know you well enough by now to know I could never seduce you with mere flattery and flowers. Though I do hope you appreciated the roses. No, but I can see that I am one of the few people who know you as a woman, not a girl. And the woman before me has an extraordinary amount of compassion in your heart. It occurs to me how remarkable it is you would even sup with me or lend me a sympathetic ear, given what I did to you. I find your inherent
goodness rather remarkable."

Hermione put down her fork and sighed.

“I’m not a perfect person, Lucius, so I don’t think you’re seeing me clearly. I have empathy for most people, yes, but I wouldn’t really be here with you by choice. I am hoping you will help me lock Bellatrix in Azkaban. And the day that happens, I will be able to move forward in my life. Don’t expect our association to continue afterwards.”

“And I am hoping that one day you won’t find my company abhorrent. I still believe I could make you happy in certain ways.”

The corners of his lips turned up.

“I won’t ever betray my husband, Lucius.”

“No, you’re too loyal, too good-hearted, I suppose. Shame.”

He winked at her. Against her better nature, Hermione felt her cheeks blush a little.

“But it’s possible you may change your mind. And if that ever happens, I shall never turn you away, Hermione. I will always desire to have you in my bed. In the meantime, I will continue to serve you faithfully. You are a far worthier master than the Dark Lord ever was.”

“I am not your ‘master’, Lucius.”

“My ‘mistress,’ then.”

Hermione pursed her lips. Lucius leaned forward onto his elbows and locked eyes with her.

“Yes, why not? My mistress. I like that. Mistress Hermione, for whom I would do anything.”

Hermione swallowed. The room seemed to feel a bit warm.

“Let’s just agree to be former enemies who are now colleagues, and leave it to that.”

Lucius leaned back and laughed throatily.

“Very well. But after the kindness you have shown me by listening to me prattle on about my familial troubles tonight, I will respectfully also consider you my friend.”

Hermione scrunched up her nose. Friend?! A friend of Lucius Malfoy’s? Good Lord.

“We should hurry up and get to Highgate before it gets too late. Severus will miss me.”

Lucius nodded.

He was so pleased with her progress.

So very, very pleased.

****

Twenty minutes later they apparated to the outskirts of Highgate Cemetery. The enchanted gates opened as they sensed their presence.

Hermione shivered. Lucius took off his cloak and wrapped it around her.
“I’m fine,” she protested.

“Nonsense,” he insisted. "It’s chilly."

They each took out their wands and held them aloft. *Lucerna!*

The tips of their wands glowed with soft lamplight and they made their way into the darkened cemetery. Their feet crunched under the gravel walk. Plane trees listlessly tilted over carved tombstones in the shapes of urns and pyramids.

It was beautiful in the moonlight, but, Hermione had to admit, rather spooky. Still, it was better to come here at night when she could inspect the Pureblood crypts and not risk being witnessed.

Lucius explained to her some of the history of the cemetery as they walked, pointing out some of the graves of famous wizards and witches of days of yore. Hermione pretended to be interested, and waited until they had gone some of the way in before she asked him what she wanted.

“Were many buried here after the Battle of Hogwarts?”

Lucius nodded.

“Many of Voldemort’s followers were, though it caused some controversy at the Ministry. The Pureblood vaults were purchased lifetimes ago, and the Ministers could not prevent the Pureblood families from interring their Death-eater relatives, even if they had to be laid side-by-side next to the crypts of Order of the Phoenix members. In death, I suppose we all deserve a proper burial.”

Hermione hummed in agreement, flashing to Ron’s funeral. She was glad he was at Hogwarts. He wouldn’t have wanted to be in a place like this. *And neither would I*, she realized.

“Could you show me those burials?”

“Of course.”

They continued on for a couple minutes in silence. Hermione pulled Lucius’s cloak tightly around her body. She was grateful for its warmth.

Eventually they reached a smaller set of gates and passed through them. In front of them was a narrow alleyway with large crypts on either side.

As they walked, Hermione read the names on the large double-sided marble doors.

*Nott.*

*Rosier.*

*Avery.*

*Mulciber.*

They continued uphill and the vaults grew larger and more ornate.

At the top of the hill, the vaults gave way to a large open space sub-divided into private family cemeteries. Each one surrounded by large iron railings, and a family name and crest mounted atop an iron arbor covered in ivy indicating the entrance to each.

Hermione glances at the various curlicue names. These were ancient Pureblood families. Some of
whom were direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin himself.


At the Malfoy entrance, she watched as Lucius knelt onto one knee and, holding his wand to his chest, bowed low in an almost chivalric-esque sign of deference.

Hermione realized that, having been raised in the Muggle world, there was truly so much about Pureblood tradition she just didn’t understand. What often seemed backwards to her was perhaps simply because of her own ignorance.

She vowed to dig around in some of the books on Pureblood history on the bookshelf in Snape’s study when she got back.

After a few moments of whispered, spiritual deference, Malfoy rose and glanced over at her.

“We should probably return,” Lucius said. He turned and took a few steps, indicating for her to follow.

“I’ll be right there,” Hermione called back. “I’d like to pay my own respects.”

“I’ll wait at the bottom of the hill,” Lucius replied with a small bow, and continued down the path.

Hermione watched until he was out of sight, then turned back at the entrance to the various gates.

On instinct, she slipped under the archway that said “Black.”

That was the blood that flowed through Bellatrix’s veins, and if something was going on with her, that was where Hermione was most likely to find a clue. She walked along several feet, pushing some overgrown branches aside. The brush here was wilder than the rest of the cemetery. Evidently, the Black family had not contributed much to its upkeep lately.

As she pushed another branch aside, she saw it.

A row of five or six open graves. Dark and empty.

Are they preparing them for burial? Hermione tiptoed over to the first one, her left hand starting its familiar shaking.

Inside was a coffin. Its white satin interior flung open and gleaming in the moonlight. Empty.

These graves aren’t being made ready for burial. They’ve been dug up!

Dirt was piled up on each side of the hole. She took a few steps over to another grave. The another. In some of them, coffins lay wide open in their pits. Several feet underground. In others, the coffins had clearly been lifted out and were hanging open on top of the nearby grass.

Mott had been right. Someone was stealing the corpses of former Death-eaters. Hermione hadn’t disbelieved him, but it was shocking to see the evidence. Who would do this?

Suddenly, behind her, Hermione heard a rustling noise. Someone was coming through the thick brush the way she had just come!

She silently extinguished her wand and looked about. Where to go?

The branches were snapping underfoot. The person was coming closer! It could be Lucius… But
what if it wasn’t? What if it was one of the grave-robbers? What if it were Bellatrix herself? She could feel her entire body start to tremble at that notion.

Hide!, her brain screamed.

She glanced about, frantically. The headstones were too low to the ground and not wide enough to duck behind.

Merlin!

She turned and with a grimace jumped down into one of the empty graves, landing with a soft thud in the dirt. She ducked down as far as she could, and tried to hold her breath. The stench of decaying flesh filled her nostrils.

She listened.


She could hear boots in the dirt as they moved past the grave in which she was hiding. They didn’t sound tentative and they didn’t slow down. Whomever it was obviously hadn’t heard her. She waited a couple seconds until the thudding was a little bit further off.

She knew she should remain hidden, but there was a part of her that couldn’t help herself. She needed to take a peek.

She lifted herself up and very, very slowly raised the top of her head out of the grave so that just her eyes were above ground-level.

And what she saw caused her mouth to fall open in complete and utter shock.

For there at the end of the path, walking steadily away from her and rounding the corner, was the very familiar form of her husband.

Severus Tobias Snape.
Chapter 45

As Hermione rejoined Lucius at the entrance to the cemetery, her mind whirred with a million thoughts.

Why was Snape at the cemetery? And what did he know about Bellatrix’s plans?

Hermione wasn’t sure she was going to be able to ask him without having to reveal her own time spent with Lucius recently. And she certainly did not want to have that conversation.

She and Lucius apparated back to the Hogsmeade flat. Lucius was studying her, thoughtfully.

“Are you alright?”

Hermione gave a thin smile.

“Yes..it’s just…you’re right. The place was…unsettling.”

“So many died in the War. So many fresh graves…”

Hermione looked up at Lucius.

“I’m glad Ron wasn’t buried there. It’s so dark and cold, and lonely.”

At the mention of Ron’s name, Lucius frowned and turned away from Hermione.

“I know you will never be able to forgive me for his death, but I hope you understand that as a Pureblood, I, too, would have wanted to die on the battlefield. Ronald Weasley died with great courage and dedication to his cause. I respect his memory.”

“Of course you don’t!”

Lucius turned back towards her.

“What do you mean?”

Hermione could feel a tightness in her chest. How could Lucius respect his memory?! He was Ron’s killer!

“Have you ever even visited his memorial? Have you ever tried to reach out to his family members? Did you ever even apologize to Ginny for the torment she went through with the diary? Of course not!”

“Hermione, as you are all too aware, it is only very recently that I have come to see my past actions in…a new light. You cannot expect me to be able to atone for my crimes in only a couple weeks.”

“No, but you should be doing more. For all your talk about wanting to help me and serve the side of good now, I think your actions have been pretty minimal.”

“What would you have me do?”

Hermione paused, biting her bottom lip.

“I saw you kneel and you held your wand to your chest and you recited something at the Malfoy
family plot. What was it?”

“It was an oath of allegiance and respect to the memory of those who have fallen.”

“I want you to deliver the same oath to Ron. At his grave.”

Lucius wrinkled his nose slightly and Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

“See, you won’t do it, will you? Admit it! You’re still proud of yourself for murdering Ron! You think killing an eighteen-year-old boy, the same age as Draco, makes you a powerful wizard! Don’t you?”

“No, I don’t think it makes me powerful. I think it made him powerful. Ronald Weasley was a serious threat. Even at just eighteen years. Don’t you find that extraordinary? That was what was so remarkable about him, about all three of you. That together you would be able to take down the Dark Lord, when older wizards had failed.”

“Will you do it?”

Lucius paused and looked into her caramel-colored eyes. He had no desire to do this, but he could see it would be powerful for her.

“I will be honest with you as we are now friends. If you were not asking me, I would not do it. But because it may bring you some small amount of solace, I will go. Will you come? May I take your hand?”

Lucius reached out his large palm. Hermione nodded and took it. Lucius smoothed the skin on the back of her hand with his thumb in a tiny, comforting gesture.

Seconds later, they were walking along the grass of the Hogwarts’s front lawn to Ron’s memorial.

Hermione watched as Lucius climbed the steps and slowly lowered himself to his knees. He took out his wand from his sleeve and bent his head down and kissed it, then held it to his chest and, bowing his head, she heard him recite the Pureblood oath he had murmured at the cemetery.

She didn’t realize how emotional it was going to be for her until she felt the tears dripping down her cheeks. Lucius may not have done this of his own volition, but he had done it. Was doing it.

If only Ron could see this! Lord Lucius Malfoy’s once too-proud form on his knees showing respect for a member of the Weasley family! Would you were here, Ron!, Hermione thought.

Lucius took his time as Hermione watched and when he rose, there was emotion in his eyes. Not tears, but some wetness that glistened in the moonlight. His eyes shone down at her.

“The boy was a worthy opponent, and he loved you, Hermione. I have shown him the respect he is due.”

“Thank you,” Hermione whispered.

“Is there any other way I can serve you this evening?”

Hermione lifted her chin. She wouldn’t let him get saucy.

“No.”

“Then I shall take my leave. May I kiss your hand?”
Hermione bobbed her head in acquiescence, and Lucius took up her palm in his. This time, instead of kissing the back of her hand, he flipped it so her palm faced upwards. His eyes never leaving hers, he slowly raised her arm and gently pressed his lips to her palm.

Hermione inhaled. It was such a sensuous gesture. No one had ever kissed her palm before. She pulled her arm back.

Lucius bowed formally.

“Until tomorrow. Sleep well, Hermione.”

“Here’s your cloak.”

She hadn’t realized she’d still had it around her shoulders. She undid the golden clasp and handed it back to him.

With an elegant gesture, Lucius swung the crushed green velvet around his form, then turned and strode back towards the apparition point.

Hermione stood in the darkness and watched his tall form until she couldn’t see him any more.

****

Lucius settled into his armchair in his study at the Manor a few minutes later and poured himself two fingers’ worth of firewhiskey.

The day (and night) had been a resounding success. He had spent hours with Hermione, and though they hadn’t discussed Severus or her marriage, he was growing deeper into her confidence. He could see her anxiety about Bellatrix and her loneliness with Snape was continuing to eat away at her. She had very few friends, and no one who understood everything she had been through with both parties. Except him.

That was going to be the way forward. Hermione was trusting, kind, and empathetic by nature. He could exploit those characteristics. Frankly, he was a bit surprised she hadn’t been sorted into Hufflepuff for all the emotion she had displayed. But perhaps that was the War’s doing. We’ve all become raw nerves in one way or another.

He hadn’t intended to share so much of his situation with Narcissa and Draco with her…and he wasn’t sure showing her the Pureblood crypts was entirely wise, either…but as long as he could be in her company…he enjoyed her company. It was surprising. Though his earnestness was feigned, he found her entertaining and, he had to admit, lovely.

He thought of her soft skin, her lithe form, and her round, intelligent brown eyes.

She was rather pretty now that he had spent more time with her.

He liked how she furrowed her brow when she was testing a prophecy, and bit her lower lip when she was deep in thought. It would have been a pleasure to have brought her into his bed as a virgin. But completely turning her away from Severus, there would be great pleasure in that.

To make her his lover, and to completely poison her heart and soul against Severus, that would be worth the wait.

He imagined the day Hermione would tell Severus everything. She was too honest to keep it a secret.
Eventually she would confess their affair to Severus.

And how it would crush him, just as Lily choosing James had crushed him.

It was the perfect revenge.

Lucius smiled, knocked back his whiskey, and headed upstairs for bed.

****

Hermione entered the Dungeons and crossed the foyer. She could see the lights were on in the living room. The fish in the aquarium window were all lit up.

As she rounded the archway, she could see her husband, Severus Snape, sitting on the settee with a book in his hand. He was wearing his black pants and his tunic, which was unbuttoned around the collar. If she hadn’t seen him with her own eyes only minutes earlier, she would believe he had been sitting and reading for hours, so relaxed was his deportment.

“G-good evening,” she said.

Severus didn’t even look up.

“It is 9:08pm,” he intoned.

“Yes…I apologize for being slightly late. I was held up.”

Snape glanced at her.

“At the Ministry?”

“Yes.”

Snape paused. Hermione sucked in a breath. She knew better than to lie to a Legilimens, but she wasn’t sure what to say to him.

After a few seconds, Snape’s eyes returned to his book.

“I am glad they are making use of your talents. Good evening.”

Hermione could sense she was being dismissed.

“’Night.”

She turned and quickly reached her room, closing the door behind her. She breathed out a huge sigh of relief. If Snape could sense she was lying, maybe he would just assume it was about something trivial, such as a late-night wedding planning session with Ginny, or a visit to Ron’s memorial. That last part at least is true.

Hermione prepared for bed. As she tucked herself in, suddenly a disturbing thought crossed her mind. There was no way…no. It wasn’t possible that…no, of course not. But once it had invaded her mind, like an earworm, there was no removing it.

Hermione leaned over and took three drops of Dreamless Sleep.

As she drifted off, the idea kept repeating itself. What if Severus is somehow helping Bellatrix? What if he has switched sides…again?!!
The next morning, Hermione stood in Snape’s study looking at the books on his shelves. She had pulled a couple on Pureblood families and customs, but there was nothing related to the Dark Arts. Nothing even worthy of the Restricted Section. Curious.

*For a former Death-eater, Severus’s library is remarkably…tame.*

She left the study and closed the door, then moved into the living room. Snape sat at the dining room table, reading from *Potions Monthly*.

“I need to attend to classes a little earlier. Would you mind getting on with the reading?”

Hermione frowned. She hated it when he was rude like this. She plopped down the books she was carrying. Severus arched an eyebrow.

“I see you have availed yourself of my study.”

“I was looking for some books. Are these all you have?”

“I believe there are tens of thousands of books on the first-floor of this castle, should you choose to ascend the stairs.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“There isn’t much on Purebloods there and you know it. I’m surprised your personal collection is so *paltry*.”

“I have another entire bookcase in my bed chamber.”

Hermione lifted her eyebrows in hope.

“No.”

“Oh, come on! I don’t want to snoop. I’d just like to borrow some *books*. May I have access?”

“No.”

“You can charm the door. Limited access for five minutes?”

“No.”

“Well then I shall just have to go to Borgin and Burkes.”

Severus put down the journal and glared at her.

“That would be foolhardy. And what books could you possibly want there?”

“I wish to learn about the Dark Arts.”

Severus froze. *Did she just say…?*

“A most unwise pursuit. Besides, aren’t you banned from the establishment?”

Hermione shrugged.

“A minor misunderstanding. Besides, thanks to my generous husband, I have plenty of filthy lucre to
toss about.”

Hermione smirked, trying to break the tension, but Severus stood up, his eyes flashing.

“The Dark Arts are not to be dabbled in. I should have thought the War would have at least taught you that!”

“I am not planning to perform Dark Magic, I just want to read about it. To grasp some of the concepts!”

“And why would you want to do that?”

“I think you know why! I want to know what Bellatrix is up to!”

“You should not concern yourself with that. She will be found by the Aurors, I am sure. And she will be returned to Azkaban eventually.”

“You of all people should know I am not one to let other people fight my battles for me.”

“There are no more battles left for you to fight. Focus on your career. And be satisfied that you have that freedom. It is more than most Pureblood wives are given!”

Hermione stood as well. She could feel herself growing angry, but she was desperate to diffuse the situation.

“I will make you a deal. Access to your bedroom’s bookshelves and I will be a little more respectful.”

“Humph!”

“Alright, I’ll…I’ll…I’ll convince Harry not to ask you to be one of his groomsmen at the wedding this Saturday!”

Snape paused.

Potter had been lurking about his classroom for the past week. No doubt he wanted to make some sort of sentimental request. Harry and Ginny’s wedding was this weekend, and he was certainly not going to be dragged into performing any duties at the absurdly ostentatious function.

Snape nodded.

“Very well. You may access the bedroom for five minutes once a week. I shall charm the door so I will know when you cross the threshold. In exchange, you shall tell Potter than my presence at his wedding to Miss Weasley is all the duty I am willing to discharge.”

Hermione smiled.

“Excellent!”

“Now, if you will excuse me, I have to proctor several NEWTs today.”

Severus exited, and Hermione was left by the dining room table.

She had been foolish to think that Snape was helping Bellatrix. It simply isn’t possible. However, she didn’t like that he was so insistently keeping her in the dark. If only he would respect her enough to work as a team! Still, she was glad that she had managed to diffuse their argument, and it had been
rather enjoyable to talk with him! Even if it was just to negotiate. She missed having conversations with him, even listening to his lectures in class.

He might be a git, but he was certainly stimulating. And even when they fought he could be witty…she liked the way his upper lip curled in a half-smirk when he thought he was winning an argument, and she loved the deep intelligence in those eyes. Those eyes…and when his eyelids had shut in pleasure…Hermione blushed. Her mind flashed back to his face in the throes of passion. There is definitely more to Severus Snape.

Hermione smiled and floo’d to work.

****

Lucius had been on his best behaviour all day — allowing Hermione to work in relative peace. After the gains he’d made yesterday, he didn’t want to push his luck. He could tell something was on her mind. She was shredding up the end of a quill with her teeth.

“You seem agitated, my dear.”

“I’m just frustrated with how much time this is taking.”

“I don’t think I could work any faster, though I admit I am unused to traditional work.”

“I’m not blaming you. I just…”

Hermione sighed.

…I don’t think I’ll be happy until Bellatrix is dealt with. She just, sort of, hangs over everything.”

Lucius nodded.

“I understand. There is a bond…a terrible bond, that develops between the torturer and the tortured. Even when you believe what you are doing is right…it stays with you. But I am sure Severus has spoken of it.”

Hermione looked down.

“He doesn’t discuss the past with me.”

“I see. Still holding you at arm’s length? Have you made any progress in your seduction of him?”

Hermione glanced back up. God, she didn’t want to open this can of worms back up. She sighed.

“Very limited progress.”

“With a man as difficult as Severus Snape, any progress is progress.”

Lucius smiled warmly.

“May I touch your hand?”

Hermione nodded.

Lucius reached out and patted it affectionately, and gave her fingers an encouraging squeeze.

“Severus is a man with many secrets. It shall take time before he will be able to reveal them.”
Secrets?, Hermione wondered. Was Lucius toying with her? What other secrets could Snape have?

Hermione cleared her throat, changing the subject.

“Do you have many books on the Dark Arts in the Malfoy Library?”

Lucius arched an eyebrow, but nodded.

“Of course. Many ancient texts. Some from the last hundred years.”

“Where did you get them from?”

“Some are translations of books from abroad, many were inherited from my grandfather, and the newer texts I acquired from various dealers. Borgin and Burkes being the most prominent. They have a good number of texts in their back rooms. Quite expensive, however.”

Hermione put her hand under her chin and considered this. Lucius examined her pensive expression.

“Hermione, I don’t suggest you sojourn to Knockturn Alley if that is your intention. I know you’re looking for information on Bellatrix, but that is not a safe place to do research.”

Hermione leaned back in chair.

“No, of course. You’re right.”

“Promise me you won’t go lurking there.”

“Of course. I promise.”

“Good. I do worry about you, you know. I am so invested in you now.”

Lucius gave her a little wink. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Alright, back to work.”

Lucius smirked a little.

“Anything for ‘Mistress Hermione’!”

The blonde wizard got up and moved back over towards a large pile of floating prophecies. As soon as his back was turned, Hermione made up her mind.

She couldn’t trust anyone to be honest with her — not Dumbledore, not Severus, and not Lucius.

She had to find her own answers.

****

Exactly three hours later, Hermione found herself slipping into Knockturn Alley.

She had to be quick if she was going to get back to the Dungeons before Snape missed her.

She’d visited Gringotts and taken out a large sum from the account Severus had set up for her. Her hope was that Mr. Borgin would be willing to share his perspective on Bellatrix with her. He might even have some books on Necromancy he would part with — he’d certainly had enough nefarious customers over the years. And both he and Burke were misers of legend.
What was the Muggle expression after all? *Money talks.*

Hermione lifted her robes so that her head was covered, and, keeping her head down, followed the narrow twisting alleyway as it led away from Diagon.

She moved swiftly, trying to attract minimal attention. She had just about reached her intended destination when suddenly she felt hands reach out and yank her shoulders to one side into a smaller alley.

She felt herself be pushed against the dirty brick, face-first. She reached her hand down to grasp her wand, but her hand was roughly pulled back, so that her shoulder socket sharply twinged in pain.

“Ouch! Let me go! Who are you!?”

She struggled against her unseen assailant, but couldn’t twist her body to see who it was. The person held both her arms firmly behind her back, and just pressed her cheek even harder into the slimy, wet alley wall.

“Who are you?! Stop it!” she shouted as she flailed about, trying to kick at the feet and legs of the person behind her. A rush of panic came over her at the oh-so-familiar sensation of being manhandled. *No! Not again. Oh, Merlin, please!*

Suddenly she felt the grip of her arms loosen and she was spun around. A tall, cloaked figure loomed down at her. As the hood of his cloak fell back, Hermione found herself looking into dark, terrible, familiar eyes. Madness in them.

Scruffy face. The one who had unleashed the terrible purple-colored curse at her that had left her ribs sore for weeks.

Another one of her torturers.

*Antonin Dolohov.*

Hermione opened her mouth to scream.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

This was difficult to write. Trigger warning. Please mind the tags.

Thank you for sticking with me. The kudos and comments mean a great deal, and keep me typing away at this 5,000+ word behemoth so very late on a Friday night. :)

****

Antonin Dolohov’s pallid visage and demoniac smile overtook Hermione’s field of vision.

Even as she screamed vociferously and struggled, she couldn’t manage to create more than a couple inches of distance between the Death-eater’s horrible face and her own. In her peripheral vision, Hermione could see two people who passed by the small side street in Knockturn Alley simply scurry away from the noise, eager to avoid being part of a potentially dangerous confrontation.

*Cowards!*, Hermione thought. In any other street, Muggle or Wizarding, people would run to *help*, not run to *avoid* helping! This place was all wrong.

Dolohov’s breath smelled like old fish and his eyes were glowing, alight with pure bedlam. It was the same twinge of insanity Hermione had witnessed in Bellatrix Lestrange on multiple occasions.

“Let me go!” she screamed again, grappling unsuccessfully for the wand in her sleeve.

Dolohov merely laughed and covered her mouth firmly with one of his dirty palms. Her hands were jerked upwards and pressed against the slimy alley wall by Dolohov’s other large palm, his meaty paw gripping both her wrists. His fat thumb pressed deeply into her pulse, causing her entire right hand to become numb. He had put on weight and was built like a Quidditch player and the power of his grip frightened her to her bones. Hermione lifted her right leg to knee him hard in the groin, but before her patella could connect with his dangly bits, he quickly whispered, “*Imperio!*” and then, “You will *cease* struggling, Mudblood.”

Immediately, Hermione felt her entire body relax and obey the command.

Her leg dropped back down and her shoe hit the muddy cobblestone with a loud *clop*. Dolohov released his grip and her hands fell to her sides. She stood before Dolohov, a sudden zombie inside her own skin.

No! No! *Move!* *Please move!* Oh Merlin, *why* can’t I *move*?

Her brain screamed at her to do something, *anything*! But she could not so much as twitch a pinkie.

She had never been under the *Imperius* before, and she had read that it was allegedly a pleasant sensation, a feeling of floating away, carefree and weightless. But to her it felt similar to *Petrificus Totalus*. The panic and the inability to control one’s body while being fully present in the mind. *Why are my thoughts my own?*, she wondered, almost academically, as if what were happening were not actually happening to her, but merely part of some magical experiment.
She tried to focus all her mental energies.

*Break this! You can break this! Some wizards have been known to break through Unforgivables! Come on, Hermione!*

Dolohov smiled widely and stepped in even closer to her, one thigh moving between her two legs. He lifted his hand and carded his dirty fingers through her brown hair. Hermione felt a strong sense of nausea rise up deep in her belly. She wanted to double over and be sick on the cobblestones, but her body stood as a statue, her wide eyes unable to break away from Dolohov’s dark, lascivious stare.

“Well…well…well,” he whispered. “I would not have expected to see you in Knockturn, Little Mudblood.”

Hermione’s left hand was stone still, but if she wasn’t under the *Imperius*, it would have been trembling something fierce. Dolohov continued.

“Perhaps you have fallen on hard times, eh? Become a common street slag?”

Dolohov grinned widely. Hermione could see he was missing two incisors. Evidently he was the one who had fallen on hard times since the War ended. He was dressed like a common tramp, his robes in tatters.

*You disgusting maniac!,* she thought. *Don’t touch me!*

The hand in her hair glided through the strands, down over her ear, and was now cupping her cheek.

“Oh, yes, I *do* recall you. Tell me, are you marked from my *special* curse? You know, I only cast that one on those who are *meaningful* to me…I do so love to leave my own mark.”

He gripped at her hair tightly, yanking it back. Hermione felt the pain in her scalp, but could do nothing. Her neck was pulled backwards, her throat exposed.

Dolohov leaned in and sniffed at her flesh. *Like a dog,* Hermione thought.

“Well, Mudblood. It has been *too* long. Lucky me…I know someone else who would like to see you. Someone who would pay me top galleon, in fact, if I delivered the Mudblood bint to her. Shall I gift you to her as an early birthday present?”

He paused, as if waiting for an answer.

“Oops!” he beamed. “Forgot! You can’t talk, can you, you Mudblood whore?”

And as if he had just made the cleverest joke in the Wizarding World, Dolohov threw back his ugly head in rough, choking laughter.

*Fucking creep,* Hermione thought.

After a couple moments, he recovered himself with a wheeze of self-satisfaction.

“Tell you what, Mudblood. Let’s pay a visit to that place across the way. Madame Sugar is always generous to me. I’m sure she has a room. Something for just the two of us. Why don’t you and I have a bit of the old in-and-out, and if you *please* me, I’ll *consider* delaying taking you to Bellatrix? But only if you show some *effort*. I hate it when a fucking whore just lays there.”

For several seconds, Hermione could feel herself stop breathing. It was as if everything around her
was moving in slow motion. She thought she might be about to faint, but then her brain snapped back to attention and the realization washed over her like a sudden, dragging riptide.

*Oh, God. Oh. GOD. No. No! No! NO.*

*No, no, NO! Please, no! Oh, please, not this! This cannot be what he wants!*

She wanted to scream, "But you're a Pureblood! And you consider me a Mudblood!" But she was slowly realizing that Pureblood ideology was inconsistent at best; when even Lucius Malfoy desired her, or acted as if he desired her, Pureblood ideals were remarkably flexible.

Dolohov leaned forward even more and rubbed his nose against her own in a weird Eskimo kiss, laughing like a lunatic.

He began to lift his knee, the one between her legs, until it was rubbing beneath the apex of her thighs.

*I'm going to throw up, and then I'm going to choke on my own puke,* Hermione thought with alarm. She could feel her stomach churning again, but couldn’t open her mouth to let it out. Instead it bubbled up at the bottom of her esophagus; she willed the acids back down.

Dolohov cackled at the look of primal, animal-fear in her alarmed eyes.

*This isn’t happening. This is not happening! No, no, no!, Hermione kept chanting in her mind.*

Dolohov leaned into her ear to issue his next command.

“*Walk to the brothel. Smile big, Little Mudblood, and act as if everything is just as you wish. If asked, say you are new to the trade but oh-so-eager to learn.*”

Immediately, Hermione felt her lips contort into a wide smile, the corners of her face pulling towards her ears as far as they could go. Against her will, her legs began to walk out of the side-alley and into the main street. Dolohov moved behind her. His wand clutched in one hand, and his other was wrapped tightly around her waist. She shuddered internally at the contact.

*Oh my God, he’s going to rape me!, Hermione’s brain spun in a million directions as it sunk in. His dirty, chilly palm pressing across her stomach made it all the more real. I am going to be raped.*

The word itself was terrifying.

*Four letters. R-A-P-E. Why was it so scary? Four letters couldn't hurt you. But oh, what certain letters could represent! Outwardly, her body was still. But inside, she felt the familiar shaking. What her counselor at Mungo's had termed her psychological trauma, what she knew Muggles called 'PTSD'. Her war wounds that could not heal, at least on the surface.*

Damage. The fear response. Uncontrollable.

She took a deep breath. *It's just letters. Letters cannot hurt me. Take a deep breath. Breathe! You could write the word with six lines of a quill, Hermione thought quickly, desperate to distract herself.*

*Only need dip the quill once to write it. One dip. Six marks. Four letters. One word.*

The fear was mounting and it was excruciating. There was no way for it to be physically expressed under the *Imperius*. It turned back inwards.
"I am going mad."

She felt like a little girl all of a sudden. As if she had an inner voice that had remained the same since the day she discovered magic, or the day she had first boarded the train to Hogwarts.

"Why would you want to hurt me in this way?," her eleven-year-old self said. "I'm just a girl! It makes no sense!"

The fear was strangely familiar to Hermione, she suddenly realised. She had felt a similar deep fear when she had been in the private Hogwarts’ dining room with Lucius, but somehow it had felt like something oddly… expected.

After the physical abuse she had endured, it hadn’t shocked her as much as perhaps it should have when Lucius had grappled with her, his heavy body atop hers. The two of them rolling and punching and kicking and biting. He had never treated her like she was a child. He had barely encountered her when she had been a child. He knew her reputation through Draco, but only briefly remembered her presence at school. But she had known from their first encounter what kind of violence to expect. He’d always hated her as an enemy. It showed just what kind of man Lucius Malfoy was. Arrogant. Cruel. Selfish.

And when they had finally come to a stop in their tussle and Lucius had been above her with her arms pinned, her dress ripped, her newly-fatalistic brain had said, of course.

After all he has done to me, of course this would be his next step.…This is what is next.

She had still been desperate and terrified, but Lucius’s abuse had been known to her for some time, and she had anticipated a terrible consummation with him. She had believed that he would take her unwillingly at some point, even if that had been their wedding night. A marriage to Lucius Malfoy meant an inevitable rape, whether during their engagement or shortly after their marriage. She had…anticipated that horrible inevitability. Had somehow mentally adjusted, though not accepted, its impending trauma.

With Dolohov…she expected him to outright kill her. Of course he would! He was just a Death-eater goon, one she knew from the Ministry albeit, but one who wanted her dead plain and simple. As soon as she recognized him, the next words out of his mouth should be, “Avada Kedavra!”

Or if not the Killing Curse, he would immediately take her to Bellatrix. "Look what I found!" he would say. And Bellatrix would clap her hands in glee. And Hermione would endure several weeks of torture, if she were unlucky, before Bellatrix finally bestowed death upon her. That was the expectation her brain had created within 15-seconds of Dolohov gaining the upper hand. She had never heard that Dolohov was a sexual sadist; he was simply another Death-eater sociopath. The truth was, she barely knew him.

So as Antonin Dolohov marched her to the front door of Knockturn Alley’s shabbiest brothel, her brain just couldn’t accept what was happening. Are they all rapists? Most of them?, Hermione wondered.

Lucius said he had never…if she chose to believe him. And she couldn’t believe Severus ever had….But the rest of them? The way Dolohov so casually decided upon this dark path. It wasn’t the first time for him.

Is this what they all did with impunity during the War?

Hermione felt like her eyes were opened even more to the real-life horror that was Voldemort’s
ideology.

Any system of belief that turned grown wizards, grown men, who should be strong and moral and righteous, into nothing but mindless swine was evil. Plain and simple.

As much as she hated Antonin Dolohov, there was that tiny part of her that suddenly realized he was just doing what he had always done. He was a mindless machine, programmed to hate, and torture, and rape, and maim, and kill. Even with Voldemort gone forever, he could not stop himself. There was no redemption. Perhaps there was no redemption for Lucius Malfoy? Perhaps not even for Severus Snape? Are they all, this entire generation of men, damned?

Hermione felt her body robotically move to the front door of Madame Sugar’s run-down bawdy house. It’s exterior was made of rapidly dessicating plywood, and the whole building looked like something out of a Hogarth print.

Knockturn Alley had half a dozen houses of ill repute, but only Madame Sugar’s was plainly visible from the main thoroughfare. The others were magically disguised as a variety of other stores, or were cleverly located in third or fourth stories that were not visible from the street below. All required a secret password or charm to enter, and most catered to the middle or upper classes. One or two were unknown even to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Madame Sugar’s place was the lowest of the low.

The establishment in which the older prostitutes, or the ones who had become diseased or disfigured after years of “service,” came to ply their trade as a last resort. Rooms were plain and cheap and could be rented by the half-hour. Hermione had heard rumors when she had been as young as sixteen at Hogwarts of its existence, but even the most desperate and hormonal teenage boy (and girl, for that matter) stayed well clear of the place. It’s reputation was universally terrifying rather than titillating.

She and Dolohov entered.

Her plastic, wide smile was still unwillingly plastered across her lips. Madame Sugar herself was seated in a large armchair in the shabby front room of the establishment. Various well-worn couches and armchairs decorated the room with its peeling chintz-patterned wallpaper.

She was a large woman in her fifties, over 6 feet tall and weighing over fifteen stone, who employed her own daughters in her establishment. She wore a bustier and ostrich feathers in her dyed-orange hair, as well as a ridiculous number of roped rhinestones around her neck. If Hermione wasn’t so horrified to be in this revolting place, she would have laughed. No doubt Madame Sugar had never heard of Las Vegas in the Muggle World, but if she had, she would have fit right in among its gaudy denizens. She looks like an aging showgirl.

“Ah, my dear Antonin!”

“A room. Top floor.”

“Yes, yes of course,” the buxom brothel owner demurred. "I am not sure if we have the top floor free..."

Antonin reached into his robes and pulled out a coin, flicking it over to Madame Sugar, who snatched it up and tucked it in between her pendulous bosom. Madame Sugar rose and moved over to a cabinet. She extracted a gaudy silver key and handed it to Dolohov.

“Room 306. Top floor. Only the best.”
Dolohov nodded. Madame Sugar glanced over at Hermione. Hermione made eye contact with her; she was surprised the curse allowed that much, but found she could not force the smile from her face.

_Help me, Hermione thought. Please! Help me! Don’t let him take me upstairs!_

Hermione never thought the day would come when she’d be facing a brothel keeper and praying she was a Legilimens, but here she was.

“Is she alright?” Madame Sugar inquired, lifting her heavily made-up lids to gaze at Dolohov. Dolohov grinned, toothlessly.

“Answer, my dear Dora.”

Hermione felt her smile grow even wider. The sides of her face were beginning to hurt. She felt her lips part.

“I am new to the trade, but _oh-so-eager to learn._”

Her lips closed, and she felt the corners of her mouth stretch back into her fake, forced clown-smile. Madame Sugar tossed her head back and laughed.

“Oh, I _do_ like them eager!”

“Me too,” Dolohov nearly panted.

_Ugh! Creep!_

“Let’s go,” Dolohov muttered, under his breath, giving Hermione a nudge.

With that, they left Madame Sugar on the ground floor and began climbing a winding staircase up to the 3rd. Dolohov climbed the steps behind her. He had put his wand away. There was no need. Hermione had no control whatsoever over her body. With every step, she felt the dread and panic continue to rise.

_Dolohov will rape me. He will rape me, then take me to Bellatrix. And she will torture and kill me._

She couldn’t quell her fear — it rose and rose until she wondered if it was possible to go completely mad under the _Imperius_ Curse. _Why can I hear my own thoughts?, _she wondered. _Why don’t I feel safe and secure and happy? This is not how it’s supposed to be. Shouldn’t I be a mindless automaton?_

As she climbed, she also thought of Snape.

Severus Snape. Her _husband_.

He hadn’t been much of a lover, and certainly not _much_ of a husband, but she thought of him nonetheless.

_Severus had been right._ She _was_ a foolish girl, still. A silly Know-It-All Gryffindor. She should have _never_ left the safety of the Dungeons.

But she couldn’t have anticipated _this_.

_Maybe Snape has followed me? Maybe he would appear at any moment and save the day?_
He was remarkably perspicacious. A master spy. It was possible.

Don’t give up! Severus will come! He may come any moment!

But if he doesn’t….? She felt a sharp sadness at the thought of Severus finding out that she had been raped, tortured, and murdered. Will he blame himself? Will he blame me? Will this destroy him?

She knew Lily’s death had almost destroyed him…she couldn’t bear to cause him more suffering. Not after the War.

She knew he didn’t really care for her that much, but he had said over and over that she was his duty and responsibility. He took that seriously.

He would believe he had failed his duty. Yet again. What would that do to him?

But... maybe he will be happy to be rid of me? He’ll be free...maybe this way I set him free? Oh, I’m so stupid! Why did I try to come here alone? Oh, Merlin. God. Any Higher Being at all! Someone or something protect me. Help me! Help me and I promise I will never be so stupid ever again!

Her thoughts were interrupted as they reached Room 306.

Dolohov placed the magical silver key in its lock and it turned itself; the door swung open without being pushed. Inside was a rusted Queen-size bed that looked like it had been in the room for at least sixty years and an ugly floral bedspread. The carpet was equally hideous with intermittent dark stains the origin of which Hermione actively chose not to ponder.

“Get on the bed and undress,” Dolohov commanded as he closed the door behind them.

Hermione felt her body walk to the bed on its own accord, and turn to sit on it. Her fingers lifted to her cloak and unfastened the clip at her collarbone, removing it.

No, don’t do that, she tried to command the phalanges and tendons of her hand. The moving parts ignored her and did their bidding. Her robe cast off on the bedspread, her nimble fingers moved to her maroon-colored blouse and began to unbutton it, starting at the top and working her way down.

At some point, he’ll lift the curse, she thought. As soon as he does, I’ll jump him. I’ll get my wand from my cloak. I’ll escape!

As if hearing her optimistic thoughts, Dolohov leered at her, thin lips spread wide, revealing his toothless mouth once more.

“I don’t usually like to skip foreplay, Mudblood, but it’s easier to keep you under until I’m inside you. Then I’ll release you, and we’ll have a bit of fun, I think. I wonder if you’ll try to buck me off or just give in. I hope you’ll be a fighter. Merlin, but I love an energetic fuck.”

He grinned even more widely and licked his lips demonstratively, making a lewd gesture with his forefingers.

Hermione felt a choked sob well up in her throat, but there was no release to be had for it. She couldn’t open her mouth. The sensation passed and still her fingers worked at her blouse. When it was completely unbuttoned, she pulled it off and dropped it on the floor, then her hands began to work at her skirt, unzipping it and pulling it off her hips. As it too joined the blouse on the floor, she felt her hands move around to her back to unclasp her bra.

Oh, God. Oh, God, stop this! I don’t want to do this. Stop, hands! Stop, fingers! Why can’t I STOP?
Even in this horrible moment, she was surprised she thought of her husband.

Severus Snape had not even seen her naked, but she was overcome with a strange sense of failure.

Somehow, despite the bizarre triangle she had found herself in with Snape and Malfoy, this other man, this strange, disgusting creature leering down at her was going to be the first man to glimpse her naked body and know its secrets — to see how full her breasts were, despite her small frame, to learn that her areolas were pink, not reddish-brown like some witches', to notice that she had a small, white birthmark on her sternum the size of a pea (yet of course, despite its size, she was self-conscious of it), to see she had an “innie” belly-button and not an “outie”, to know she shaved her bikini line, but left the rest of her pubic hair intact, and to discover that she did in fact have a slight scar on her ribs from Dolohov’s powerful curse.

These were things she never wanted anyone to know, really.

These were her private things.

This is what she had always wanted her future husband to know. But no one else. She would have trusted Ron with these facts.

Even before Bellatrix had carved her up as “Mudblood” and “Whore,” she had been nervous to entrust her physical body and its uniqueness to a wizard’s care, but Ron would have accepted her. He loved her body. He had told her so.

As for her husband, despite the fact they had had sex several times, Severus Snape still knew none of these more intimate details. And this revolting creature, Antonin Dolohov, would know them all. It was unfair! And it made Hermione angry.

Deeply, ferociously angry.

Only a man she loved...or her husband should know these things! Should SEE her like this!

Dolohov took a step closer to her. He pulled off his own tatty robe to reveal even tattier attire underneath — a patchwork pair of linen pants and a dirty Muggle t-shirt. He pulled his t-shirt over his head quickly, and stared with lewd anticipation at Hermione’s still-covered breasts.

You shouldn't get to see me!

As her fingers obeyed the Imperius and moved to unhook her bra clasp, she felt the anger grow inside of her even more as she made eye contact with Dolohov.

I am not for you, she thought. You will not have me. I am not yours, you grimy, gormless little Death-eater! I hate you! I will destroy you!

Despite the Imperius, she suddenly felt her fingertips began to tremble and shake at the clasp at the back of her spine.

No, she thought. I will not do this. You cannot command me to do this. I know who I am. You have no power over me! I remove your weak magic from me. Be gone!

She suddenly felt her hands fall from her bra and land on the bedspread next to her. Dolohov tilted his head, quizzically.

“I didn’t tell you to stop undressing, you Mudblood whore!” he spat.
But Hermione’s hands did not lift themselves from the bed.

“I said, take off your bra, you slut!” Dolohov raged, incensed at the slow progression.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. There was a buzzing sensation in her ears now, low. It reminded her of the sound of static on a Muggle television set when it is turned down. Almost imperceptible. The hairs of her forearms stood to attention. She felt her blood pumping into her ears.

No, she thought. My arms will not do as you say, Dolohov. Harry could resist this. And I can, too. I am no longer a girl. I am… powerful!

She lifted her jaw slightly, and all at once she realized she had complete command over her own body once more. She smiled, slightly, as it slowly dawned on Dolohov what was happening.

_I am Hermione fucking Granger. Brightest witch of my age. Perfect NEWTs. And you…_ 

“Why you little diseased doxy—”

And before Dolohov could lift his wand, Hermione dove down to her robe and pulled out her own wand from its sleeve, before wheeling above and, on one knee, pointing it at the rangy form of Antonin Dolohov.

“You’re the diseased one!” she retorted, followed by a rapid, “Expelliarmus!”

Dolohov growled and launched himself across the room, tucking and rolling away from Hermione’s spell.

She stood and pointed her wand at his balled-up figure.

“Impendimenta!”

Again, Dolohov quickly jumped out of the way, diving to the other side of the bed. Hermione began to see his abilities clearly — he wasn’t nearly as powerful as Lucius or Severus on the offense, but he was agile in his parries and had quick reflexes.

She leapt to her feet.

The battle was on.

“Amputatio!” she cast, pointing at Antonin’s right arm.

The spell hit him square in the shoulder and he howled as his right shoulder socket detached from the rest of his body. He screamed in profound physical agony as his body was jaggedly split.

Her eyes went wide in shock at his visceral pain. She had read about this particularly brutal curse in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts while preparing Dumbledore’s Army, but never attempted it, never even thought she'd attempt it.

It was a Dark Curse…and she had never known anyone to cast it in real life. But somehow it had just come to her in the moment. It was shocking to see it in action. Dolohov’s right arm detached completely from his torso and simply dropped to the carpet with a shocking thud. Blood poured from the wound.

He used her pause of astonishment to duck down and seize his wand from his severed right hand and take it up with his left.
“Reparo!” he shouted, pointing at the gaping hole in his sleeve.

His magic quickly stemmed the bleeding and healed the open wound, but to re-attach his limb would take a skilled healer. The limb remained on the carpet, and Hermione couldn’t help but gape at it.

Dolohov leaned forward and pointed his wand at her.

“Oh, I shall make you suffer for that, you dirty Muggleborn bitch!”

“You had your chance!” Hermione retorted. “Stupefy!”

“Protego!”

Dolohov skillfully evaded once again.

Though the room was small, Hermione found it difficult to maintain the upper hand. Dolohov was wily and preternaturally quick, and her strong offensive spells were rapidly tiring her.

Five minutes later, she had cast, “Segmentum!” and “Ignium!” and all kinds of horrible things she could think of — at least ten curses — all in response to Dolohov’s narrowly-dodged, repeated “Crucio!” and she felt her energy begin to lag significantly. She had ducked behind a small chair in one corner of the bare bedroom, using it for a small-form of protection, as Dolohov had continued to do with his edge of the bed. She glanced around, frantically. There was no window in the room, and making a run for the bedroom door would give Dolohov a clear shot. She couldn’t risk it.

I don’t know how long I can keep this up, Hermione shuddered. If Dolohov was able to put her back under the Imperius, she wasn’t sure she could break through again. It had taken a remarkable amount of magical energy to do so. She hadn’t even believed it possible, and she was certain that she was approaching complete exhaustion. She’d expended far more energy than she knew she could muster. Not to mention she had a pounding headache between her eyes, her limbs ached all over, especially her wand arm and wrist, and the queasiness in her belly had not subsided. Though she knew Dolohov was at a tremendous disadvantage fighting one-armed, she hadn’t managed to land another hex. He was annoyingly nimble. Crude and dumb as he was, she began to see what his value had been to Voldemort. The Russian wizard was as sprightly in his body as he was thick in his brain. He wears down his opponents, she realized suddenly, in a panic. And I am being worn down!

She felt her eyelids droop. No! Focus, Hermione! Focus! She willed herself to hang on. Now was not the time to pass out. I must conserve my resources! Let him come to me!

She waited behind the chair for some time, until finally she heard a creak in the floorboards beneath the carpet. He’s coming to check, she thought.

Not lifting her head, she waited until the creaking was only a foot away, then jumped up, and with her last ounce of reserve, cast one more spell.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

It was a child’s spell, but she was exhausted, and if it landed, she could probably manage an “Expelliarmus!” But, unfortunately, it didn’t land.

Dolohov self-levitated and issued a lightening-fast “Protego!” and, having deflected, floating above her in triumph, quickly casting “Stupefy!”

Hermione fell back into the brown carpet, semi-conscious. The curse had hit her in her stomach, and
the numbing pain radiated from her center to all parts of her body. Her curls fanned out among the threadbare carpet. Her wand fell from her grasp, and she heard Dolohov "accio" it to him.

Oh, not when I was so close. Don’t let him win!, Hermione pleaded. Don't touch my wand!

Her vision was rapidly tunneling, and she was terrified that she was about to pass out. Would she ever wake up? She tried to lift her neck, but the room was beginning to spin slowly around her. She laid her head back on the rough carpet, and turned her head to one side.

I…I tried, she thought. I did the best I could. But I’m…I’m so tired…I can’t…I feel…weak….

And just as the blackness began to seep in, she heard a loud crashing noise, and fluttered open her eyes in time to see Lucius Malfoy appear in the doorway to the room.

He was all flashing eyes and proud fury. The door had nearly been broken off its hinges, such was the force of his entry.

He didn’t duck or skulk, but scanned the room immediately, summarizing the situation, his body at the ready to launch an attack. As his gaze moved from Hermione's prostrate form and fell on Dolohov, Lucius flung his robes over his right forearm and bent his knees in dueling posture.

“Someone...has not been... behaving himself…” she heard him utter in rage, slowly enunciating each syllable.

His articulation barely belying his intense fury. It had been some time since Hermione had seen that wild, uncontrolled anger in him, and even longer since she had seen it directed at anyone except herself.

Dolohov straightened in surprise, landed on the carpet and gave a quick, respectful tug on his forelock.

"L-Lord Malfoy!” he whimpered. “I…I can explain! I did not expect….”

Lucius lowered his own wand slightly, sensing that Dolohov was caving. But Dolohov merely straightened and rapidly changed tacks. With a smug snort he quickly stepped into a lunge, and, lifting his own wand, shouted, “Sectumsempra!”

Before he could deflect, Lucius was struck by the curse square in the torso and grunted deeply in pain as it cut through him. He doubled over, but recovered rapidly and turned his stony blue gaze on Bellatrix’s dirty little creature, as if to say, “you dare do such a thing to me?!?”

Lucius stood to his full height, despite the blood now dripping down his body and onto the carpet. He moved as if it were merely a small scratch.

Hermione watched, weakly, as Dolohov swallowed nervously at this response.

Antonin opened his mouth to say something, a plea of some kind she guessed, but before he could speak, Lucius coldly lifted his wand halfway, almost absently, as if what he were about to cast was merely a child’s exercise and barely worth the effort.

"Avada Kedavra!”

The green light burst from Lucius’s wand with dazzling alacrity and struck Dolohov in the heart, sending him backwards with the speed of a locomotive. He slammed into the far wall with a horrible, reverberant crack and crumpled to the floor, eyes bulging, tongue protruding, his one-armed torso
folded in on itself, dead as can be.

His head rolled to the left to face Hermione, and Antonin Dolohov’s stone-cold gaze, looking at nothing but eternity, was the last thing Hermione saw as her own pupils were covered by her eyelids and she slipped into oblivion.

So lost to unconsciousness, Hermione never even heard Lucius Malfoy fall to his knees beside her weakened form and whisper softly, “what have I done?”

"What have I done?"
“Hermione!”

The faint word was familiar to her.

“Hermione! Hermione!”

_That’s my name_, she thought absently, floating somewhere between her conscious and unconscious brain.

“All business, you must give me permission to touch you! I must remove us from here! We must go!” An urgent voice was commanding her.

Hermione’s eyes fluttered open. She felt weak as a kitten. All over, magically depleted, and just too exhausted to even move her heavy skull. Even lifting her eyelids felt Herculean. Lucius Malfoy’s pale face stared down at her, his cobalt irises flashing in alarm and concern. His hands were hovering above her shoulders, but he was careful not to touch her.

“Do I have your permission to touch you anywhere?” he asked, breathlessly. "We must leave!"

Hermione nodded and swallowed some excess saliva. Her mouth tasted slightly metallic and her head positively thumped.

“Y-yes.”

Exhaling in relief, Lucius moved his hands to scoop her up. She closed her eyes again, dizzy, and felt herself being lifted in the wizard’s strong arms. Her head rolled to the right against his upper bicep, and she felt her legs bend at the knee and dangle from his right forearm.

_We are getting out of this hell-hole_, she thought. A feeling of hope ran through her.

“My…my wand,” she murmured as she slipped her right arm around his neck.

“I have it,” came the assured, whispered reply. And then, a feeling of tightening as she clung to him.

_Pop._

A minute later, they had apparated to the Hogsmeade flat. As they landed, Lucius cried out in pain and sunk down onto one knee, careful not to drop Hermione.

Her eyes opened once more. She felt slightly more nauseous from the apparition, but she sighed in relief as she glanced about at the now-familiar flat. She sat up and lifted herself off Lucius’s knee, a bit wobbly. She almost stumbled to the carpet, but managed to keep herself on two legs. She felt like a sailor who has just arrived on shore after months at sea. Everything felt like it was swaying.

As she got her bearings, she felt a stickiness against her skin. She looked down and realized she was still wearing only her bra and underwear! Oh, Merlin! But before embarrassment and natural modesty could set in, she realized her stomach and most of the front of her was covered in _blood._

Her eyes widened in alarm, until she turned to Lucius and saw that it was plainly not her own. She
examined Lucius’ figure, now hunched over on his hands and knees. His dark robes gave nothing away, but below him, Hermione could see blood dripping and pooling onto the cream-coloured carpet. She had never seen him in such a state, and it was more than a little frightening to see someone who had always acted like he was impervious in such an obviously dangerous condition.

It snapped her back to full consciousness.

“Lucius! How badly were you struck?”

Lucius merely groaned in response. Hermione felt herself shift into ‘action-mode’.

“You’re going to die if you lose too much blood! Here, get on the couch! Take off your outer robes!”

Lucius made an attempt to stand up, but collapsed almost immediately. Hermione knelt down, and though she could feel that she herself was still much weakened from the exhaustion of her battle with Dolohov, the adrenaline began to pulse in her veins.

She reached into his robes and found her wand. She pulled it out and quickly set it on the coffee table. She managed to lift Lucius up and help him stagger the two feet to the couch. He lay on his back, his chin dipping down to meet his neck. His breathing laboured. One leg dangling off the edge of the cushions. His arms hung limply about him.

“He's in terrible shape," she understood all at once.

His lips looked to be turning blue! She knelt down and shook his arm.

“Lucius, can you hear me? Do you have any Blood-Replenishing Potion?”

“In…the bath…,” he murmured faintly, his head tilting slightly towards the door at the far end of the room.

Hermione leapt up. She had never been through that room. All their dealings in this flat had taken place in the living room, but she had to find something to help him. She knew from Harry’s experience with “Sectumsempra” that the loss of the blood the victim suffered was rapid and extremely dangerous. The wounds were often deep and though they could be healed, the blood needed to be replaced. And quickly. Severus Snape had invented a nasty, vindictive curse that produced much more than a mere flesh wound. No wonder it had become a fast-favourite among the Death-eaters. Who wouldn't prefer a curse that could inflict multiple slashes in one burst rather than have to dole out one “Secare!” at a time?

She opened the door. Behind it was an elegant bedroom. A large four-poster bed on the wall on her left occupied most of the chamber. And a pair of French windows that matched those in the living room was on the far-left side. The bed itself was fastidiously made up with a large red and white French-style quilt in a toile pattern, and over-run near its carved headboard in a variety of matching pillows adorned with tassels. It was extremely ostentatious. Very “Malfoy,” she thought.

She scanned the room. On the wall in front of her, there was a bureau, a long, tufted red bench, and a massive armoire. To the right she spotted another door and hurried to it.

The bathroom was equally opulent — an alcove tub framed by exposed wood beams faced frieze-topped mirrors and wrought iron wall sconces. The flickering candles in which automatically lit up as she entered the room. A square cushioned bench occupied the center of the chamber and a carved oak cabinet that stood from floor to ceiling took up one wall.

Is this as large as the bedroom?, Hermione wondered in surprise. The bath looks like it could fit four people. For a simple one-bedroom flat that Lucius insisted was used as merely a meeting place for
Death-eaters, it was extraordinarily luxurious. *Lies upon lies,* she thought.

Hermione walked across the marble floor. Its coolness under her feet reminded her that she had left her shoes (and blouse and skirt, for that matter) at Madame Sugar’s. She caught a glimpse of her nearly-naked, bloody body in the mirrors and had to will herself not to turn, gasp, and examine herself closely. This morning she had been another professional witch, dressing herself for work the way women do every single day -- acceptable clothes, simple hair, simple make-up, and off they all go by the millions to their places of employment. But how she had ended the day!! She looked like... *I look like I have been involved in a crime!* What will the Aurors think when they discover my clothes lying next to Dolohov’s corpse?!? *But you have...you have been involved in a crime. You are an accomplice to a murder.*

She would have to explain everything about her attack tomorrow at the Ministry. It was self-defence, after all. She could not be held responsible. Dolohov had attacked her. But if she did that, Severus would find out... *then what? What should I do? Would the scandal I had tried to avoid by not reporting Lucius explode once I report Dolohov??* Is it only a matter of time before Rita Skeeter publishes salacious articles about me on the front page of "The Prophet"? *I can't bear that type of scrutiny.* Ugh! Lucius might be dying at this very moment. *I don't have time for this!*

Hermione quickly moved to one of the large wooden cabinets. A sudden dizzy spell overtook her and she reached out to grab the sink counter to steady herself. She dropped to her knees, thudding on the cool marble.

*Don’t faint! Please, I can’t faint!*

She gathered her strength and sucked in some oxygen, then launched herself at the cabinet. She opened it to discover it contained a number of items, relatively well-organised. The upper shelves were full of towels and various bath salts, bubbles, lotions, etc. The lower shelves had a large number of Potions bottles that were mostly unlabeled.

But Hermione knew exactly what she was looking for. She rummaged through the bottles, sniffing and sorting, until she landed on it. The reddish-brown liquid in its traditional glass bottle and stopper. She seized it and returned to Lucius. *Lucky for him, I know my Potions,* she thought, with a tiny bit of smugness.

Lucius had passed out by the time she came back. *Oh, no! He can't be...* She put her ear to his chest, but she could hear his heart beating. She slapped his pale cheek, lightly. Once. Twice. Then hit it again, even harder.

“Lucius! Lucius, wake up! You have to drink this!”

He opened his eyes, and she felt as tired as he looked. She clenched her fists together, digging her nails into her palms.

*We cannot both be overcome,* she thought. *If I pass out, he’ll die!* She was almost tempted to slap her own cheek, depleted as she was.

She moved the bottle to his lips and Lucius drank, some of the potion spilling over his lips, a faint trickle of red moving down his chin and onto his neck. His head collapsed back down onto the couch cushion from the effort.

Hermione turned and picked up her wand. She knew she had to act quickly.

She breathed in deeply, then cast a quick, “*Mobilicorpus!*” and managed to raise Lucius’s body
enough that she could unclasp and pull his outer robes from him. They were heavy and difficult to lift. She realized as she pulled them from him that they were completely soaked in blood. She tossed them onto the carpet, where they landed with a wet, disgusting splat.

Alarmed, she turned back to Lucius. His embroidered, silver waistcoat was practically painted with deep red all along his front. She could see several slashes in it and beneath, bloody, torn skin peeking through. I need to see his wounds.

With Lucius still suspended in the air two feet above the couch, Hermione set her wand down and began to undo the buttons of his waistcoat. Pulling it aside, she made short shrift of his white button-up tunic, finally revealing his naked chest and shoulders. He was pale and muscular and yes, obviously well-built and attractive, with a smattering a pale hair on his breastbone and down between his well-defined abdomen, but what her eyes were immediately drawn to were the three terrible gashes that were criss-crossed across his poor body. One went nearly from his right shoulder-socket all the way down to his left-hip, and looked to be at least half-an-inch deep. The edges had begun to coagulate, but blood still issued profusely from that wound in particular. The others were shorter in length, but equally nasty.

He’s been bleeding this entire time, Hermione thought, suddenly worried. Are his organs punctured? Would she have enough reserves to heal him if they were?

Lucius groaned in pain as he lay, suspended in mid-air. Hermione noticed that sweat had broken out in his brow and his lips had started to turn an even darker shade of blue. What if his blood loss has been too great?!?

She could barely focus now. The exhaustion was over-taking her. All she wanted to do was sink to the floor and close her eyes, but Hermione Granger was NEVER going to give up on another living thing in need. No matter who that was.

She grasped her wand again and pointed it at the pale wizard. Lucius had clearly fallen unconscious. His pale face had become even more drawn, and she wasn’t sure if the Blood-Replenishing Potion had made up for his blood loss enough.

Don’t die!, she found herself silently praying. In the past, she would never have been able to picture herself working so hard to save the life of the irredeemable Lucius Malfoy, but for some reason it was imperative to her now that she save him.

She glanced at the tip of her wand and bit her lower lip. She had never cast the Vulnera Sanentur before. It was an extremely advanced spell. She had read about its remarkable healing power in the Restricted Section, and she had a good idea of how to clear her mind and focus her energy to make it efficient. Harry had told her of Snape’s use of it to heal Draco, but she was nervous to attempt it. It was terribly dependent on the intent and clarity of purpose of the caster. What if I screw it up?

She still felt very weak and more than a bit woozy. She wasn’t sure she had enough strength to even draw it out of her through her wand. I have to try! She was surprised how much she needed Lucius to recover. It had never even crossed her mind to let him die…to let him bleed out. Yet that would have been so very easy. But he’s killed for me, she thought. He killed for me! I have to do this. It is what is right.

Hermione stood tall and pointed her wand at his chest, grounding her bare feet into the carpet beneath her and trying to connect to the energy of the earth. She took a deep breath in and focused her last reserves of strength.

“Vulnera Sanetur!” she commanded.
She watched as the powerful spell burst from the tip of her wand and the magical power descended over Malfoy’s wounds, swirling in and out of them. They began to heal and close of their own accord. Slowly. Slower than she had anticipated, but she was magically depleted. It took some time, but within five minutes, the wounds had almost totally sealed and the bleeding had effectively stopped.

Hermione sunk down onto the carpet, exhausted after her vigil. She was still in her bra and panties, covered in sweat and Lucius Malfoy’s blood. Her entire body was shaking slightly. It seemed unreal to her she was even in the Hogsmeade flat. She was sure her body still thought it was at Madame Sugar's, but she had done it. Thanks to her, Lucius Malfoy was going to live.

_I did it. I made it through..._.

And that was the last thought in her head before she abruptly passed out.

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Hermione awoke two hours later in the red-bedecked four-poster she had glimpsed earlier when she had retrieved Lucius’s Blood-Replenishing Potion.

She opened her eyes and was slightly shocked at her surroundings. She lay in her bra and panties on top of the comforter, but with a thin throw blanket over her. Lucius Malfoy lay asleep at her side.

She sat up, blinking. At the sudden movement, Lucius opened his own eyes, blearily. He didn’t sit up, too weak yet to move much.

She glanced down at him.

“Did you move us here?”

He nodded.

“I woke up and you were passed out in the living room floor. I carried you here, but then I myself was overcome. How were you able to stop the bleeding?”

Hermione blinked.

“I… I don’t know. I was so weak, but I found your Blood-Replenishing Potion in the bathroom cabinet. I cast _Vulnera Sanentur_ to close up your wounds. I should’ve tried to find Dittany, too. But I was too tired.”

Lucius smiled, faintly.

“I don’t mind the scars. They aren't the only ones.”

Hermione laid back down and pulled the blanket over her chest, self-consciously. She was too tired to broach more than the most basic of questions.

“How did you apparate us? You must have lost at least a pint of blood.”

“I… I don’t know,” Lucius admitted. "I knew it was our only way...If I had fallen unconscious, we would both have been arrested by the Aurors. You would have been freed...but me...I would have been taken back to Azkaban.”

“How did you find us?”
Lucius’s eyes looked downwards, uncomfortably. His cheek resettled on the pillow.

“Hermione, I have been deceiving you. Though I do not know Bellatrix’s location or specific intentions, she did send me a letter by owl two days ago. In it, she informed me that she was reaching out to our former associates. She is attempting to re-build Voldemort’s Army.”

Weak as she was, Hermione could not help the anger course through her. She lifted herself on her right elbow.

“She owled you?! And you chose to keep this from me? Meanwhile pretending to woo me and to be my servant and my good little assistant, and all the stupid games you play with me at the Ministry? You’re such a liar! I ought to have known! A leopard can’t change its spots!”

“None of it is pretend for me. Not anymore,” Lucius whispered, softly. “Not after tonight. I do want to assist you and woo you, et cetera. But I wasn’t sure how to bring this to the Aurors’ attention. Or how to tell you. She gave no specifics, and only told me to ‘hold tight’ and that she had several of our former associates now pledged to her. I was trying to decide what to do with this information.”

“How did you find Dolohov and I?”

“I came home to the Manor, but somehow I knew you would not leave well enough alone. Only Hermione Granger would risk her life for books,” he smirked.

“I had a sneaking suspicion you would try to go to Borgin’s, and so I decided to go myself to meet you, or at least make sure they knew that if you came in, you were to be treated equitably. When I got there, they said you had not yet come. I left, assuming, perhaps unreasonably, that you had made a wise decision for once. I was about to leave Knockturn, passing Madame Sugar’s, when I suddenly had a strange…I don’t know what to call it. I knew you were there.”

Hermione arched her eyebrow in suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“I…sensed you, my dear. I stood in the street and looked about. It was a strange feeling. Few people were around, but I just had a sense you were nearby. Most of the stores were closed for the evening, but there was one that still had the light on. In fact, one establishment whose red light is always lit in the evening. Madame Sugar’s. I had a terrible feeling of dread come over me. You know that many of our former Death-eaters were little better than degenerates. Dolohov among them. Many of them frequented that establishment. And though I myself had never been on the premises, I just had a….I’m not sure…a premonition, I suppose. I had to make sure you weren’t there. It didn’t take much to make Madame Sugar tell me that someone matching your description had just entered with Dolohov.”

“Had you seen him? Did you know he was working for Bellatrix? That they had been in communication?”

“I haven’t seen him since the Battle of Hogwarts. But it makes sense he would eagerly go to work for Bellatrix again. As I’m sure you saw, he had fallen to the lowest depths since the War ended. And he was always cut from her cloth. A true, mad believer.”

Lucius shifted against his pillow, groaning slightly.

“Are you in pain?”

“A little,” he admitted. “I can manage it. The wounds are healing well, thanks to you. Did he…did Dolohov…did he hurt you?”
Hermione pursed her lips. Lucius’s aquamarine eyes bored into her own. His were filled with concern and his heightened physical pain. His regal haughtiness was long gone. *This might be the first time I have ever seen the real Lucius Malfoy*, she thought. If their circumstance wasn’t so dire, she would almost have been amused.

He seemed…vulnerable. She knew that it was possible, and in fact somewhat likely, he was still manipulating her, lying to her, but she couldn’t deny the truth: he had killed for her tonight. He had suffered near-mortal wounds for her tonight. And if he had not intervened, it was certain that she would have been raped and handed over to Bellatrix by the disgusting individual, now corpse, known in his corporeal life as Antonin Dolohov.

She decided to tell him the truth.

“No,” she whispered, with a slight shake of her head. “Thank God. He…he made me undress. He was going to…but I was able to break free.”

“What do you mean, ‘break free’?”

“He cast the *Imperius* on me. He accosted me in the street. Then he cast the Curse. It was how he was able to get me into the room. He forced me to…to remove my clothes. But I was able to stop him before he made me completely undress.”

Lucius’s tilted his head slightly in surprise.

“You broke free of the *Imperius*?”

Hermione nodded.

“I…I’m still not sure how. But I did. If I hadn’t…the would have…”

Hermione shivered. Lucius looked at her in total astonishment.

“I have never known any Mudblood…I mean, forgive me, *Muggleborns*, to do so!!”

“What do you mean?” Hermione questioned, ignoring his lazy slur.

Lucius took a deep breath, and pulled the blanket closer around his form.

“Hermione, I have witnessed that Curse being cast on Muggles, Muggleborns, and Purebloods. Many, many times. Of course no Muggles ever stood a chance, but I have never seen a Muggleborn overcome it, either. Occasionally certain Muggleborns, especially those who were particularly well-trained, resisted other spells, but never, *ever* the *Imperius or Cruciatus*. And in all my time, I have only *ever* witnessed *two* Purebloods overcome the Curse through the strength of their magic alone.”

“What?!” Hermione pressed.

Lucius inhaled deeply. Should he reveal this? Why not? The girl had certainly proved her abilities tonight.

“Bellatrix Lestrange and Severus Snape. This occurred during separate occasions in which the Dark Lord placed them under the *Imperius* as punishment. Both were able to break the spell. Our Lord had to punish them with *Cruciatus* for the impudence. I have never seen anyone else, nor heard of anyone else, breaking through the *Imperius*. It is…it is *exceptional.*”

Hermione took this astonishing information in.
“A-are you saying that I might be the only Muggleborn ever to break an Unforgivable?”

Lucius looked at her with something between mild disgust and unrestrained admiration. His own brain was racing, depleted as it was.

“It’s likely the truth,” he murmured.

“You don’t seem pleased about it.”

“I’m simply…I never would have… expected…I never would have expected you,” he murmured.

His cool, blue eyes moved across her face and up and down her body.

*Remarkable, remarkable witch…*, he thought.

He yawned then, unexpectedly, and he could feel his body sagging deeply into the bed, his eyes desperate to close themselves and give into sleep once more.

Hermione broke eye contact and rolled onto her back, leaving him to his own thoughts. She didn’t know what to make of this. His eyes on her body made her feel… tingly…but also uncomfortable. Suddenly she was very aware that she was wearing nothing but her undergarments underneath her blanket.

Would he have taken advantage? But, no. Absolutely not. From the moment Lucius had appeared in the doorway of the room at Madame Sugar’s, Hermione had not felt one iota of impure thoughts directed at her person. They had both been too concerned with dealing with Dolohov and then getting away. Staying alive. And now…getting away with it.

Her eyelids felt heavy again. And though she knew there was much more to discuss and that there would be a world of consequence to face in the morning, she couldn’t help but close her eyes and snuggle into the red pillow beneath her head.

Somehow here in this flat she felt…safe.

*How can I feel safe here?*, she wondered, in amazement, sleeping one foot from Lucius Malfoy. *After what he did to me…what he did to Ron…how can I rest beside him?*

But she did.

Lucius had also closed his eyes at the same time, giving into his own exhaustion.

And though both of them wanted to continue the conversation, and Hermione knew she would face hell if she did not return to the Dungeons tonight, her body betrayed her, and within thirty seconds she was fast asleep.

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Hermione awoke on Wednesday morning in a bedroom that had a large window that streamed in soft rays of sunshine.

She sighed in pleasure. She loved the way morning sunbeams felt across her bedspread when she slept in a bit. It always reminded her of her childhood.

*But I’m not home…*, she suddenly realized. *And I’m not in my Head Girl room. And the Dungeons have no windows to the outside!*
She opened her eyes wide and sat up. *I’m in Lucius Malfoy’s bed in the Hogsmeade flat.* The memories of last night came flooding back to her.

*Oh, Merlin! It’s daylight! What time is it?*

She looked about, but she was the only occupant of the bed. Her wand lay on the night-stand next to her. She picked it up and cast a quick “*Tempus!*” and realized it was nearly half past 8 o’clock in the morning!

*Oh, shit! I’m going to be late for work, and what is Severus going to think?!?* It was usually around this time they met at the breakfast table for their required daily ritual of reading aloud.

She threw back the blanket and looked down at herself. She was still covered in dried blood. She quickly cleaned herself with a rather uncomfortable “*Scourgify!*” (She would have much preferred a bath.) And then she transfigured the thin blanket into a simple knee-length. As she hopped out of the bed, she noticed a piece of paper fall from the night-stand to the floor. She snatched it up and read.

*Hermione,*

*I owled Mott and informed him that I received a message from Bellatrix, and that we would be taking the day off work to review it and do some research at the Manor.*

*Tell no one of what happened with Dolohov, not even Snape. I have already made arrangements with Madame Sugar, who has been paid handsomely for her silence and for the destruction of any evidence linking us to her establishment.*

*Last night you acted with a tremendous amount of fortitude, more than I ever believed a Muggleborn capable of, I admit.*

*I am in your debt.*

*Please rest today, my dear. Regain your strength.*

*Yours,*

*Lucius*

Hermione read it twice, and then burnt it to a crisp with a flick of her wand. She wished she could burn the memory of last night away just as easily.

Lucius always laid everything on so thick. She couldn’t believe he was now acting like she was a witch whose power he actually *admired.* It was unbelievable. It *must* be a feint. Right…?

But…she *had* done things last night that she had not even known *herself* to be capable of! And she couldn’t see why Lucius would lie about how few wizards had ever broken through the *Imperius.*

*Could it all have been a set-up?* It was possible Lucius knew more than he was letting on — especially if he admitted to having received a letter from Bellatrix two days ago and not telling her… he was an inveterate liar.

…but the…the near rape. She shuddered. As for the attempted rape would Lucius have condoned, nay, ordered such a thing?… *No.* She knew that Lucius Malfoy did draw the line there.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, her thoughts running wild.
Lucius knew what kind of man Dolohov had become... he called him a “degenerate.” Lucius would never have sent Dolohov after me directly, because he knew the consequences. He would know what Dolohov would try to do to me... Lucius is such an egomaniac, he would never want another wizard to have what he considers “his.” Even the fact that I married Snape rather than himself clearly gnaws at him. Lucius has put his claim on me. Why? Lust driven by ego, perhaps... but I can’t imagine he’d have let Dolohov do that... he considers himself a different level of breeding... and he’s just not stupid enough to think Dolohov would obey his orders not to hurt me....

No, Hermione decided, surprising herself. *I think, for once, Lucius’s words might actually be closer to the truth than to lies!* It was a rather surprising thought.

Hermione didn’t want to waste any more time. She was off the hook at the Ministry for today. But would still have to face her husband.

“I broke a promise,” she said aloud to the empty bedroom. *I promised Snape I would let him know if I were to leave the Hogwarts grounds past dark. And now I simply didn’t return last night! Will he be worried? Will he have gone to look for me?*

*You usually don’t cross paths in the evenings. It’s alright, it’s possible he didn’t miss you until just about now. Maybe I can tell him I had an early morning meeting in Hogsmeade and that is why I missed breakfast? He’ll be annoyed, but not furious.*

Ten minutes later, Hermione was still constructing the details of the lie in her mind when she closed the front door to the Hogsmeade flat and made her way down the stairs and onto the High Street. She had decided to walk back to the Hogwarts grounds rather than floo. It would make it all the more convincing.

Pleased with her decision, she wrapped a cloak she had transfigured from one of Lucius’s towels around herself and headed past Honeydukes.

Behind her, some thirty yards, the tall, stoic form of Severus Snape watched her move towards the Castle.

He could not claim to know all of her secrets yet, but he knew he had just learned one interesting thing about his pretty, young wife: she was a liar.

And he would find out the truth.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not usually one for pretentious literary quotes, but I did find myself thinking of this sonnet as I wrote this, for reasons that should be made even more clear in the next few chapters. :) 

"When my love swears that she is made of truth,  
I do believe her, though I know she lies,  
That she might think me some untutored youth,  
Unlearnèd in the world’s false subtleties.  
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,  
Although she knows my days are past the best,  
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
Oh, love’s best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be."
Chapter 48

Hermione whispered the passcode and entered the Dungeons suite, dragging her unwilling feet across the foyer.

As she passed the archway and stepped down into the living room, she expected to see her husband’s dark form waiting for her, arms crossed, obsidian eyes glaring down at her. Her mind had run through the scenario thoroughly as she had crossed the grounds.

“Where were you last night? How could you have been so foolish, you stupid girl!” he would say.

And she would make excuses, and he would take his rage out on her with a severe verbal lashing. And though she would have to endure the ten minutes of acrimony, eventually Snape would storm off and she would be free to go about her day. It was to be expected now. *I transgress, he disapproves. He loses his temper at me, and then cuts me down. Over and over. Rinse and repeat.*

So it was a shock to find that Severus Snape was nowhere to be found in his home. Hermione glanced around the dining room and peered under the doorway of his bedroom, lab, and study. The rooms were dark. She listened. Nothing.

*Should I send him a message to his classroom? Apologize for missing our breakfast?*

She knew she probably should, but she was too mentally tapped out. He’d be back eventually, and they’d have to see one another at some point during the day. She was in no rush to experience his cruel tongue, not after the trauma of her assault.

She walked to the end of the hall and entered her own bedroom. Her bed was still made up as she hadn’t slept on it and she collapsed onto it, emotionally exhausted from what she had been through with Dolohov. She could still feel his hands on her waist and smell his disgusting breath. She wasn’t sorry he was dead. He deserved to die, and if she could have, she would have killed him herself, but she had no idea what to do next.

Part of her wanted to tell the Aurors everything about her assault and how Lucius had found her, but then her ongoing…*what was it? Relationship* with Lucius would become public knowledge. It was one thing to see him in the confines of the Hall of Prophecies, but they both had avoided any public appearances in London. She couldn’t deal with media attention of any kind —she had always hated Rita Skeeter and her horrible stories. Somehow, Rita would find the worst angle and paint her as some sort of vengeful demon or lustful harlot. Snape would then know, and she would have to explain that she had been in contact with Lucius *all this time*. There would be a public inquest. Then Ginny would find out. And Harry.

*I can’t lose their good opinion,* she thought. *I have lost so much.*

She remembered the look on Ginny’s face when she had seen the kiss on the stairs, and the way Harry and Ginny had firmly told her they could not attend her marriage ceremony to Lucius. She knew they loved her, but they would never, ever understand. *Hell, even I don’t understand why I keep seeing Lucius.*

*You’re lonely,* a voice in her head answered.

Hermione moved into the bathroom and quickly showered, firmly scrubbing the memory of Antonin Dolohov from her skin. She emerged and looked at herself in the mirror, wrapped in a towel. Her
twin carvings, ‘MUDBLOOD’ and ‘WHORE’ stared back at her. The ‘WHORE’ carving had almost completely healed, leaving only its lasting raised red and white scar, but the letters were so large, so plain to see.

_I’ve been marked so much_, she thought. _Bellatrix, Dolohov, Lucius, even Severus_. She felt like they all wanted a stake in her body, her mind, her soul. They all wanted to slice her up and take a piece away for themselves. _Is there any hope for the future?, _she wondered. The War was long over, but for her, she felt like it just went on and on. _All of these former Death-eaters — they all keep their claws in me._

Hermione left the bathroom to dress and found there was a scroll from Ginny that had been left on her desk. She got up and read it. Ginny had finished her NEWTs and now had lots of last-minute preparations for the Saturday wedding — final bridesmaid fittings, etc. Hermione quickly dashed off a reply that she’d meet Ginny in the afternoon to help her organize everything.

But that was all her exhausted brain could muster for now. Hermione practically crawled back over to her bed. She set a quick alarm spell to wake her in four hours and slipped under her comforter, quickly falling asleep once more, grateful to have avoided a confrontation with her husband.

****

That evening, Hermione returned to the Dungeons after spending almost five hours with Harry and Ginny in Gryffindor Tower.

The entire school, but especially their House, was buzzing with palpable excitement. Students were taking their final NEWTs this week, and preparing for the graduation ceremony Saturday morning in the Great Hall, which was to be followed by Harry and Ginny’s wedding Saturday afternoon and evening.

A massive white tent had already been constructed on the Hogwarts grounds, and Molly Weasley was driving Ginny more than a little insane with all of the last minute details — flowers, musicians, catering, etc. What had started as a nice idea — their wedding coinciding with the graduation — and a way to gather about a hundred of their closest friends, had quickly expanded into the Wedding of the Year™, with Rita Skeeter doing a full editorial spread, as well as articles in _Bridal Beauty_ and _Wizardly Weddings_ and almost the entire staff, all the Seventh Years, and many important Ministry figures and celebrities in attendance. Hermione tried to be sympathetic to Ginny’s stress and complaints — the pretty redhead was certainly no “bridezilla” and was about to be photographed and made to do quite the dog-and-pony show, but Hermione couldn’t help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

Not for the absurdly ostentatious wedding. Marrying in the Room of Requirement with only a Ministry Official to legitimize the contract had been perfectly fine with her. Hermione had never been one of those girls who daydreamed about her wedding day as some lavish society event.

But Ginny was about to marry the love of her life — Harry had grown into a remarkable young man; though they were young, Hermione thought it was wonderful that they were launching their adult lives together. Once you found your soulmate, why waste time? She had wanted that for herself. A soulmate. And she thought she had found one in Ron.

Hermione had offered to return Molly Weasley’s wedding gown to Ginny, but her dear friend had insisted she keep it. “Ron would have wanted it this way,” she had smiled as she squeezed the brown-haired witch’s hands with warmth and affection.

Hermione had smiled, wistfully. _You’re just sad you don’t get the happy ending, _she thought. _Don’t be jealous! Harry and Ginny deserve their happiness. You’re being silly._
So, she had straightened her shoulders and set about helping her friend make sure this wedding day would be absolutely perfect.

It was almost seven o’clock now, and Hermione knew that Snape had finished giving his Potions NEWTs and would likely be back in the Dungeons. So she was surprised yet again when there was no sign of him for the second time that day.

She ordered a meal for both of them from the elves — a gnocchi dish and some tomato soup — and cast a quick warming spell on them. Then took out *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, Vol 2* that she had found in the Hogwarts Library. It wasn’t particularly detailed, but it was the best she could do for now. She didn’t want to venture into Snape’s bedroom and look at his bookshelf there — not until she could gauge how angry with her he was.

She waited and read, nervously, until at long last she heard the heavy front door open and heard his boots on the flagstones. She steeled herself for his anger.

“Severus?” she called out.

He said nothing, but continued to walk down the hallway until he appeared in the archway. He removed his outer robes and flung them over the couch, as he typically did, and set down a pile of books on a side table. He looked over at her and paused.

Hermione pressed her lips together. *Why isn’t he saying anything?*

He didn’t look angry, more just generally disdainful. *That is probably a good thing.*

She cleared her throat.

“I ordered supper. I know you said it’s not necessary, but I…I missed our morning breakfast and I wanted to apologize. I had to be at the Ministry early for a meeting, and I forgot to inform you. It was callous of me.”

Snape slightly narrowed his eyes at her, then lightly exhaled and strode towards the table, sitting in his place at the head. He sniffed at the food, then picked up a spoon and started on the soup.

*He seems more interested in the meal than in where I’ve been!* Hermione thought.

“Anyway…I…know that you are in charge of my safety, and you take your duty seriously, so I just…didn’t want you to… worry.”

He lifted his head and met her brown irises once more. Those dark pupils looked at her, completely expressionless. She noticed that he had slightly dark circles under his eyes. He looked tired.

*Finally,* he spoke.

“I have given four Potions NEWTs today, and I have four more to give tomorrow. Forgive me, but I have been far too occupied with my professional duties to pay much mind to *you.*”

Hermione bit her lower lip. That stung.

“Yes, I am sure you are exhausted.”

“Indeed.”

He went back to the soup; she took a bite of her gnocchi and chewed it, watching him cautiously.
Was he really so indifferent? He was acting...odd. Rage and correction and disapproval had been
mainstays in their relationship so far. But this felt different. This was even colder. **Who knew it was possible that Severus the Husband could be even LESS forthcoming than he already was?**

“I didn’t mean to inconvenience you, that’s all, or break our routine.”

“Whether we fulfill our required interaction over breakfast or supper does not matter in the slightest to me.”

*You don’t matter in the slightest to me is what he means,* she thought.

She wondered suddenly if she told him about Dolohov, if he would even care. Would he lash out,
or would he just shrug as if to say, “Just another example of how your foolishness gets you into trouble.” He had been so unsympathetic when she had first come to him with her bruises and confessed what Lucius had done to her. He hadn’t even believed her at first!

*Maybe deep down he just doesn’t care at all, for all his talk of duty and being concerned about my safety. Am I honestly just something else he has to check off on his to-do list each day?*

Hermione found herself fiddling with her wedding band on her left hand, nervously. Snape stopped eating and glanced at it, then at her book on the Dark Arts on the table. Hermione watched him. *What is he thinking?? The silence is unbearable.*

“I got it from the Library.”

“I see.”

“Um, yes...”

“Getting more...involved in the Dark Arts, are you?”

“Sort of...,” Hermione mumbled.

Severus stopped eating and leaned forward slightly. Hermione felt his black eyes lock into her own.
If she didn’t know any better, she felt like he was attempting Legilimency, yet she couldn’t sense any of the pressured prodding that accompanied it. There was definitely a searching intensity in his stare, however. She exhaled, nervously.

“Be. Very. Careful,” he intoned, his facial expression remaining placid. There was a definite threat beneath his words.

With that, he rose, cleared his half-eaten meal, and went into his Potions Lab, slamming the door after him.

Hermione slumped over in her chair and put her head in her hands. *What the hell was that? Does he know about Dolohov? About Lucius? Does he know it all? No, it’s not possible. He’s just being a bastard because he’s tired from the NEWTs. At least he didn’t scream at me and lose his temper. Small mercies.*

Despite the long nap she’d had earlier in the day, Hermione felt overwhelmed. Her husband’s indifference felt like just another tool Severus Snape had in his arsenal of weapons to make her feel like a completely worthless, insignificant witch.

*Should I have just told him everything? No,* she thought. *I can’t trust him. I’m...I might be more afraid of him now than before we married!*
Not because she thought he would ever physically harm her, but what was between them now felt like emotional abuse. *I feel so alone.*

She stood and cleared her own half-eaten meal and returned to her bedroom.

*I am alone,* she thought, remembering by contrast all the chatter and bright, welcoming atmosphere in the Gryffindor Common Room she had just been in, and the relaxed, comfortable manner in which she and the other bridesmaids — Katie, Parvati, Cho, and Luna — had conversed by the warm fireplace.

The entire school knew about her marriage to Severus at this point, but Ginny and Harry had told all of their friends not to pry or broach the subject with Hermione and, bless them, they had all abided. With them, she felt like her old self. Or as much as she could feel like her old self without Ron.

*They all seemed so excited about graduation, about the wedding, and their future careers. They are all going to move to London next week after graduation, getting flats together or moving in with boyfriends, as Luna and Rolf are planning.*

*And I’ll be stuck here. Forever. With no friends. No one to talk to.*

*The bride of the Bat of the Dungeons.*

*Persephone.*

*Maybe Lucius isn’t Hades after all. Maybe Severus is Hades. And this is Hell.*

Hermione could not help herself. She took four drops of Dreamless Sleep and drifted off to sleep.

****

In his bedroom chamber, Severus lay on his own bed. He was also considering Dreamless Sleep, but he had to be up early Thursday morning to prepare for the final NEWTs.

Unsurprisingly, most of the students had performed *appallingly* in the past few days.

True, Hannah Abbott has merited an Exceeds Expectations, and though Harry Potter had *almost* been at merely an Acceptable level, his original potion presented had shown a remarkable creative flair, and Snape knew he would be giving him an “E” as well. Fair was fair. Somehow, he hoped Lily would be pleased to know her son had done so well in her favorite subject.

As for the others, they had all merited an Acceptable.

Barely.

Contrary to popular belief, Snape did not *enjoy* failing people. He had warned Neville Longbottom not to attempt the NEWT for Potions, as the boy could still not make it through the course-review sessions without blowing something up. There was no point in awarding him a Poor. As much as the boy annoyed him, he didn’t want to damage his academic record. He would find his place in another field. Pomona seemed to adore him.

No, no one was even *close* to Hermione’s skill level in Potions — her care, consistency, accuracy. Her Potions had just been better in *every* way. The stark contrast between her performance a few weeks ago and these others’ reminded him just how remarkably, unusually intelligent his wife was.

Yet for *all* of her book smarts, how could she *continue* to behave with such recklessness?
Chastisement seemed to do nothing to curb her idiocy. It was infuriating that a young woman blessed with such natural intellectual gifts would have no common sense whatsoever!!!

So Hermione is gifted with brains beyond her peers, what matter? Her judgment is appalling. Why is she so blatantly disrespectful to me?

He wasn’t sure what was the best move to correct her, and at the moment had decided to take the most Slytherin approach — lie in wait, keep her unbalanced, and observe.

From their interaction at dinner, he could sense she was nervous, fibbing and stuttering her way through her explanation for missing breakfast. Madame Rosmerta had informed him that Hermione had been seen again in Hogsmeade, and Severus had been furious at first that she was not heeding his order to stick to the Hogwarts grounds outside of her work at the Ministry.

When he witnessed her walking down the High Street this morning — that was not an eventuality he had been prepared for! What was she doing in Hogsmeade so early? Had she spent the night there? Or at the Ministry?

She was still so naive and inexperienced, it was unlikely she had (already) taken a lover. Many Pureblood wives did, but most did not do so within the first month of their marriage. When would she have even had the time to meet anyone? No, not meeting a lover. So, what then? Why didn’t she return last night? She is obviously attempting to look into Bellatrix’s whereabouts on her own. Dangerous proposition.

But short of locking her in the Dungeons and denying her access to the Ministry and her career, which he had agreed to allow in the contract, there was little he could do to restrict her movements. And he had warned her over and over again about leaving the Hogwarts grounds. The annoying chit never would listen to me.

For now, all he could do was follow her and observe. He would have to make sure she kept to her curfew at night. He would have to increase his control over her. Bella and her followers will surely target Hermione, and she must be kept away from them.

For her own good, yes, I will have to tighten the reins.

****

Thursday morning, Hermione awoke and made sure she was up and dressed and ready to greet Snape at the breakfast table. She was eager to get to the Ministry and meet with Lucius.

Snape exited his bedroom and found his wife already sitting quietly, sipping her English Breakfast tea, her tome on the Dark Arts on her lap.

“I thought I’d read from this.”

Snape nodded, and Hermione began to read aloud. With a wave of his arm, he poured his own cup of tea and joined her at the table. He listened as she read for a few minutes. The book was a simple overview and contained several factual errors, he noted. Still, it was relatively harmless. Any of the books that even mentioned the Dark Arts contained in the Hogwarts Library were. Dumbledore’s censorship, Severus thought, disapprovingly.

Eventually, Hermione closed the book, took one last sip of her tea, and stood.

“I…should be off then. Have a good day, Severus.”
“I expect your return by six o’clock.”

“Yes, of course. I-I hope the last of the NEWT’s go well. And thanks again for understanding about yesterday.”

She tried to give him a half-smile, but he simply stared at her in mild irritation, his pale features giving away absolutely nothing. He watched as she gathered her belongings and walked to the fireplace. She looked over her shoulder and gave him an awkward nod before tossing the powder and flooing away.

Severus picked up *The Daily Prophet* absently and undid its binding. The headline at the top swirled around the page, and finally came to rest. There, in big block letters, Severus read:

"FORMER DEATH-EATER FOUND MURDERED IN KNOCKTURN"

As he read, he could feel the tension in his jaw. The details were sketchy, but Dolohov had been killed by an Unforgivable, that was certain. The culprit left no evidence. *Did he displease his mistress in some way? Had Bellatrix disposed of him?*

It was then that Severus noticed the date and time of death — the same evening his wife had spent the entire night away from his chambers.

Severus considered this, and as he did, was unaware that his hands were clutching tightly at the paper until it was a balled up mess. He pressed his fingers deeply into his palms, fingernails digging in, his jaw pressing so tightly now it was beginning to hurt.

*The mendacious, double-dealing little bint. Just what has she involved herself in?*

He had read once a poet refer to women as “perfidious as the waves.” He had never spent enough time with women to know whether it was generally true. But his wife’s behaviour was not only reckless and deceitful, it openly mocked him. After all he had done for her! Protecting her as a child, saving her from a life as Malfoy's abused wife, offering up his body and mind to her continued protection, forced to become her unwilling bed-partner, her *rapist!*

*She offers me nothing but treachery in return.*

*I will not have it.*

It was time Lady Snape learnt what was expected of her.
Chapter 49

Hermione was worried.

Lucius was not in the Hall of Prophecies when she arrived. Instead, Phillipus Mott was standing by her desk. He asked her to fill him in about the particulars of Bellatrix’s message.

Hermione simply repeated what Lucius had told her: Bellatrix had informed Lucius that she was reaching out to her former associates and that she was attempting to re-build Voldemort’s Army.

“Lucius and I researched and attempted several tracking spells on the scroll, but could not ascertain its country or destination of origin,” she lied, easily.

Mott took the information in and let her know he had discussed the matter with Lucius, who was going to take a few days off from assisting her with the prophecies to make inquiries among the former Death-eaters.

“Bellatrix surely knows by now that Lord Malfoy has switched sides, or is at least pretending to help the Aurors. That is probably why she is withholding her plans from him. He is still on good terms with many of his former associates. The Aurors will be listening to his conversations with them in the next few days.”

“And what if the former Death-eaters discover that Lucius is betraying them, allowing the Aurors to overhear the meetings?”

Mott shook his head slightly and shrugged rather nonchalantly.

“I imagine they would not be pleased. But it is Lucius’s life to venture, and remember the Aurors have promised to keep him out of Azkaban permanently if he cooperates fully. He is wise to comply.”

Hermione nodded in agreement, and watched as Mott took his leave, promising to let her know at once if he heard any further news.

Alone in the Hall, Hermione attempted to work, but she couldn’t help but feel at least a tiny bit worried about Lucius. He could be walking into a trap.

What if Bellatrix finds out Lucius killed Dolohov? Family or no, she will surely try to take Lucius’s life. She could easily order one of her cronies to cast the Avada Kedavra.

Hermione was well aware just how insane and all-consuming Bellatrix’s desire for revenge or bloodlust could be. She shivered, slightly, gently placing one palm to her upper sleeve, under which was the horrible ‘WHORE’ carving. She knew all too well.

And more than just feeling agitated at the thought of Lucius’s death, Hermione found herself agitated that she was so concerned that he might die.

Don’t you feel sorry for him? Remember, who he is. A murderer. A sociopath. He’s hurt you so many times! Half the time he’s lying to you, and the other half of the time he’s trying to worm his way into your bed for his own selfish pleasure like some sort of aging louche. He’ll never change.

But in her tender heart of hearts, Hermione wanted to believe that even the darkest of souls could change. And Lucius had rescued her from Dolohov, after all. He had killed one of his former allies to
save her life. If that wasn’t proof that at least a small part of him wanted to walk in the Light, she wasn’t sure what was.

He had nothing now. No Narcissa. No Draco. No one to love him or be loved by him. Bellatrix was gone. Pureblood society mostly shunned him, and Muggleborns despised him. He couldn’t very well live in the Muggle world. That idea was markedly absurd. Lucius Malfoy will live the rest of his life in disgrace. He has nothing, nothing but his wealth to keep him going.

And me.

Hermione set her quill down and rubbed her temples.

Merlin, why do I feel suddenly responsible for him?! He’s not a bloody puppy! He’s not my pet. Who cares if his life is a misery? It’s entirely of his own making!

She wished suddenly that she had never seen Lucius Malfoy again after that day in the Room of Requirement when Severus and she had married and become magically bound. She wished that Lucius and Bellatrix had fled to the Continent together, never to return.

Having him constantly around was making everything difficult. She felt confused by her own feelings. I hate Lucius. Of course I do. But what she had gone through with him suddenly made her realise that they were connected now, bound in their own awful way by this terrible secret, this shared transgression.

A horrible idea flitted into Hermione’s mind.

Oh, God, will Lucius blackmail me?! What will he require of me in order to keep Dolohov’s murder and our involvement in it a secret? Oh, Merlin…no, he wouldn’t, would he? Not…that.

She remembered how pathetic Lucius had seemed when she had lied to him in the Hogwarts dining room and told him she would be his wife and bear him a child, an heir to the Malfoy line. He had positively lit up with hope.

And then they had kissed…and it had been...passionate. She had been so frightened at the time, but the way he had moved his lips up and down her neck…he knew exactly how to kiss, and knowing that she was going to poison him…it had weirdly allowed her to give into it, knowing it would only be temporary and that it was a means for her escape from the terrible betrothal and a life of assault and abuse.

It had been such a bizarre feeling — the way this wizard she despised somehow created lust in her body. Why was that possible? She had never found the answer. With just his lips and hands and firm chest, he had made her fingertips and toes buzz and her heart beat quickly in her chest. It had made her feel a warmth, a feeling like standing near a lit fireplace, that had permeated her entire body and allowed her tortured brain to shut off and be relieved of the burden of thought. Just for a few seconds.

And, I suppose…it had made me feel like I had felt when I had been with Ron. Ugh! It’s so unfair. Why should Ron’s murderer have that ability to evoke the same feeling? Does it mean something is wrong with me? Am I some type of deviant? Because I want that feeling?

I want that feeling, Hermione thought, looking upwards in surprise at the realization.

I want to feel a man’s arms around me, holding me. Kissing me. I want that!

Hermione sighed. But Severus will never give that to me. He’ll never let me have that, will he?
Hermione shook her head and cleared her throat. If she continued down this path, she knew she would soon be having a cry, and she didn’t want to mope. There was nothing that would be achieved by tears. She had certainly cried enough in the past few months.

*If Lucius plans to blackmail me into his bed, I won’t let him. I’d rather face Snape’s disapproval and Rita Skeeter branding me a harlot to all and sundry than give Lucius Malfoy any more power over me.*

Focused now, Hermione picked up an orb and set about her work.

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At precisely 5:55pm, Hermione landed in the Dungeons fireplace. She had made an extra effort not to be late. She knew she was on eggshells with Severus, and no doubt he’d be exhausted and in a foul mood from the final day of NEWTs.

As she stepped across the hearth, she looked around the room in bewilderment. Almost all of the furniture was covered in sheets — the settee in the corner, the large couch, the green velvet armchairs, the mahogany end tables. Only Severus’s favorite armchair by the fireplace and the dining room table across the far side of the room were unclothed.

The chandelier that usually glowed so brightly above the dining room table had been lowered into an open storage trunk off to the side.

The tapestries of serpents and unicorns were gone from the stone walls, rolled up on the floor. A green damask curtain had been drawn halfway across the picture-window that looked into the Lake.

*What in the name of Godric Gryffindor…?!*

Hermione’s jaw dropped as she took all this in, and before her brain could make sense of it, her husband came out of his study, carrying a stack of books and scrolls. He glanced up at her briefly, deposited his armload into an open trunk with some wandless magic, then turned on his heel and disappeared back into the study.

“What is going on, Severus?” Hermione demanded.

She tossed her briefcase down onto a sheet-covered chaise, and marched to the study.

In the doorway, she could see Snape was going through his bookshelves, pulling a few selected volumes, ignoring her. The furniture in the room had also been covered in sheets save for Snape’s red leather desk-chair.

Hermione cocked her head in puzzlement.

“What on Earth is all this?”

Snape looked up and gave her a thin-lipped smile that was only marginally better than his famous sneer.

“I am making arrangements for our departure.”

“Departure?”

“Yes. Surely you recall the terms of our contract and addendum?”

Severus reached down to his covered desk and pulled out a scroll. He tossed it at her and then turned
his attention back to his literature.

Hermione caught it and unfurled it. He gave a slight hum as he flipped through his volumes.

“It’s time you were reminded of our legal bond, Lady Snape. You have not upheld your end of the contract. In fact, were I to take you to court, I could have you imprisoned for at least a fortnight as punishment for your bad faith.”

“What?!”

“Read. I believe you know how.”

Hermione looked down. It was indeed the addendum they had agreed upon.

“All of it. Out loud, if you don’t mind.”

Severus arched an eyebrow, his eyes glittering in anticipation of victory.

_Merlin, but he is enjoying this. Git._

Hermione “ahem-ed” and, glancing down, began to read slowly:

_“The following addendums to the above contract have henceforth been agreed to by Hermione Jean Granger and Severus Tobias Snape:”_

_item: Lord Snape and Lady Snape will refer to one another by their formal titles in public, and as “Hermione” and “Severus” in private._

_item: Lady Snape may access Lord Snape’s Study and the books therein, but may not access the Potions Laboratory._

_item: Lord and Lady Snape’s daily interaction will be limited to a 15-minute exchange._

_item: Lord Snape will not interfere with Lady Snape’s choice or pursuit of career and Lady Snape agrees to live with Lord Snape at Hogwarts for nine months and at Snape Hall for three months of the year._

_item: Lady Snape agrees to the Pureblood customs and agrees to obey Lord Snape to the best of her ability, and accepts that she is Lord Snape’s property._

_Signed, Hermione Jean Granger and Severus Tobias Snape.”_

Hermione stopped reading.

She wasn’t sure why, but she had never read their contract again after the negotiation in which they had hammered out these specifics. It was apparent to her now why Slytherins made the most effective diplomats and why they dominated as barristers.

_“…accepts that she is Lord Snape’s property.”_ It was HORRIBLE to see it in print. And even more awful to see her silver signature beneath it. What had she done? This had been a deal with the Devil, surely.

She looked up from the parchment to see Snape’s black eyes shining, his arms were held behind his back. He looked like some sort of self-satisfied Napoleon Bonaparte-type, surveying all that was his. _The smug, smug…git!_ (For once, Hermione’s varied vocabulary was failing her.)
Hermione pursed her lips and furrowed her brow in anger. The sides of Snape’s mouth curled upwards.

“Now that your memory has been refreshed, I inform you that we shall be departing for Snape Hall on Monday. I put in a request with Mott and he has just now approved it. I see no need to wait around Hogwarts once the Leaving Ceremony is done.”

“But…I…assumed we might stay another couple of weeks!”

Hermione had known in the back of her mind, somewhere, that they’d be going to Snape Hall for the summer, but she assumed that once graduation occurred, Snape would have several days of work with the other staff to complete before they planned their departure.

Hermione had been looking forward to it—a few days of quiet in which she could enjoy the Hogwarts Library undisturbed and say an extended farewell to the school she loved so dearly. It would be an absolute pleasure to have the halls to herself. Her face fell as she realized she would be leaving not just her idea of having her run of Hogwarts, but she’d be leaving Ron behind as well.

“There is no need to delay.”

“But…don’t you need to shut down the school for the summer with Dumbledore and McGonagall?”

“They can easily do it without me, and Dumbledore has granted my request. I shall turn in my final grades and reports tomorrow. There is no need to dawdle.”

“That so soon, Severus! You really want to leave in four days?!”

“I do. And as my wife, you will accompany me.”

“Please, don’t make me! I’m…I’m not ready!” she pleaded.

Severus rolled his eyes at her.

“Don’t act like an imbecile. You’re a clever witch, Hermione. You know what you agreed to; in fact, it was your idea! Crocodile tears are not a tactic that holds sway with me, and it is unreasonable to try to break the contract you yourself insisted upon.”

Hermione straightened and sniffed.

“No, of course. It’s foolish of me to ask for some kind of empathy from you. I forget, sometimes, that you’re a Death-eater!”

Severus’s eyes flashed.

“Was.”

Hermione knew she was poking a cobra. That was one step too far. Don’t go there, she reminded herself. She took a deep breath.

“Please…I just…I don’t understand. Why did you decide to do this? What is the rush?”

Severus lifted his chin and turned his head, pretending to scan their contract in confusion.

“Hmm, I don’t see anywhere in here that specifies Lord Snape is to articulate his reasoning to Lady Snape?”
Hermione huffed.

“No, it doesn’t say that outright, but I hoped Lord Snape would offer Lady Snape some common courtesy!”

Snape’s eyes widened, suddenly ablaze.

“As you show me?!”

Hermione took a step back. He was visibly angry now, controlling it well, but clearly angry. He pulled down the front of his tunic and straightened his spine, trying to pull himself back from the edge. Suddenly, he smiled at her widely; it was off-putting to see his gleaming white teeth all at once. He reminded her of a shark.

“Please, Lady Snape, do read that last item again. Just the last one.”

Hermione glared at him and lifted the scroll back up.

“Item: Lady Snape agrees to the Pureblood customs and agrees to obey Lord Snape to the best of her ability, and accepts that she is Lord Snape’s property.”

She finished and looked up at him. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, grinning snarkily at her, a look of cold cruelty settling over his visage.

“This is barbaric,” she whispered.

“It is a binding contract. A contract to which we are both bound for life. And I agree, what you have done to me is barbaric. But you are the one who asked for this. Not me.”

“Please, just give me one more week at Hogwarts. I’ve been through so much…it’s been such a big change. I’m still adjusting. We both are—“

“—read it again.”

“Severus!”

“AGAIN.”

His voice boomed at her. Hermione had always admired his deep, rich baritone. But now, the way it bounced off the walls of the small study frightened her. She had loved its sensual mysteriousness, but right now it was being used on her like some sort of slicing curse. It stole the breath from her lungs.

She looked down at the scroll again. What could she do? She read.

“Item: Lady Snape agrees to the Pureblood customs and agrees to obey Lord Snape to the best of her ability, and accepts that she is Lord Snape’s property.”

“Once more.”

Hermione could feel her eyes prick with tears, but she refused to let them fall. She wouldn’t be bullied by her own life partner! How could he do this to her? He was supposed to be her bloody protector! Her husband! What she had said to him in anger before had been true — he needed to learn to protect her from himself! He was treating her like a First Year. It was humiliating.

She opened her lips again, and her voice came out pitifully small this time. Still, she managed to hold
back the tears as she choked out the hateful sentence once more:

“Item: Lady Snape agrees to the Pureblood customs and agrees to obey Lord Snape to the best of her ability, and accepts that she is Lord Snape’s property.”

Hermione finished and rolled the scroll up, then stepped up to the desk between them and set it gently upon the white dust-cover.

Severus watched her carefully. Her head was bowed and she was staring at the floor, resigned. He suddenly felt a knot in his stomach, a sense that he had gone too far in his discipline. He had enjoyed humiliating her…that is, he enjoyed it as it was happening. But this result? Her drooping shoulders, her slightly tremouring left hand, her lips pressed tightly together and her sudden refusal to make eye contact. He did NOT like this result.

*She has been cowed. I have what I want. She’ll behave now.*

But as he apprised her, he felt far from pleased. He felt *awful.* He had a sudden urge to move around the desk and take her up in his arms. *Do I want to… embrace her?*

It was a bizarre impulse, and he watched it rise within him with clinical detachment. He couldn’t recall another time in his life when he had felt the urge to comfort an emotional female with physical touch. He had no pity for snivelly witches, and he was certain no adult witch had ever found his body or touch a source of emotional comfort.

He stood his ground, uncertain how to operate. Hermione said nothing; half her face was obscured with those annoyingly-full chestnut curls. There was silence for a few seconds, and then Severus turned back to his books. He didn’t want to look at her slim, subdued form anymore. It was… unpleasant. So, he changed the subject.

“I hope you informed Potter that I will perform no duties at his moronic matrimony, other than provide my reluctant attendance. I have already charmed the door to my bedchamber if you wish to peruse the bookshelves there.”

It wasn’t much, but he knew she *lived* for books. Perhaps she could find some solace in *them.*

He felt Hermione shuffle a little behind him.

“Yes, I told Harry. I-I think I’m going to retire early. I have a headache.”

Severus didn’t turn around until her footsteps departed the room and he heard her close the door to the study after her. Alone in the room, he sank slowly into his leather chair, which was still uncovered, and pressed his fingertips together, thoughtfully staring into the middle-distance.

*I have what I want. She is subdued. All is as it should be.*

So why, he wondered, did he feel so terribly sick inside?

****

Hermione lay on her back on her bedroom floor.

She wasn’t sure precisely why she was on the floor and not on the bed. She felt like she needed a hard surface to prop her up. Her body felt numb all over. Squishy. Weak. Like it might melt away.

*It’s trauma,* she thought. She had discussed these things with her therapist. *It manifests in a variety of*
ways. You’ll be okay. There’s nothing actually physically wrong with you.

There was something about the humiliation Snape had just put her through that reminded her of the awful powerlessness she had felt under the *Imperius*.

The way he was able to make her read the contract over and over again simply by the commanding tone of his voice. It was like he had slipped inside her pores, gotten into her bloodstream. Powerlessness scared Hermione more than anything. She was worried she was becoming a shell of her former self. Any trust she had had in Severus Snape was rapidly evaporating. She remembered all those times she had defended him to Harry and Ron when they were younger, insisting he was acting in their best interest. *How could I have been so wrong?*

She sat up and pulled the duvet off the bed and wrapped herself up in it on the carpet, moving into fetal position.

“I’m sinking,” she said out loud. *No! I can’t let myself. It’s…it’s too much. I need help.*

She got up suddenly and threw off her comforter. She grabbed a clean scroll and wrote a quick message to St. Mungo’s. Though it was after-hours, perhaps they could forward it to her counselor, Mathilda Merrybrook?

_Mathilda,_

*Apologies for the late notice, but do you have any free appointments tomorrow (Friday)? No need to be concerned. There is no emergency, but just thought I’d like to have another session sooner rather than later.*

*Sincerely,*

_Hermione Granger_

Hermione paced rapidly and waited for a reply. To her surprise, she had one in less than a half-hour.

_Miss Granger,_

*Unfortunately, Dr. Merrybrook is booked up tomorrow, Monday, and Tuesday. Let me know if you would like us to schedule you for some time Wednesday afternoon.*

_Regards,*

_Sigmundr Strophe,*

_Assistant to Dr. Merrybrook*

Hermione crumpled the scroll and tossed it across the room. Her pacing for the past thirty minutes had done little to calm her down. She’d splashed some warm water on her face and brushed her teeth, flossed, and brushed her hair, trying to busy herself with some mindless self-care. It hadn’t really provided much of a distraction. She still felt a bit panicky and warm, and she couldn’t stop her thoughts from bouncing around furiously inside her skull. She imagined her brain contained a hundred snitches and they were right now dueling it out with each other for control.

She continued to pace back and forth between her bed and bath, trying to make a decision. She desperately wanted to leave the Dungeons and get some fresh air.
I could walk to Ron’s memorial. Watch the sunset. She loved the way the beams danced across the marble. She loved when the breeze picked up and the air grew chilly. It was a calming place, familiar now.

She glanced over at her closet. Harry’s Invisibility Cloak was hung up in the back.

I can probably leave without Snape noticing..., she thought, before quickly shutting the idea down. And where has sneaking out ever gotten you? That’s why you’re in this nightmare! All you do is make things harder and harder!

She sat on her bed, finally, and combed her fingers through her hair nervously. She glanced about her room. Her eyes landed on a pile of books in her to-read stack. No, she was too wound up to read. Too wound up to do anything. Leaving her room could mean crossing paths with Snape.

Suddenly, Hermione felt like she was in a cage. Merlin, it’s like the walls are closing in. I feel queasy. I can’t have a panic attack now! I can’t!

She closed her eyes.

Breathe, Hermione! Breathe deeply. In through the nose, out through the mouth. You’re okay. You’re fine. You’re just freaking out. You’re just...you’re....you’re...

She struggled to complete the sentence. What am I? I’m... a prisoner. I am in a prison.

She turned to the Dreamless Sleep beside her bed. Snape had not mentioned anything to her about her consumption. If he was even still keeping tabs on it. Not that he actually cares, she thought.

Screw it.

Though it was still early in the evening, Hermione found herself once more doling out four drops into a glass of water and drinking it down.

Sleep is my only escape now.

She leaned back in her pillow.

“Nox,” she whispered.

And soon her mind was somewhere else.
So many kudos and reviews!! I had to spend all day writing this to thank you all!!!! So, thank you and enjoy! :)

****

Friday came and went and Hermione only felt moderately better.

She had had no word from Lucius, no update from Mott, and at breakfast she exchanged no words with Severus other than what she read aloud to him from *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, Vol 2.*

Work was work. The prophecies were still fascinating to her. She loved looking deep into the orbs and seeing the flashes of imagery — people, places, occasionally some that she was familiar with — they came in bursts of sparkly haze and then swirled back inwards into the center of the orb. And she had made good progress, devising an entirely new system of organization that was going to be exceptionally efficient. She was almost halfway through the work of re-categorizing. Mott had commented on her incredible speed and he was excited to move her into some of the other Halls once the task was completed in several weeks.

“I couldn’t be happier with your diligence and terrific progress, Hermione!” Mott had smiled at her, his kind eyes crinkling at the corners.

But Hermione could not feel happy. The fake smile she had plastered on her face dropped the minute Mott’s back was turned and she was alone again in the Hall.

She felt like an invisible Dementor was lurking just over her head — the world had gone a little grey somehow. She felt the solitude of the place without Lucius’s acerbic remarks and unwanted flirtations. She hadn’t particularly enjoyed being cooped up with him, but she was surprised to realize she missed having his company all the same. The Hall now felt like the size of a Quidditch pitch, cavernous and isolating.

She felt like she was being swallowed up in it.

****

Saturday had arrived.

The Graduation Ceremony in the Great Hall that morning had been beautiful. McGonagall and Dumbledore had given speeches and one-by-one, her entire class had approached the Headmaster at the podium and received their official Hogwarts diploma. Even though Hermione had finished her NEWTs weeks ago, she felt a bursting achievement in her chest when McGonagall handed her her official Hogwarts diploma and announced to all that she was class valedictorian. The entire class had clapped for her. She scanned the crowd of parents and family members there to support her classmates. If only somehow her parents would magically appear among them. Impossible, she sighed.

She had glanced over at Snape, who was sitting with Flitwick, Sprout, and Trelawney at the high
table just behind the podium. Everyone except Snape was beaming. *This should be one of the best moments of my life*, she thought. But there her husband sat. The only one of her teachers whose face was gloomy and totally apathetic. Not even a hint of kindness in his eyes or a tiny upward curve that could even faintly resemble a smile on his thin lips. *Just give me a nod*, she had thought. *A hint of “well done.”*

But there was nothing to be had from him.

She had accepted the diploma and, with the rest of her class, tossed her graduation cap high into the air when Dumbledore announced they had all officially become Hogwarts graduates.

She and Snape had returned to the Dungeons immediately after the ceremony to change for the wedding. Hermione had trailed slowly behind her husband as he stalked the halls, chastising the Seventh-Years for running back to their dorms as quickly as possible to get into their formal robes. He’d drawn back a curtain and found two Ravenclaw boys drinking from a flask already, which Snape promptly removed from them with an “*Evanesco!*” Hermione had said nothing as he sneered and sniped at everyone around him. She noticed some of the Seventh-Years who passed in the hallway glancing at her and Snape, and then back at her. They didn’t dare speak to her.

When they arrived back at the Dungeons suite, Snape had simply entered his own bedroom and slammed the door. Hermione had sighed and gone to her own chamber to change. She couldn't understand why he was in such an exceptionally bad mood.

Now, Hermione stood in front of her bedroom mirror and adjusted her bridesmaid dress. She finished wrestling her bushy hair into the thick, high bun with a wrapped braid that Ginny had requested, and she was determined not to let Snape ruin the day.

*So what if he doesn’t approve of my accomplishments? I approve! I am valedictorian. I have perfect NEWTs. I did everything I set out to do at Hogwarts. I worked myself to the bone, and I am bloody well going to celebrate tonight with my class and with Harry and Ginny!!*

Hermione stepped back and turned from side to side. Her hair wasn’t perfect and the style wasn’t really her taste, but it was an elegant updo and she hoped Ginny would be happy with her efforts.

The bridesmaid dress was lovely. Hermione had to admit that Ginny (or more likely, Molly Weasley) had a hell of a sense of fashion. The satin dress was floor-length and elegant, a rich plum color. The form-fitting bodice was decorated with floral appliqués that were magicked to flutter and gently open and close in the cool breeze. Its scoop-neck went from shoulder to shoulder, exposing enough collarbone to be flattering, but avoiding too much décolletage. The satin sleeves came down to the elbow. Ginny had insisted to Molly the bridesmaid dresses not be completely sleeveless. *Sweet Gin, she probably didn’t want me to feel self-conscious.*

Hermione smiled at her reflection. It had been a horrible week, but she felt a little lift in her spirits — the kind of lift that only a beautiful dress can make a young woman feel. *I do look fairly nice!*

She tucked her wand up one sleeve and exited her bedroom. Snape stood by the aquarium window, waiting for her. She had been expecting him to wear all-black, as he had at the Yule Balls and other formal Hogwarts events, so she was surprised when he turned and she saw that underneath his long outer robes and fitted black vest, he had on a white button-up shirt. It was buttoned up to his chin, and directly below it he had tied a black cravat. The white shirt was tightly fitted along his arms and tapered at his wrists to accentuate his long, graceful fingers. She could see silver cufflinks in the shape of snakes poking through the holes, which matched his silver wedding band.

Severus allowed his eyes to flick over Hermione’s own form. He had been surprised when she had
stepped down into the living room with a slight rustle of skirts. He had been expecting her to be wearing some type of silly frippery. The Weasley’s were not exactly known for their refined sense of fashion. He shuddered at the memory of the Weasley boys’ Yule Ball get-ups over the years. They had donned a sickening array of second-hand robes in a variety of putrid colors that always featured an absurd amount of ruffles. He expected Hermione was going to be in a similar cake-topping costume, and expected it would take her hours to get herself squeezed into it and her face painted. He had no patience for these ladies’ things. It always seemed like a stupid waste of time.

But the witch that stood before him was a lovely young woman who looked very grown-up indeed, who had just enough make-up on to accentuate what was pretty about her features without looking ridiculous. Her hair had been bewitched (no doubt, by some Dark Magic, he thought smugly) into something that looked almost acceptable, and her figure was well displayed in her purple gown — not too girlish and not too desperately-trying-to-look-sexy (a look he would often note was disturbingly common among the older girls at the Yule Balls). For once, Hermione Granger’s clothing was perfectly suited to the occasion. The bodice accentuated her slim waist and the material fell nicely down over her hips. She would not be out of place in the ballroom of any of the Pureblood houses. The entire effect was…pleasing.

He gave her a formal bow. Hermione smiled slightly and gave a small curtsy in response. Is this a Pureblood thing?

Snape took a step towards her and offered his arm. Hermione took it, gently placing her hand inside the crook of his elbow.

“Let us go, if we must.”

Hermione nodded.

****

Snape watched his wife closely as she stood next to Miss Bell, Miss Lovegood, Miss Patil and Miss Chang at the front of the tent.

They all stood behind Ginny Weasley as she faced Harry Potter under a beautiful arbor covered in white roses. Harry’s groomsmen stood on the other side: Neville Longbottom, Dean Thomas, George Weasley, Seamus Finnigan, and (rather absurdly, in his opinion), Rubeus Hagrid.

The two besotted Gryffindors spoke their vows to one another, but Severus couldn’t find it within himself to pay attention. Instead, he watched his wife.

He had to admit, the girl was in his opinion the prettiest of the five bridesmaids, and though he liked to consider himself evolved enough not to think of Hermione as merely his possession, (though legally she in fact was and he would continue to remind her of the fact until it was drilled into her stubborn brain), it did make him feel a bit self-congratulatory that she was something worth admiring. If she could simply behave herself and not constantly defy him, it was possible he could make it through the Pureblood Summer Season without too much humiliation. Here was proof she could at least be made to look like a proper Pureblood wife, if not act like one.

Bored, his eyes roved the tent. People were sitting in their golden folding chairs weeping into handkerchiefs, smiling and holding their spouses or significant other’s hands, or clutching their hands to their breasts in sentimental display. It was all rather nauseating. He had mostly managed to tune out Potter and Ginevra’s mawkish vows. Something about, “in this time we have to spend…I am so lucky…blah blah blah…by your side forever…” He wasn’t interested, to be honest.
Looking at Harry Potter, who had grown taller now, Severus found himself unpleasantly reminded of James Potter’s tall, thin form. And it did not help that Ginevra Weasley’s hair color was not too dissimilar to Lily’s. He had seen photographs of James and Lily’s wedding…he hadn’t been invited, of course, but he had seen the photos. He had to. It had been torture. He remembered staring deeply into James Potter’s hazel eyes and wondering if the bastard knew just how lucky he was. Then he’d burned the photos.

Severus shrugged off the unpleasant memory. The vows continued. How much longer can this take? He sighed and moved his black eyes back to Hermione. He was certain this was not going to be a pleasant evening. He and Hermione hadn’t spoken of it, but it was Saturday after all. He knew what he would have to do to her after the wedding. It made him feel sick inside. Hermione was staring thoughtfully at the couple under the arbor. Is she thinking about our own farce of a marriage? Does it fill her with disgust that I will have to touch her again tonight?

He knew it might not be much of a consolation to her, but when they settled into Snape Hall, he had promised himself that he would have a conversation about fidelity with her. Though they would have to continue to do their repugnant duty each Saturday, he had decided that he would not interfere if she wanted to take a lover. Almost all Pureblood wives did. As long as she was discreet and did not fall pregnant, it was the only kindness he could offer her. Until, hopefully, the Marriage Law was overturned and they could separate without endangering their magic. If they were lucky, it would be in the next year or two, before the Ministry found out they were using an illegal Contraceptive Potion to avoid pregnancy.

I cannot bring an unwanted child into the world. I cannot force that too upon the girl, Snape thought, miserably.

Snape shifted in his seat, suddenly rather uncomfortable. Hermione had caught his eye. She gave a slight smile, but he couldn’t bring himself to offer her anything in return.

This girl…this girl who has forced this situation upon me…this girl, for whom I am now responsible, always responsible. Forever and ever and ever. No peace. No respite. I will never have my life back. I will never have my privacy, my freedom.

He hated it when she smiled coyly at him like that, as if they were lovers who shared a fun little secret! As if he somehow owed her smiles and kind words and romance. It infuriated him. She’d done the same thing at the Graduation Ceremony in the morning — stolen little glances at him. And why? He owed her nothing. What did she want from him?

At the front of the tent, Hermione dutifully held her bouquet of white roses and glanced from her impassive husband back to Ginny and Harry. Hermione had managed not to think of Ron during Ginny and Harry’s emotional, deeply-felt vows, because she knew that if she did that she would not be able to control her own emotion. Harry and Ginny’s vows that they had written themselves were the most beautiful she thought she had ever heard.

Next to her Padma and Katie were openly crying through their big smiles, but Hermione bit the inside of her lip and refused to display any raw emotion.

Get through it! This is about Harry and Ginny! You can make it!

Finally, the ceremony came to the end. A Ministry officiant stepped forward and with the ceremonial wand cut a simple line across their palms. Harry and Ginny pressed their hands together, their blood mixing, and spoke the final words that would bind their magic together for eternity:

“I, Harry James Potter, do promise myself in matrimony to you, Ginevra Molly Weasley. On my
honor as a wizard, I swear to uphold this marriage contract and faithfully fulfill all requirements herein for as long as we both shall live. With my blood, I consecrate.’”

“I, Ginevra Molly Weasley, do promise myself in matrimony to you, Harry James Potter. On my honor as a witch, I swear to uphold this marriage contract and faithfully fulfill all requirements herein for as long as we both shall live. With my blood, I consecrate.”

The shimmering field of light appeared around Harry and Ginny. It was as stunning as Hermione remembered from the Room of Requirement, when a similar burst had encircled herself and Snape, and here too the light surrounded the bonded couple in a swirling golden bubble that expanded outwards quickly until it dissipated into the air above with a pleasant ringing.

Hermione smiled. The Ministry officiant turned to the seated guests and with a large grin, proclaimed, “My fellow witches and wizards, it gives me great pleasure to present to you all Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley Potter, bound in marriage by Law and Magic!”

He took their hands and lifted them, showing the matching silver bands off to the entire crowd. At this, the guests erupted in joy. The entire Weasley clan in the front row, led by Bill, Charlie, and Percy, leapt to their feet and began whooping and hollering. Most of the Seventh-Years rose as well, clapping and shouting their congratulations.

Harry and Ginny, hand in hand, walked down the aisle surrounded by cheers on both sides. Hermione followed Ginny and laughed with the other girls as all around them golden balloons exploded to cover them in multi-coloured confetti. Doves circled the tent, and self-ringing bells burst from the wands of several guests.

Everywhere was the flash of bulbs as the press took photographs and the entire wedding celebration was moved to the other end of the tent in which long wooden tables had been set up, brilliantly set with gleaming silverware and topped with stunning ornate centerpieces made up of dozens of candles, white and pink roses, and crystal strands. Above the guests, gilded lanterns glowed softly as they gently bobbed and floated and the two sides of the tent were drawn back with golden braided ropes to reveal the beautiful sinking sunset over the Hogwarts’ lawn.

Hermione took her place at the Head Table. She and Severus were placed next to each other, and she watched him take his seat, silently. She sat as well and watched dreamily as Harry and Ginny danced their first dance on the wooden dance floor, circling each other, looking as in love as Hermione could imagine two people looking.

*This is gorgeous,* thought Hermione, *even more beautiful than Bill and Fleur’s wedding!* Molly Weasley had truly outdone herself.

Waiters began to serve appetizers and pour champagne. Hermione glanced over at Snape on her right. He was watching Harry and Ginny dance with barely contained boredom.

*He doesn’t have to look so miserable,* Hermione sighed to herself. *He could at least pretend to be happy for them, or be happy for any of us. He should know more than anyone how much the people in this tent deserve happiness after the War.*

Instead, she turned to her left. Arthur Weasley was seated next to her and he was already a blubbery mess, though valiantly trying to hide it.

“It’s a beautiful wedding, Arthur.”

He nodded at her and petted her hand.
“Thanks, Hermione. Goodness knows it’s costing us an arm and a leg, but Molly insisted it was worth it, and of course she’s bang-on, as usual.”

As the first dance ended, Harry and Ginny took their seats in the middle of the Head Table to another round of cheers and applause. Hermione sipped her champagne and smiled as Arthur stood and cleared his throat.

“Hello, everyone. Hello. If I could just have your attention please?”

The crowd quieted as all the guests took their seats at the long tables and looked towards the Head Table in anticipation of the speeches. Arthur began.

“Thank you. On behalf of the Weasley clan, thank you so much for attending Harry and Ginny’s wedding. We are so proud to welcome Harry into our family. And we want to thank Hogwarts for inviting us to hold our celebration on Graduation Day here on the grounds. Congratulations to all of you Seventh-Years!”

A big “whoop” went up from the crowd, which Molly Weasley had to silence with a loud whistle. When all was quieted once more, Arthur continued, a quaver in his voice.

“Yes…well, as many of you know, I am not the best at speeches, so I decided that perhaps I would read something that was read at my own wedding to my beautiful wife Molly. As I am the Head of Muggle Artefacts, this author feels especially fitting. We have all been so recently reminded that we are all equal — Muggle, Muggleborn, and Wizard — and that what binds all of us, Love, is the most precious thing of all, and so…”

At this point, Hermione could hear the quaver turn into a deep tremble in Arthur’s voice. Sweet man, Hermione thought. He’s going to lose it.

Arthur took a piece of paper from his tuxedo pocket and opened it, turning to Ginny and Harry, who sat to his left, holding hands, bright emotion in their eyes.

“Ahem…”

Arthur lifted the paper.

“L-L-Let…”

But that was as far as the dear patriarch got before bursting into tears.

“Awww, is alright, Art!” called out a voice from the back.

“We love ya, mate!” someone else shouted.

“Excuse me for being so overcome,” Arthur murmured, taking out his handkerchief. “It’s not everyday you see your little girl married!”

Arthur’s voice cracked again, and he brought the handkerchief to his nose, blowing into it loudly. Ginny blushed but smiled sweetly at her father. Arthur turned to Hermione and held the paper out to her, the tears pouring from his eyes like a river now.

“W-w-would you m-mind, Hermione? I…I-I don’t think I-I can get through it, sentimental fool that I am.”

“Oh! Erm…of course!”
Arthur turned back to the crowd.

“Hermione is going to step in for me. Let’s hear it for her!”

Everyone clapped, with some Seventh-Years pounding the grass with their feet in approval. Hermione stood up. She wasn’t particularly afraid of public speaking, but she was suddenly quite aware that several hundred pairs of eyes were on her person. She glanced to her right. Severus stared up at her with his dark eyes, watching closely to see how she would perform, no doubt.

She turned to the crowd and then glanced down at the paper.

“Well, erm, alright, then…”

‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove…”

Hermione recognized the sonnet. It was very famous in the Muggle world, though much less well-known in the Wizarding one. It was perfect for the occasion, and sweet of Arthur to have chosen it. She could feel the emotion catch a bit in her throat, but she didn’t want to let Harry and Ginny down. She glanced over at them; they each looked at her with such love and gratitude. She smiled back and continued:

‘O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

The breeze outside the tent picked up, and the curtains began to flap wildly. Hermione glanced up at the disturbance and suddenly realized that through one of the large openings in the tent, she could see Ron’s memorial in the distance. It was as it always was in the twilight. The white marble reflecting and absorbing the fading rays of the sun — turning pink, purple, red. Shining brilliantly.

Solid. A constant. Always watching her.

Her Ron.

She continued.

‘It is the star to every wandering bark,

Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.’

Hermione stopped; she felt a jagged stabbing sensation in her chest.

She heaved over slightly, placing one palm flat on the table to steady herself. She found her eyes moving to the memorial again.

Oh, Ron!

She forced herself to look away from the memorial and back at the piece of paper she clutched in her trembling hand.
Come on, come on, get through it.

She swallowed as a painful bubble of emotion threatened to emerge from her throat as an open wail. She took one more swallow and tamping the feeling down, managed to lift her head and continue:

‘Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle’s compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.’

She stopped again. She couldn’t hide the emotion anymore.

She looked up. The room was silent.

Many guests had tears pouring from their own faces. They all had known Ron. Loved Ron.

And somehow everyone was slowly making the connection between the words Hermione was reading and the loss of their brilliant red-headed comrade and schoolmate.

The boy who wasn’t there today to celebrate with all of them.

The one whose name had been called out at the Graduation Ceremony anyway, and whose diploma would later be owled to Molly and Arthur with a hand-written scroll from Dumbledore.

Hermione glanced over at Severus. He looked at her tearful face with an annoyed grimace. Please save me from this, Hermione tried to telegraph to him. For a Legilimens, he was remarkably dense. She hoped he might stand and take over reading the rest of it. Help her get through it. Just do something! Anything! But Snape merely sat in his chair, arms folded, face screwed up as if he had just tasted a lemon.

Hermione took a deep breath through her nose. She was embarrassed that her private pain was on display, but hoped most people would just take it as wedding-related sentiment.

Summoning all her self-control, she managed to read out the last of it in a strong, clear voice:

‘If this be error and upon me proved,

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.’

The room was silent after she finished. There was a somber tension in the air.

Harry Potter stood and lifted his champagne glass high, wiping the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hand.

“Arthur, thank you for the beautiful poem. And that was a bloody brilliant reading. Ginny and I love you, Hermione. Thank you for that! Let’s here it for her!”

The room erupted in clapping and a few people called out, “We love you’s!” and “Well done!”

Hermione blushed and sat back down, deeply embarrassed. She’d never given much thought to how the rest of the Seventh-Years had viewed her loss of Ron and hasty marriage to Severus, but as she glanced about she saw that she was an obvious object of pity. It was more than a little uncomfortable.
She had never been “popular” or “cool,” but she knew that since the War’s end, she had been well-liked and respected. She didn’t like the idea that her year felt *sorry* for her.

Arthur leaned over and gave her a big bear hug, though he was blubbering far too much to express his gratitude with words. He got up to talk to some of the other tables, and Hermione settled back in her seat, pressing the small of her back into it and exhaling deeply. *Thank Merlin that’s over,* Hermione thought.

She tossed back her glass of champagne and motioned for a nearby waiter to refill it as she settled in to listen to the numerous other toasts. Everyone, it seemed, had one to give. Dumbledore, McGonagall. George’s speech involved props and had everyone howling in laughter. Hermione listened and smiled and tried to enjoy herself, but she found her eyes drawn over and over again to Ron’s memorial.

*God, but I wish he was here.*

**Wishing is no good, Hermione. You know there is nothing but pain if you think this way.**

An hour and a half later the reception was in full swing. The musicians played fast-tempo jigs that had everyone hopping and leaping on the dance floor. The faculty and older guests sat on the outer tables chit-chatting and enjoying the food, while the Seventh-Years ran amok, taking photos, playing games, and slipping off in pairs to snog behind the catering vans.

Hermione had left her silent husband’s side at some point to walk around the reception and talk with Luna and her other friends. She’d tried to make small talk with him, and he’d just completely shut her down. She couldn’t just sit there and let him make her any more depressed.

Besides, tomorrow her classmates would all be departing and she wanted to say goodbye to as many people as she could now. She’d had another glass of champagne, but was surprised at how wobbly she was beginning to feel on her feet. She scanned the crowd. Severus was sitting alone at the Head Table, watching her. *Ugh, always keeping tabs on me.*

He’d barely shifted in his chair since the reception started, and only Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore had gone over to speak with him for any length of time. Bless him, she’d even seen Hagrid saunter over and attempt a little conversation, though he’d given up after about thirty seconds.

Hermione made her way through the crowded reception back to the Head Table and took her seat beside her husband.

With a wave of his hand, he refilled her water glass and slid it over to her.

“Drink this.”

“I..I’m fine.”

“You are inebriated, and require fluid replenishment.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose in annoyance and glanced over at him.

“I am *not!*”

“You are moving like a sailor just come ashore. It’s unbecoming.”

“I’ve only had two glasses of champagne!”
Severus narrowed his eyes and arched an eyebrow.

“And how much Dreamless Sleep have you imbibed this past week?”

“None of your bloody business! Besides, you’re the one who gave it to me!”

“I gave it with a warning, if you recall. Don’t you know it interacts poorly with alcohol?”

Hermione paused. She didn’t know that. Severus smiled smugly as Hermione took up the water goblet and took a big sip from it.

She was about to go on the offensive again, when she heard Ginny’s voice calling for attention from the dance floor. The musicians quieted and the crowd turned its attention to her.

“Thank you again for everything. Before this evening gets too late…”

There were some chuckles from the crowd at this.

“…I’d like to have a dance with all of my bridesmaids. So if you could please join me in welcoming Hermione, Cho, Katie, Padma, Luna, and their partners to the dance floor. These are the best girlfriends a witch could ask for!”

Cho, Katie, Padma, and Luna slowly made their way towards Ginny with their respective dates as everyone around them clapped. Hermione stood and looked over at Severus.

“Absolutely not,” he responded, before she could open her mouth.

“What?!”

“I am not going to make a spectacle of myself before the Hogwarts’ staff and student body.”

“Oh, Severus, these are all graduating students! Please!”

“No,” he responded firmly.

Hermione glanced up. The other bridesmaids were almost to the dance floor.

"You're supposed to dance with your spouse!"

"Not at Hogwarts! It is inappropriate."

“Please, you’re… embarrassing me!” she pleaded.

“And you are embarrassing me with your displays of emotion and drunken antics,” he hissed at her.

Hermione could feel the pink color rise in her cheeks. She glanced around. A few people were staring. Any moment the other girls would be on the dance floor and they would realize that her husband was refusing to dance with her!

Two students at the next table over were whispering now behind their palms.

“Poor Hermione,” they are probably saying. Oh, Merlin! I am going to die of shame.

Hermione turned to her husband again, and put her hand on his. Snape bristled at the touch.

“Please? PLEASE!”
Severus glanced up into her eyes. If it had been earlier in their marriage, he might have been disposed to help her, but he was tired of her deception, her constant attempts to change him into who she wanted him to be, and her lack of respect for him. She deserved no more pity from him. He’d already given her his entire life!

“No,” he commanded firmly, flicking her hand off his own.

Hermione’s eyes fell. His cruelty was truly limitless. She moved around the table and stepped onto the dance floor. She’d have to tell Ginny she couldn’t join the dance.

She was only a few feet away from the white-gowned redhead when she heard a voice call out her name softly. She paused and turned.

A young man stood before her on the dance floor, one who looked about her age, but no one she recognized from the Hogwarts’ class.

He was tall and had dark brown hair and a sweet, lopsided grin, and was dressed in fine black dress-robes.

“Hermione, if it isn’t too forward, may I dance with you?”

She paused, confused.

“I’m sorry, do I…do I know you?”

He grinned. “No, I’m not in your Year, but I know who you are, and I’m fond of dancing.”

Hermione smiled.

“Not too many boys at Hogwarts would admit to that!”

The boy’s eyes twinkled with mirth.

“Maybe it’s just an excuse to touch a pretty girl and swing her around until she’s breathless? May I?”

Hermione glanced over at Ginny. She and Harry were already absorbed with gazing into one another’s eyes and the other bridesmaids were facing their partners, waiting for the dance to begin. Hermione smiled at the boy in gratitude.

“Alright.”

She looked over at the musicians and nodded, and they began to play a waltz.

The boy opened his arms and Hermione stepped into them, taking his hands in her own, forming elegant triangles with their lifted elbows.

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of glancing over, but she hoped her husband was watching. *I hope he sees that I don't need him!*

The couples all began to circle the room to the sounds of the string quartet, and Hermione was suddenly reminded how much she, too, enjoyed dancing. She circled the floor with the boy, laughing and smiling at Luna and Rolf as they passed her, rolling her eyes in mock-annoyance at Harry when he attempted an elaborate dip with Ginny. She felt like she was able to let go a little, and she was enjoying the way the light of the lanterns above flickered as they spun and spun.

Severus was right. She was a little drunk. But it was a nice feeling, a slight numbing that banished
her anxiousness and brought her *joie de vivre* back, if only so she could better appreciate the loveliness of the occasion.

“You look *beautiful*,” the boy whispered to her, bringing his lips close to her ear.

Hermione turned her head to look at him. This boy who had saved her from her humiliation.

And it was then she noticed that he had *such* brilliant blue irises.

A glittering, aquamarine blue that stared deeply into her own with an overpowering need.

****
Five minutes later, Hermione entered one of the Hogwarts’ greenhouses, dragging the blue-eyed boy behind her.

She had yanked him off the dance floor as soon as the song had let up and everyone had finished their polite clapping, and had pulled him to follow her outside the tent. They had quickly crossed the lawn and she had ducked into one of Pomona Sprout’s greenhouses a few yards off from the Whomping Willow. She could distantly hear the musicians playing the next dance, and could make out the sound of George Weasley’s loud laughter.

As soon as the greenhouse door was shut, Hermione Granger turned and wheeled about to face the disguised form of Lucius Malfoy.

“What are you doing here? You can’t be here! If Harry and Ginny knew! My God, if any of the Weasley’s knew…it would absolutely destroy them! Don’t you know that? How could you do this to them? To me!”

The boy with the flashing blue eyes pulled a wand from his tuxedo sleeve and with a twist of his wrist, his Disguising Spell was broken, and the tall, elegant blonde form of Lord Lucius Malfoy once again loomed above her. Hermione was dazed at his quick transformation.

“I…I had assumed Polyjuice…,” she stuttered.

Lucius smiled at her wickedly.

“Nonsense. I have not the time nor patience to brew or acquire it, and I only required a temporary concealment to see you.”

He took a step closer to her and Hermione took a step back, feeling the bodice of her dress nudge into some potted ferns set on a long worktable behind her. She took her own wand from her sleeve and pointed it at him.

“Stay away from me! Why are you here? It’s wrong! You shouldn’t be here, Lucius!”

Lucius eyed her wand cautiously, and replaced his own up his sleeve.

“Calm yourself. Of course I mean you no harm. But I had to see you and this was the quickest way. Are you well?”

Hermione huffed in astonishment. The nerve!

“You’re asking if I am bloody well?! You’ve shown up unannounced at my two best friends’ wedding, one of whom is the sister of the boy you killed!”

“I understand how inappropriate it is for me to be here, but I dare not go to the Ministry now. Bella’s spies are everywhere. Nor can I very well walk into Hogwarts without attracting attention. I’ve been meeting with former Death-eaters, attempting to convince them of my loyalty.”
“Y-yes. Mott told me.”

“They must be convinced that I am still devoted to the cause. I cannot be seen with you or be seen at the Ministry for the time being.”

Hermione nodded.

“Did the Death-eaters believe you were still loyal to Bellatrix?”

“They did. Those who are still devoted to Voldemort’s cause are not exactly, how shall I put it… their intellect is rivaled only by these garden tools.”

Lucius gestured to a bucket of spades in the corner with a playful wink. Hermione refused to smile back at him. She cocked her head, suspiciously and folded her arms.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“I was worried about you. You have no idea how much I wanted to owl you yesterday, to see if you were alright. I’m sorry I had to leave you to wake alone in my bed.”

Lucius’s eyes glanced slowly down her body and back up to her eyes. His handsome face bore a look of concern.

“How are you?” he inquired, quietly.

Hermione turned away from him and set her wand down on the worktable. She could feel the tension in her neck and shoulders. That tension Lucius Malfoy had once told her he found so very alluring.

She was full of champagne and stress.

“How am I? How do you think?!”

“I don’t know. You’re young, Hermione. Resilient, I admit. But young. You endured the abuse I heaped upon you with much fortitude, but I have been worried…I worried that Dolohov was the final straw. We cannot all of us be strong all the time. And I know how it feels to be under the Imperius…that terrible fear, the powerlessness….Many times the Dark Lord—”

Hermione turned back to him.

“—Save it. You know nothing of what I have endured!”

“I do. Because it has all been done by me or to me. I know your suffering intimately. And one glance at Severus has told me everything I need to know about what you currently endure…”

Lucius took a step towards her, his eyes roving her pale face.

“I know it must be difficult for you not to tell him about Dolohov. But it’s for the best.”

“Maybe I have. How are you so sure?”

“Because I would be in Azkaban right now, charged with his murder if Severus knew. He loathes me. You have made a choice to protect me, and I know it is causing you pain.”

“How do you know that?”
“You always do what you believe is right, Hermione. And there is something you know intellectually is the right thing to do — tell Severus, go to the Aurors, and explain the entire story about Dolohov. But there is something you feel in your bones is right — that Dolohov deserved to die, and you deserve to be free of derision and prosecution. It must be terribly difficult. There are consequences for either choice.”

“Like what? It seems that going to the Aurors and telling my husband is the right thing to do. I just… need to find the right way.”

“Yes, but if you go to the Aurors, I am imprisoned and you must bear the guilt of that and your reputation is decimated by our mutual enemy Madame Skeeter. If you do not go to the Aurors, you must hide this terrible secret from Severus, your friends, everyone, and bear the guilt of that. I sympathise with your dilemma.”

“Unlike you, I don’t care about my reputation.”

“I certainly do. It could destroy your future political career if anyone were to know of this cover-up. You must think of your future, Hermione. You have so many gifts….?”

Hermione lifted her chin, defiantly.

“I knew it. I knew you would try to use this against me. What do you want, Lucius? Do you want to blackmail me? ‘Have sex with me or I’ll tell the Aurors you helped me murder Dolohov,’ is that it? You’re so pathetically predictable.”

Lucius merely shook his head, but his face contained no trace of anger, only a forlorn expression she wasn’t sure she’d ever seen before. Were these glimmers of vulnerability all an act? Increasingly, she was convinced they weren’t, and the potential authenticity itself was cloying. He sniffed the air and smiled bittersweetly.

“It’s entirely fair you think so little of me. I was on the opposing side of the War, and I’ve hurt you. I hurt you for my own entertainment, to build up my own sense of power, because I wasn’t sure there was anything else left for me.”

“Ah, I see, you’re ‘reformed’ now?”

Lucius shook his head again, and stared at the brown-eyed witch with his fever-pitch intensity.

“No, not reformed. I am far beyond that possibility. In many ways, I am the same as I have always been. I still see what I want, and I go after it.”

The intensity in his piercing gaze burned her. She swallowed.

“And what do you want? Lucius, I can’t go on like this for much longer…please, just…be done with me.”

“I want you. I want nothing else.”

Hermione took a step and tried to move past him, but he blocked the door. She ruffled.

“Step aside!”

“Please, we must speak.”

“I have nothing to say to you. I cannot. Let me pass.”
Lucius lifted his palms.

“I cannot touch you, as you know, without your permission. And if you want me to leave right now, we may never cross paths again. But I need you to know…”

“What?”

Hermione could feel a few tendrils of her hair sneaking free from her updo. Undoubtedly, her appearance was a mess. She suddenly realised she couldn’t totally feel her own face. There was a numbness present that was unfamiliar. Pleasant, yes, but unusual. She swept her escaping locks behind her ear and looked back defiantly at Lucius Malfoy. He stood against the greenhouse wall, illuminated by the lights from the wedding tent. His hair neatly tied. His blue eyes dazzling, and his handsome jawline turned just-so to plead with her. His desperation was undeniably enticing. Lucius moved his right hand to his heart to make a pledge.

“If it comes out about Dolohov, I will take full responsibility. I will say that I tracked him to Madame Sugar’s on my own, and murdered him in cold blood because of past debts. I will obliviate Madame Sugar herself if I have to. I will protect you. I know I can never make up for what I did to you…how I tortured you…how I gave you to Bellatrix…but if there is ever a choice I can make between my life and yours, I will choose yours.”

Hermione furrowed her brow, her breathing was coming fast in the cool evening air. She could see her warm expiration in the night air every time she exhaled in the glass structure. How on Earth could she believe any of this? She felt her head spinning, and not merely because of the champagne bubbles. Still, she knew who she was facing.

It was impossible to forget.

“That’s either the least Slytherin or the most Slytherin thing you’ve ever said.”

Lucius smiled.

“I suppose I am less and less a credit to my old House as the years pass.”

Hermione’s eyes flicked over his body. After returning to his natural form, the boyish dress-robcs he had been wearing as his younger incarnation were rather tight on him. His strong, lean, over six-foot torso was well outlined.

So odd that someone so attractive could be such a good liar.

Hermione sighed in annoyance at herself.

“I can never fully trust you, or believe anything you say. You know that.”

“I do know that. But…it gives me something to confess to you.”

“What…does it give you?”

“Absolution, of a kind. I find it strange, but I long for your forgiveness. To think a proud old Pureblood such as myself would crave that. But, I am marked. I am irreparably marked. And I don’t want to be. I don’t want this anymore. This… thing.”

Lucius suddenly unbuttoned his robes and tugged them off. Beneath he undid his shirtsleeve and folded it up. Hermione watched as he revealed his Dark Mark. She did everything she could not to gasp at the sight of it. She tried to pretend it was something she saw every day. No big deal.
Lucius held his forearm out to her.

“Hideous, isn’t it? When I took the Mark, I was proud of its ugliness, if you can believe it. I felt that it showed I was someone to fear, someone who could not be made afraid….We all were so naive.”

Curious, Hermione took a step closer. She’d never seen the Dark Mark close up before. She glanced up. The light from the tent was filtering in through the greenhouse windows and casting strange shadows across the handsome, blonde wizard’s face.

“Go on, examine it. I was your age when it was burned into my flesh.”

“May I touch it?”

Lucius nodded, and Hermione took his forearm in one hand, drawing it closer. His skin was cool to the touch, but she could feel some heat radiating from the Mark itself.

“Why is it warm?”

“It always burns.”

“What do you mean? Voldemort is dead.”

“It burned much more strongly when he was alive, yes, but even now, it burns slightly. There is always that heat there. That temptation towards evil. Power. Selfishness. It is a reminder of the innocence we have lost.”

Hermione wished she could simply blame it all on the champagne, but she felt her eyes suddenly fill with tears. She dropped Lucius’s arm and turned away. He began to roll his sleeve down, self-consciously.

“I’m sorry. I’ve upset you.”

Hermione shook her head.

“No…I just…it’s been an emotional day. And the loss…I feel Ron’s loss…the War changed so many things for everyone in that tent. Your Mark is this very physical reminder….”

She turned back to the blonde wizard and wiped at her eyes. The alcohol was buzzing in her ears now. She glanced shyly back at Lucius. It felt like a long time since the evening with Dolohov, and she did still have questions.

“Are you healed? Your cuts from the Sectumsempra?”

Lucius shook his head.

“They are some criss-crossed white scars now; they will never fully go away.”

“Then we have marked each other,” she whispered, softly, another tear inadvertently rolling down her cheek. She wiped it away. It annoyed her that she could never hide her emotion in front of Lucius Malfoy. He finished rolling his shirt-sleeve back down.

“I did not mean to upset you by showing you this. I wanted you to understand.”

“If you upset me, you can better manipulate me. You think I don’t see how you operate, Lucius, but I do.”
He smiled lightly at her.

“I think you may understand me better than I do.”

He took another step towards her, only inches away, though still extremely careful not to brush up against her. He lifted his hand and caught a tear as it dripped off her chin.

He lifted the water droplet up and stared at it.

“I told you before that your tears were exquisite. That they brought me pleasure, and was the reason I spared you on the battlefield, but none of that is true. My pleasure is not your pain any longer.”

“Then, what is your pleasure?”

“My pleasure is your pleasure.”

He leaned into her and looked at her properly for the first time, examining her dress, her make-up, her hair.

“You are absolutely stunning tonight, Hermione. I was a fool to drive you away from me, to treat you the way I did when we were betrothed. It was cowardly. I see now, you are my only future.”

“Don’t flatter me. Your lies are transparent.”

“It is not flattery to say you look beautiful tonight. Your eyes, your lips, your hair, your figure. I watched you from across the tent and I couldn’t help but be entranced.”

“Don’t have to lie to me. There’s no need to add to your cruelty.”

“How about this for truth? I still think about you constantly…I think of what our life could have been like together. If we’d married in the Room of Requirement. If I’d taken you back to Malfoy Manor as intended that night. What our following weeks would have been like….I think… I think you would have saved me.”

“And I think you would have hurt me, Lucius,” she murmured.

“No. Something had changed. By the last evening, I was captivated. When you kissed me in the Dining Room. When you let me kiss you on the staircase in the Tower. I…”

“…What?”

“I began to imagine all the things I wanted.”

Hermione bit her lip slightly. His gaze burned her, and she could feel the air around them become a little heavier.

“W-What things?”

“I had decided that I wanted to take you that first night, to earn your submission to me not by pain, but by pleasure. I thought of your lovely untouched body, and having it beneath me. The taste of your lips, your tongue. The sweetness of unlocking your desire. Coaxing and guiding you to take your first delights of a man’s body. Yes, I imagined all of these things, even as I felt you were just a Mudblood. If the Dark Lord were alive and had seen those thoughts, he would have proclaimed me a blood traitor and killed me on the spot. It was hard for me reconcile, but eventually I found that my desire for you mattered more than anything else….”
Lucius had increasingly closed the distance between them and he was close now. *So* close. Hermione could feel his hot breath on her cheek.

“It’s not right for you to say this to me…” Hermione whispered, more to herself than to him.

“No, it isn’t,” Lucius agreed.

“I am never going to give myself to you.”

She looked up into his blue eyes. They were ablaze with excitement and lust. Hermione was having a hard time not getting lost in them.

“That may be. But I can still *want* you. Desire is not something I can control. And I don’t think you can, either.”

“I don’t…I *don’t* desire you.”

Lucius raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t believe you. I remember your lips on mine. There has *always* been desire between us, even when we were enemies.”

“It was nothing on my side but fear, and a desire to please who I thought would be my future husband. That’s it.”

Lucius scoffed.

“You cannot pretend that *this*…is so commonplace. As a wizard with much more sexual experience, Hermione, I can attest to that. What is between us is a unique alchemy. I knew it when you kissed my hand and had my fingertips in your mouth.”

Hermione blushed at the memory.

“What do you want from me?”

“A test.”

Hermione took a couple steps away from him and leaned back into a few hanging ferns, a leaf tickling the back of her neck.

“Of what sort?”

“A kiss.”

“Absolutely not!”

“You believe there is nothing here between us. If you kiss me and tell me there is nothing, then I will stop my foolishness. I will leave you alone.”

“And if I refuse your ‘test’?”

Lucius softened.

“There will be no consequences. I told you, I don’t want to force my company upon you any more if it is truly unwanted. I will still take the full responsibility for Dolohov’s murder if necessary. And I will stay away from the Ministry — you will be free to complete your work. I will still work to turn
Bellatrix in. This is not a blackmail. I will swear a wand-oath to it if you require.”

Lucius reached into his sleeve to retrieve his wand, but Hermione reached out and placed her hand on his wrist. The contact made little tingles go up and down her arm.

“You don’t need to take another oath. I’m tired of the grand-standing. Your pursuit of me needs to stop. If we kiss and I tell you there is nothing between us, will you keep your distance from now on? Will you promise not to return to the Department of Mysteries?”

“I promise.”

“Fine. One kiss. I give my permission for you to touch me.”

Lucius’s eyes lit up. He lifted his right hand, slowly, and placed it on her neck, gently sliding his fingers along the smooth skin there.

“So soft,” he murmured.

Hermione closed her eyes at the contact. His fingertips were delicately caressing her neck.

“Oh, Hermione. The reason I want to…”

He leaned in and kissed her neck.

“…is because…”

He kissed her again, slightly higher up.

“…you are…”

He was now making a trail of kisses up along her jaw, heading up to her temple and across her forehead.

“…a completely sexy…desirable…witch…and I want…more than anything…to take you…to bed…”

Lucius closed his eyes lightly and gave a soft groan.

And suddenly his lips were on hers.

From the second they landed, Hermione felt a tightening between her legs, a tingling in her breasts, and a relaxation in her spine. Her stomach felt like it was doing flip-flops.

Within seconds, he was everywhere. One hand splayed against her upper back. One knee between her thighs, pressing against her most intimate place. The other hand gliding down her backside, not squeezing, but softly caressing.

Oh, God, Hermione thought, nervously, as she felt her body melt into his.

His lips slanted across her own, claiming her, nipping at her. His tongue licking his way inside her mouth. She wound her arms around him, clutching him to her, and she felt him smile against her moist mouth. She couldn’t stop herself.

She needed more, more, more. It was as if her body completely betrayed her. He was backing her onto the worktable, pressing her lower back into it. She could feel a hardness between them — his hardness, urgently against her hip.
She knew it was wrong, so wrong, but his physical body was practically lighting hers on fire. Her hands caressed his hair and the sides of his cheek as his mouth twined with hers — doing exactly as he promised — coaxing her, guiding her, teaching her how to take maximum pleasure. No kiss had ever felt so good before. Not even with Ron.

_Ron._

Suddenly, Hermione pushed Lucius away from her. He stepped backwards, eyes feral with lust. She was panting.

_Oh, God._

_Ron._

**What the Hell is wrong with me??**

Without a word, Hermione pushed past Lucius and flung open the greenhouse door and ran out into the night.

The guilt and her self-disgust were exploding within her chest. She ran to the portable loo on the side of the tent and, checking to make sure all the stalls were empty, locked herself in, frantically splashing some cool water on her face and fixing her hair and make-up.

*Why would you let him…? How could you let him…?! You are betraying Ron. You are betraying Severus. You have a husband! Lucius is not to be trusted.*

Hermione caught her own eye in the mirror. There was a look there she had never quite seen before — something wild. Pure lust?

It frightened her.

_Maybe I am a ‘Mudblood whore’? What else could explain it?!_

She broke away from the mirror and exited the loo, quickly walking back into the tent. As she entered, she grabbed a champagne flute from a waiter’s serving tray and knocked down the glass.

She was almost done polishing it off when a strong hand grasped her forearm, yanking it down. She glanced up to see Severus’s scowling face.

“I believe you have had quite enough for one evening!”

Hermione flung his arm off her own.

“Don’t touch me! I’ll have what I want!”

She knew she was being petulant, but she picked up another flute and tossed it down, then set the empty flute back on the serving tray. The waiter moved away, awkwardly. Her husband glared at her.

“It is time we go.”

“Maybe I don’t want to!”

“You are acting like a _child._”

“I’m acting like a child?! You’re the one who refused to dance with his own wife! I had to…had
“Had to what? And just who was that boy?”

“Just another apprentice at the Department of Mysteries! He’s…from Durmstrang. Not that it’s any of your concern. And at least he had the courtesy to dance with me!”

“We are going!”

Suddenly, Hermione saw Harry approach them. He was smiling widely, red-faced from a little too much champagne.

She smiled and waved him over. She didn’t want to leave. Screw Lucius! Screw Severus Snape! She wanted to stay at the party forever. She wanted to get drunk with Harry and Ginny and Luna and Neville and George and pretend the War had never happened and Ron wasn’t dead and she wasn’t married to Severus and she hadn’t just snogged Lucius Malfoy like a disgusting trollop!

_I hate this! I hate all of this!_

“‘Mione! I was worried you’d gone,” Harry broke in.

“No, not yet,” she replied, smiling a little too widely to compensate for the nuclear bomb going off inside her brain.

“Professor, I appreciate you coming to our wedding. It means a lot to me.”

Snape simply nodded. He was not interested in conversing with a sentimental Harry Potter. The last thing he wanted was them getting into a discussion involving the past or his mother. It was bad enough Potter seemed to look at him like he was some type of hero.

“I…I know I’ve asked a lot of you, Professor Snape, but the musicians are about to leave. We’d love to have everyone for one last waltz. Would you and Hermione join in?”

“Unfortunately, we must—“

“—We’d love to!” Hermione interrupted.

Snape glared down at her.

“We’d love to dance one last dance, and then I’m afraid we’ll have to leave.”

Harry glanced between his friend and her glowering, grim-faced husband. She obviously wanted to dance, and he was more than reluctant. _It would be good for the two of them_, he thought.

“Alright! Great!”

He motioned them over to the dance floor, where Ginny had also corralled a large group of friends. The musicians began, and Severus opened his arms, begrudgingly. Hermione slipped into them.

“We are leaving immediately after this,” Snape hissed down at her. But Hermione smiled widely at him with a smug grin.

She was happy to have everyone see that she was not simply to be an object of pity, and she was enjoying seeing Severus so uncomfortable on the dance floor. A few of the Seventh-Years at a nearby table were whispering about them.
See, my husband will dance with me!, she thought. And then two seconds later: You’re pathetic, ‘Mione.

She glanced about the room, nervously, but there was no sight of Lucius, nor of his boyish alter-ego. She still couldn’t believe what she’d done.

She could still feel his lips upon her own, his hands sliding into her hair, his tongue in her mouth, and his…him pressing into her lower stomach. It made her cheeks flush. She was ashamed, but she knew she wanted him. Wanted that closeness. That passion!

She looked up at her husband. He was peering down at her, curiously. She felt the shame rise in her cheeks.

Oh, God, does he know, somehow? Can he tell? Does he suspect it was Lucius? Does he think I was just off snogging some random boy, perhaps?

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

She couldn’t believe she’d said it aloud until it had passed her lips.

“I was considering whether or not to enter your mind.”

Hermione gasped as they started to waltz together to the music. Despite his reluctance, Severus was an extremely fine dancer, and he moved them between the other couples with considerable grace and skill.

“Don’t you dare!”

“I know when I am being lied to. I find it curious you think you can get away with it.”

Hermione’s eyes darted around the room, nervously, then met her husband’s cold gaze.

“So what if I am lying to you? We don’t even speak for more than a few minutes a day. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“What I want is to mitigate the suffering we both must endure.”

Hermione glanced over at Harry and Ginny dancing together a few feet away. Harry was gently turning Ginny under his arm, and she was gazing adoringly at him.

“Look at them.”

Hermione looked at Severus and he gave a quick sideways glance at the newlyweds.

“Marriage is about love and trust and respect and kindness. All I see when I look at them is something I will never have. Because you will never let me have it!”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Yes, of course. Wouldn’t want to embarrass you! You’re already so disgusted to be with seen with me!”

Severus stopped dancing.

“That is enough! We are going!”
With that, he pulled her off the dance floor, and towards the tent’s entrance, and within seconds they were walking back towards the Castle. Severus dragged Hermione by the hand. She was slipping and sliding over the dewy grass and her full satin skirts.

“Wait! Wait, Severus, I didn’t even get to say goodbye!”

“You may say your goodbyes tomorrow.”

Hermione tied to dislodge her wrist from her husband’s firm grasp, but it was impossible.

“Why are you being such a bastard?”

“Why are you hiding things?”

“How can I trust you when you don’t listen to me? Besides, you’re one to talk! I know you have been investigating Bellatrix’s whereabouts! I heard you with Dumbledore!”

Snape gave her a furious sneer but did not stop walking.

“And just what do you think you heard?”

“I don’t know…something about…could you slow down?”

Snape ignored her request and if anything, moved more quickly.

“It was about Euphemia Rowle. Who is that? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“It is my duty to protect—“

“—Yes, yes! I have heard it over and over again. But protecting me doesn’t mean telling me NOTHING!”

Snape remained silent, and then walked the rest of the way to the Castle in silence. As they approached the Dungeons suite, Hermione felt herself become more and more angry. How dare he drag her away from Harry and Ginny’s wedding! He was always so concerned with whether she would embarrass him; didn’t he realise how embarrassing that was for her?

Snape whispered “Lingua serpentis” and they entered the foyer. Snape flung off his outer robes and untucked his white button-up shirt, and pulled off his cravat.

Hermione stepped into the living room and watched him. He seemed incredibly uncomfortable, and Hermione had never seen his garments be anything less than perfect. He was rattled, and Hermione was unnerved by it.

She turned to look into the Lake through the partially-covered aquarium window. It was rather dark. Most of the sea creatures appeared to be sleeping.

“You are right,” she whispered to him. “I have been lying to you. I saw you at the cemetery. I know Bellatrix has taken the corpses of some of the Death-eaters. I know she is attempting Necromancy. I went to investigate myself, and I saw you there. It scared me. I wondered if you were…it’s crazy, I know…but it made me think…”

Severus turned to face her, an understanding spreading across his sallow features.

“…you believed it was possible I was working for Bellatrix.”
“Possibly.”

“Are you really so foolish?”

She pulled her shoulders back.

“Enough with the name-calling! When you tell me nothing, I can only believe what I see with my own two eyes. What were you doing there?”

“I was also investigating. I have learned nothing significant, other than the rumors of Necromancy. If I had, I would have informed you.”

Hermione paused. Severus eyed her suspiciously.

“And is there anything else you would like to tell me?”

Hermione looked back into the Lake. She knew what she was going to say, and she knew that she would probably regret it.

“No.”

Severus narrowed his eyes at her and gave a small nod. Hermione felt like his gaze could pierce through her skin down to her very bone marrow. Does he know it all?

“I see.”

He turned and moved towards his bedroom, stopping just as he reached the door. He gripped the door frame in uncomfortable frustration.

“It is Saturday evening…”

Behind him, he heard Hermione sigh.

It was an awful thing to hear.

“You’ll be with you shortly…” he muttered, and entered his bedroom.

Oh, God, Hermione thought.

Somehow she’d allowed herself to forget all about their consummation.

And now Severus expected her to go to her room and lie on her bed and spread her legs for him like a ‘good little wife’?!

She cringed at the idea.

There was nothing else she could do, though.

The Marriage Law had sold her to this man like chattel.

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Chapter End Notes
Sorry to leave you in such an abrupt, angsty place, but I ran out of time to write, so I thought something was better than nothing. :) 

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and a very Happy New Year to you and your families! Much love to everyone who has encouraged this story in 2018. Who knew it would get this far?

See you in 2019.

xo, stella.
Hermione took a deep breath and entered her own bedroom, closing the door behind her. She slowly unclipped her hair and unzipped her dress, hanging it up in the closet, then she carefully removed her bra and underwear. Unleashed from the tyrant of a bun, her messy chestnut curls flopped around her neck and shoulders. She shook her head, for once enjoying the soft bushiness that fell about her ears, and ran her fingers through her curls. She felt like a lioness with a mane. And for once her hyper-critical brain wasn’t cutting in to tell her how stupid or ridiculous or ugly she was to think such a silly thought. She enjoyed her brain’s silence; she felt free. At least for tonight.

She moved to her bureau and was about to take out her silk pajamas, when she suddenly stopped.

No, I don’t want them, she thought. I am his wife. He can look at my body. There’s nothing wrong with it! He is lucky to have me. Lucius wants me! I am desirable! Why should I cover myself up?

Her skin felt buzzy from the alcohol and she could still feel Lucius’s kiss on her lips and neck. When she thought of the pale wizard’s touch, she felt like her body was made of a gelatinous substance. She was woozy and felt a weakness in her limbs, but she was not nauseous. She felt alight.

I should drink more often, she thought, a bit of gallows-humor poking through.

She was still angry at Snape, his manhandling of her and forcing her to leave the wedding party… and angry at what he expected of her tonight. She felt… different inside her body.

Strange, she thought, as she slowly ran her fingers along her naked hips and up alongside the soft pale skin of her waist. She just felt… different tonight. Grounded, maybe. More inside herself. Less worried about… well, everything.

She knew she had been desirable in her elegant purple dress and elaborate updo. She had been stared at all night by many of the Seventh-Years and a good number of the adult wizards at the ceremony; she had felt their admiration as they glanced at her, and she had been kissed by Lucius Malfoy. Her skin buzzed with his touch. She had been wanted. She had been admired. How many others at the reception had thought about her in that way? Thought about having her? Hermione blushed, slightly, but the thought would not be ignored. There must have been others who had… impure thoughts about her. Severus Snape could not take that away from her. If Lucius Malfoy wanted her so plainly (and she had certainly felt it as he’d pressed against her)… then she was… worth having.

A small part of her brain whispered, “Why do you measure your worth in others’ desire?” but she shushed that part and quickly pulled down her comforter and removed the plain white silk sheet from her bed, wrapping her naked body in it. It was cool and pleasing to the touch. She’d never slept naked before, and it felt like a transgression to be covered in nothing but her bedsheets. It was rather delicious.

She lay down and touched her fingertips to her lips once more, remembering Lucius’s searing kiss. She felt for the first time, perhaps, that she was a sensual creature. She had always thought of “sexiness” as an unattainable, embarrassing, desperate quality, but sensuality… maybe she had that. Maybe she could admit to being a flesh-and-blood creature. Maybe she didn’t have to exist solely in her head. Live entirely inside her anxieties. Maybe she could just be a witch, and have the natural
inclinations of any attractive female human? To desire and be desired. Was it so shameful? Why had she cut herself off from this part of herself for so long?

The room felt like it was spinning slightly and her limbs were heavy on the bed. She knew she was still drunk, but she smiled, slightly. She liked the feeling, and she ran her fingertips over her lips yet again, replaying the passion she had felt there. It was like a tape she was rewinding and playing, pausing, rewinding, and playing. She couldn't stop herself from cycling it again and again in her imagination.

She giggled. She was drunk on Lucius's lust (and, she admitted, more than mildly intoxicated on the expensive champagne).

Despite Snape's attempts to ruin it, it had been an incredible evening. It made her feel grown-up. She ran her hands down her sides again, ghosting them along her ribcage. She could still feel Lucius's hands upon her body, roaming everywhere, pressing her tightly to him. Maybe there were things the body could teach the mind? She'd always assumed that the mind told the body its instructions and then the body carried them out...but maybe...maybe there were things she still had to learn...if she could give herself over to them. Her thoughts drifted again to the feel of Lucius's lips against her own...he had pressed his lips to her own so firmly. She had nothing to compare it to. It was...so much more than what she had experienced with Viktor or Ron. How could Lucius do that if she meant nothing to him?

She sighed at the pleasurable memory and cast the Lubrication Charm. One of her hands began to drift towards her center....

The knock at the door came. Hermione sat up in the bed abruptly, the sheet tucked under her armpits. She cleared her throat, though she felt much less nervous than she had on previous occasions.

"Come in."

Severus entered. He had the same reluctant, sickened expression he usually had at their consummations, but Hermione ignored it. He still wore his dress pants and the white button-up. He seemed to be sweating slightly, and he looked a bit more unkempt than usual.

If he noticed she was naked under the sheet, he said nothing. He moved to the foot of the bed and held out the contraceptive potion as he always did. And as she always did, Hermione swallowed it obediently and set the empty vial on the nightstand. She stared up at Severus defiantly, daring him to make eye contact, but he simply glanced about the room.

"Nox," Snape whispered.

In the dark, Hermione tossed the sheet off her body, and listened quietly as Snape removed his pants. She felt slightly guilty as Snape carefully crawled on top of her. He was her husband. He was who she should feel some affection...or desire for — not Lucius Malfoy.

Despite his ill-treatment of her, Severus Snape was her husband. Hermione spread her legs and tried to relax herself as he settled on his knees between them. She knew what to expect now.

And she wanted to be a good wife to Severus. She didn’t want to think of Lucius. She didn’t want to be an adulterer in thought, if not in deed. She wanted to want Severus. But the dark wizard made it so damn difficult...his cruel actions at the wedding. His controlling nature. He couldn’t even bring himself to compliment her.

But he does want me, Hermione thought, abruptly. The very proof of his desire was pressed against
her now, and now he was...he was oh-so-slowly pressing inside of her. *He really does want me,* she thought, as she felt the first inch of him press inwards, his entire body shuddering slightly above her. *He cannot hide that,* she thought. She closed her eyes and spread her legs a little wider, experiencing the stretching feeling of being filled by her husband once more.

*I want it,* she thought. Maybe not Severus, but she wanted this intimacy, this connection, and she, perhaps for the first time, was not disgusted by Severus's body joining with her own. He slid into her slowly, yet deliberately. And it felt...*natural.*

In the darkness, Hermione adjusted herself around him, moving her hips a tiny amount. There was no pain. Severus moved slowly in and out of her body — almost as if he was afraid of hurting her. *Does he feel guilty about tonight?* He’s never been quite so cautious with her, not since the first time, but he was clearly holding back, even more so than usual. *He always holds back,* Hermione thought. He was quiet and moved slowly, smoothly. In and out. Like she was made of glass. Hermione moved her hands up to his forearms and gripped his sleeves. She liked his gentle motions...for once...the motion was...enticing...yet not *enough.*

As he moved a bit more deliberately, Hermione was surprised at the mounting ripples of pleasure that she felt deep inside of her. He was pushing himself all the way in now, and taking his time as he pulled back and then pushed forward. It stoked something within her. More. And then even more.

The last time had been *nice,* but this was something else entirely. She shut her eyes and adjusted her hips slightly, trying to chase it. She was biting her own lip, she realised. There was a fogginess in her head from the alcohol and she...*wanted* more of it — she felt like she was floating a bit. Above her, she could hear Severus’s breath catch in his throat and she heard him repress a small moan as he pumped himself forwards once more. The first noise he’d made of the evening.

That sound...*she liked* it. It did something to her. He was so quiet, but each shallow groan and grunt made her toes curl and made the hairs on her neck stand on end. She suddenly understood that she wished he would make *more* such noises. She liked it. But he was always *so controlled.*

*I don’t want him to be.*

She wanted him to be like Lucius. She wanted him to take his pleasure boldly.

To give her *more* of himself.

Hermione lifted her knees up and wrapped them around Severus’s hips, pulling him closer to her. She had to have more of him. She wanted what Lucius had described. She wanted *more* from her husband. He tilted forward, slightly, until his pelvis was firmly pressed down upon her own, and her nipples grazed the fabric of his white dress-shirt. He stilled for a moment, and she was nervous he would re-adjust, but after a few seconds he continued his rhythm.

Hermione could hear his breath in her ear — his quiet groans and the rapidly speeding-up exhalation. It was *thrilling.*

*No,* Severus thought, *don’t do this to her.* He felt his own sickness- his desire to *punish* her, and *take* her, rise up inside his chest.

He shook his head, willing his baser desires away. He needed to focus, to get their coupling over with as efficiently as possible. But it was growing increasingly difficult to be rational when he was inside his lovely, nubile wife. As disgusted as he was with himself, he could not deny the pleasure his body took from her own young form. He knew he was a complete monster. What kind of sick man could *enjoy* a girl he had known since she was eleven years old...?
He clenched his jaw, and lowered his head in anguish. Even as he pumped in and out of her, he couldn’t escape the shame he felt, and the deep-seated disgust at his own pleasure.

But Hermione had no idea of the turmoil in her husband’s head.

She dug her fingers into the fabric on his biceps even harder. She couldn’t help herself. She bit her lip to suppress a moan but it came out anyway, low and desperate. She’d never felt so wanton, so ready to be worshipped by a man.

It was the first time she had lain below Snape and been completely nude, and even though it was pitch-black in the room, she felt more open to him than she ever had before.

*It’s alright,* she thought. *I want him to have me.* Her head pressed back against her pillow, and she was shocked at the pleasure than accompanied the thought.

*Yes, yes…*have me!, Hermione thought, her brain wholly submissive now to her physical response.

*Get it over with,* Severus thought to himself. *Stop prolonging her discomfort.*

He felt like he was taking hours, and indulging a dark part of him that wanted to punish her for her indiscretions at the wedding, for the way she had embarrassed him. It wasn’t right, but he also couldn’t entirely stop himself. He wanted to press his fingertips into her skin, to make her writhe with desire under him. He knew he was pushing against his own limits of propriety. As if such a thing still existed.

Hermione began to move her head left and right. Severus had touched a place inside of her that caused a rush of pleasure and she had moaned loudly. She was gripping him fiercely now, trying to adjust her hips and find her way back to that spot.

Above her, her husband continued to move rapidly, in and out of her body. It was pleasurable, but it was also too much. Too *fast.* At this new angle, she felt like she was circling something, closer than she ever had before. It felt wonderful to have him filling her — his hardness pressing her open. There was no uncomfortable stretching now. It was…an intense, enjoyable searching between them both.

*Yes,* Hermione thought, as her brain sought out its pleasure through her hazy intoxication. *God, I want this!*

But Severus was ignoring her moans of desire and her tiny, tender movements, and he’d begun to pick up the pace. Hermione recognized this. It was the beginning of the end for him. But she wasn’t ready.

*I can get there…*she thought, her body rocking most frantically for the first time. *Oh, please, I’m so close,* she thought. She felt like she was powerless to stop herself, and she was moving against him now, furiously, desperate to meet each thrust.

But Severus grunted, and ignored her hips, and picked up speed again, moving so fast she couldn’t keep apace. His hot, rapid breaths in her ear was a signal he was going to finish at any second, but it was all happening *so* quickly. *No,* Hermione thought, as she tried press back against Severus’s thrusts with her hips. *No, no, no! I need this.*

She needed *him.* She needed to explore the sensation. She needed *more.* And it was so much *more* than it had ever been in their previous consummations. There was a *passion* here. God she loved the way he was filling her and driving her onwards!

*Don’t let it stop!*
Her head tilted back once more and she let out a loud moan, and dug her fingers into his sleeves more deeply. At the same time, she tightened her grip on his bare hips with her thighs. *Please, more!*, she thought. She desperately tried to urge him on with her legs and hands, yanking at his clothing and the bare skin on his backside.

But evidently this was the wrong response. Above her, Severus stilled and stopped. She could still hear his heavy breath, but he had completely ceased moving and he pulled himself from her.

“No, please…,” she heard her voice whisper. “*Please*…don’t…”

Severus said nothing. He pulled her legs from his hips and she let them fall open back onto the mattress. He unpinned her hands from his sleeves and let them fall back at her sides, the back of her hands against the sheets.

Hermione lay on the bed, breathing heavily. She had been *so* close. She was sure. And she was confused as to why he had stopped.

She lay on the bed and tried to say something, but she didn’t want to beg. Her chest was heaving, and she was breathing so hard she was practically panting. But she said nothing. *Why is he stopping?*

Above her, she could hear Severus’s own laboured breathing. He was still above her, but he seemed to be attempting to catch his own breath. He’d never paused like this before.

Hermione bit her lower lip and rubbed her right cheek into her pillow. *God, it had been so good!* She knew she was on the precipice of experiencing… *something*…maybe ‘it’?

And Severus had robbed her of it. He’d sensed it, and *intentionally* refused to allow her any pleasure. She didn’t know what to say to him. She was humiliated. He’d brought her so close…and then abandoned her. All of her nerve endings were on fire — all she had needed was another few minutes, or seconds, of…of him.

But instead Severus paused above her, poised and controlled in the darkness. Hermione refused to beg. She waited, desperately, for him. *Please, keep going,* she prayed. But he waited. And waited. She didn’t dare wrap her legs around him again. She couldn’t let him know what she *wanted* again. So she lay there, panting, anxious and desperate for more. But he was far from forthcoming.

After what seemed like hours, but was probably only a minute or two, *finally* she felt Severus shift his weight again as he very gingerly, and cautiously, entered her body once more. This time, he moved rapidly, getting to his finish as efficiently as possible, leaning back on his calves so he barely had to connect with her. It was familiar to her — this detachment he practised, he perfected.

In a few seconds she heard the familiar low groan of his completion, the shuddering pause, and the warm stickiness between her legs once he finally withdrew. His seed dribbled from her, and her body was caught, somewhere between desire, desperation, and furious anger. She felt, more than ever, that she had simply been a *vessel* for him.

He’d always left her with nothing, but this time, she realized, he’d truly done it on *purpose.*

He could have continued as they had started, passionately. Yes, out of mutual frustration, but still there had been passion, and he could have easily enough brought her to her own pleasure. She had been *so* close! Closer than she ever had, and, she blushed, she had been completely willing to *let* him take her there.

But he had *purposefully* denied her.
Is this his punishment for the events of the wedding? Or does he always intend to deny me?

Hermione lay there in the dark, anxious. She wanted more than anything to pull Severus to her. To try to re-kindle what had happened before, to re-create. Her legs were still spread before him and she...wanted...oh, how she wanted!

Severus pulled away from her, and, in the darkness, quietly re-dressed himself. Hermione listened, not moving a muscle. It had been so different this time. She didn’t know what to say to him.

Dressed once more, he rose from the bed in the darkness, and she heard the shift of the boxspring. At the doorway, he paused. He turned back and whispered to her.

“We shall not be doing that again.”

He closed the door behind him, and Hermione was left in the darkness. What did he mean? Was he ashamed at her response? The way he’d allowed her to clutch at him? Or was it his own response? The way he’d piston ed in and out of her with such force.... She wanted to jump out of the bed and run after him, but she was always left with a flurry of confused emotions after their consummations. It took her awhile to regain her natural confidence. He always seemed to have the upper hand.

She pulled the sheet up around her naked body, and rolled onto her side, feeling his leavings wet between her legs. It was so unfair that he should be able to have her and then walk away unscathed, and yet she had to lay in the dark and feel him still, feel him inside of her, and dripping out of her. How could Mother Nature be so uneven?

She didn’t cry this time. She was still buzzing from the alcohol and the small pleasure she had received. There were things to be learned, and she felt surprisingly sated at the idea that she had experienced some enjoyment this time...even if Severus had denied her and forced them into a robotic consummation. She had learned more of her own desires.

Hermione pressed her right cheek into her pillow, and wondered just how she had landed a husband who not only insisted upon taking her in the dark, but refused to allow her to experience any physical pleasure in their coupling at all. She could feel the anger and outrage in her stomach, but she was too exhausted now to contemplate it. As she succumbed at last to the alcohol and tiredness, a few thoughts swirled around in her head:

Is this how it will always be? Does he not want me to enjoy it at all?

And then a scarier thought, right before she drifted off to sleep:

Would I have been better off with Lucius?

With that, Hermione’s conscious mind slipped away and for the first time in awhile, she slept without the aid of Dreamless Sleep.

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As the brunette witch slept, she was unaware that her husband, Severus Snape, was once more hunched on his knees in front of his toilet bowl, heaving his guts into it.

His disgust at himself and his actions was uncontrollable.

He felt like he was halfway between Heaven and Hell. The pleasure he felt at touching Hermione’s body in the dark. Her softness. Her pliability. The soft moans and coos she made. It was damning.
How dare he extract such pleasure from her? She had been entrusted to him as a student, and he took pleasure in her now as if she were a Knockturn Alley prostitute — not that he had ever visited one. (He did have some standards.)

He knew he’d pushed her tonight. He had taken his frustrations out of her body — pushed her towards the edge of pleasure…teased her. It was wrong.

She was still a nineteen-year-old. A child. How could he do such a thing? To prove a point? To subdue her? To show he had power over her person? He knew he had been out of control. And what was worse…he’d enjoyed it. That is, until he’d come to his senses and put a stop to it.

He lifted himself off his bathroom floor and wiped his mouth on a towel, then moved to the sink. Splashing water on his face, he looked long and hard at himself in the mirror.

You must not destroy her, he thought. Don’t you dare. Distance. Duty. There is no other way.

He nodded at his sallow reflection and then turned and exited, swiftly undressing and falling into his bed.

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Sunday morning, Hermione stood by the edge of the Lake and watched her former classmates load their trunks into the boats that would carry them across the water and away from Hogwarts forever.

She’d risen early and dressed herself in simple robes, throwing a large afghan around her shoulders for extra insulation. She’d breakfasted with Harry and Ginny and then walked with them to the Lake, watching as the Elves loaded their trunks into an elegant sailboat and smiled as her two best friends climbed aboard. They were to sail south, and planned a simple unofficial honeymoon along the eastern coast of Britain before sailing up the Thames and ending up in London.

Hermione had seen them off first-thing, kissing each of them on the cheek. They’d squeezed her and hugged her, insisting they’d owl her immediately upon arrival, but Hermione could not help but feel sad as her closest friends disappeared onto the horizon, the lanterns on their boat fading into the early-morning mists. They were all leaving, starting their adults lives. And yes, she would see them in London, but it was hard not to be a part of the Leaving Ceremony. McGonagall and the other professors stood on the Lake’s shore and watched quietly as the boat’s departed. It was a solemn occasion, but not sad.

It was simply an annual tradition at Hogwarts. The First-Years arrived by train on the Hogwarts’ Express, as did each subsequent Year, but the graduating class always left by boat the day after Graduation…sailing across the Lake and then through a narrow loch to a larger stream, that eventually connected to a variety of larger rivers, which, if chosen, would lead to the ocean. A tradition that Hermione had always felt was a bit silly, until she was denied it.

The graduating Seventh-Years navigated their boats in ones, twos, and threes towards the Firth, the Tweed, or any other body of water that would guide them to their ultimate destination. Some returned to their family homes in Ireland, Scotland, or England. Some made their way to the Continent for apprenticeships or new experiences. One or two headed to the larger ports of Belfast or Southampton and from there would set out for the Caribbean or the Americas. Water was the means by which the Wizarding World of Britain sent out its best and brightest. Hermione smiled as, one by one, she watched her entire Year depart. She refused to cry, but one or two tears managed to slip out from her eyes.

As the last of her class left, she turned back to the crowd on the shore. Despite the late-night
festivities of the previous night, so many faculty and staff had turned up for the Leaving Ceremony: Dumbledore, McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick, Hagrid, etc. It was sweet to see her teachers honoring her class by sending them off, one by one.

Of course the only Professor absent was her husband.

“Severus never comes to the Leaving Ceremony,” McGonagall reassured her, patting her shoulder. Hermione had given her a forced smile, but the information hadn’t comforted her in the slightest. Of course he wouldn’t come to see Harry, Ginny, or any of her classmates off.

_He is much too selfish for that._

Hermione watched the last boat depart with Luna and Rolf. They clung to one another as they raised the sail, and waved eagerly as the wind caught it. Hermione blew them a kiss.

“Take care, Hermione! Talk to you soon!” Luna shouted across the waves.

Hermione smiled, but it was only for Luna’s benefit. She felt a deep jagged cut in her heart. She was the last of her classmates at Hogwarts. They had all left her behind.

She turned and, wrapping her afghan around her shivering shoulders, turned and marched back towards the Castle.

“Hermione!” she heard. Behind her, Dumbledore was attempting to get her attention. She ignored him. She would never have considered such a thing when she had been a student at Hogwarts. But the old Headmaster had no power over her now. She was graduated. She had a diploma. It was Summer, and her entire class had just left Hogwarts for good. Why should she listen to the old grey-bearded wizard? He had done nothing to help her — merely engineered this impossible marriage between herself and one of his creatures. Severus had been right in that regard — Dumbledore was selfish.

A few minutes later, Hermione entered the Dungeons suite. She was tired, and had anticipated going back to bed for a few hours, yet as she passed the Study, she was greeted once more by the stern form of her husband, hunched over his desk, examining several documents.

Unbeknownst to Hermione, Severus had been pouring over the list of Ministry employees he had requested from the Department of Mysteries. Mott had been reluctant, but Severus had pulled a favor or two and received the complete, current roster. There was no young male apprentices from Durmstrang. In fact, the only “colleague” Hermione had in the Department had been an unofficial assistant on loan from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement — one Lucius Abraxas Malfoy.

At this revelation, Severus had expected to feel more. More anger at her deception, more jealousy at Lucius’s interference, more frustration at the Ministry’s use of all of them as pawns. Perhaps more fury at Lucius going so far as to disguise himself and attend Potter’s wedding — to dance with his own wife.

But instead, Severus felt a cold acceptance. It was as it always had been. Everyone lies. Everyone looks out for himself or herself. How could he expect Hermione to tell the truth? They lived in a world of liars, outcasts, and manipulators. Clearly, Hermione had learned the game.

She had been working with Lucius, and she had kept it from him. Plain and simple.

There were a number of reasons why she might have done so, but the plainest (and best case scenario) of all was that she did not trust him…and at worst she’d done so because she had unfinished business with Lucius that she did not want him to know about.
He knew Lucius Malfoy was desirable to the opposite sex…but considering the abuse Hermione had suffered at his hands, he hadn’t thought it possible she would willingly work with him…or, for Merlin’s sake, dance with the blonde wizard at a wedding. Were they lovers? Snape felt a sickness rising at the thought. He didn’t want her as his lover, but he certainly didn’t want Malfoy to have her, either.

Just what was she trying to pull?

Severus exhaled slowly. He needed to stop thinking of his wife as a helpless child, that was certain. She had behaved more like a devious little harpy. Despite her courage and outward selflessness, perhaps she had more Slytherin in her than Gryffindor after all. She is no innocent.

He was contemplating all of these potential motivations when he heard the front door slam and Hermione’s footsteps on the marble foyer.

Bottom line, she could not be permitted to make a fool of him this summer. They were leaving tomorrow for Snape Hall, and he would make sure that she knew there would be no secrets between them henceforth. She would need to act the part of a Pureblood Wife, even if she was a lying slattern. He bristled as she made eye contact with him from the doorway. As soon as her chocolate brown eyes found his own, he regretted his thoughts. He knew his wife was no “slattern.” But she was a liar. And for Severus Snape, that was almost as bad. How dare she lie and lie again! The little overblown fool actually thinks she can hide anything from me!

Hermione paused at the doorway to the study. She glanced at Snape, shyly, but couldn’t bear the idea of a conversation. The previous evening had been so confusing and tumultuous. She didn’t know how to speak with him without opening a massive can of worms. God, she just wanted him to accept her. To be open with her!

Tomorrow we’re leaving, she thought. Just keep it together until we leave.

“The Leaving Ceremony was beautiful.”

Snape narrowed his eyes at her. Hermione tossed her head back, proudly.

“It would have been nice if you’d been there,” she couldn’t help adding in, impetuously. She turned away, abruptly, to go back to her bedroom to pack, but a curt baritone called out to her in response.

“Stop!”

Hermione paused in the hallway and turned back to the open study door.

“Come here,” her husband ordered.

Her feet followed the command, but her hands began to shake, lightly. Stop being so scared, she thought. His deep voice always had had such an impact on her, and she couldn’t help herself but be on alert when he used it on her.

She turned and softly entered the room, stepping through the doorway. She glanced about the room. Not only was the furniture covered in sheets, but now Snape had packed almost the entire contents away in more boxes. The room was entirely devoid of books and pictures, except for the lithographs of Snape Hall and Cokeworth to the left and right of the doorway.

Snape cleared his throat and leaned down over her, folding his arms across his chest.

“Tomorrow we shall depart for Snape Hall and the Summer Season. As Lady Snape, you shall have
duties that are new to you. I shall assist you, but I expect no more subterfuge or dishonesty from you from here on out.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise and anger.

“I am as honest with you as you are with me!”

Snape narrowed his eyes at her.

“I will ignore that childish outburst. Regardless, I shall expect you to fulfill all of your duties!”

“Oh, I certainly shall. Haven’t I been such a good little wife to you so far? Don’t I fulfill all of my duties?!,” Hermione spat out, bitterly.

She ran her hands across her forehead. She had a hangover from the previous evening and it was rapidly getting worse. It was bad enough she was alone at Hogwarts for the first time without friends, but now her husband was berating her for, yet again, not being good enough. She inhaled deeply, and glared into her husband’s pitch-black eyes.

“Rest assured, I know my part, though you don’t know the first thing about being a decent husband!”

Severus’s eyes flashed in anger. He moved two steps closer to her around the desk, and gripped the side of it, willing himself not to physically subdue her.

“I am not here to meet your Muggle definition of decency! I am your Pureblood Lord, and I shall meet my duty, whether it suits me or no. Despite the fact that it is not one that I would have chosen, and not one from which I could take any enjoyment.”

“Well, you enjoyed it last night! You cannot help yourself! And…I could have… I do, too!”

Snape was taken aback. Hermione opened her mouth again, sucking in a deep breath. Her eyes blazed at him.

“I…I did enjoy it,” she repeated, a little more quietly. “Or at least, I didn’t hate it. I…I wanted to enjoy it.”

Snape had absolutely no idea what to do with that information. He stared down at the girl. Was it possible? She was somehow excited by the idea of physically joining with him? Of her former Professor bedding her? She was turned on by their depressing, mechanical coupling? The very thought was revolting.

He shook his head. No, she is simply inexperienced.

Her body was adjusting to the sex-act and her curiosity was taking over. It had absolutely nothing to do with him or what they endured together in her bedroom.

Either way, the act was not something either of them would have chosen to undergo with one another outside of their current situation. And he still found it incredibly difficult to undertake. It made him feel like a predator.

How dare she ask more of him? She had intruded on his life to such an extent that he would never be free! And it still was not enough! Her selfishness rivaled Salazar Slytherin’s. No, she would get nothing more from him. Nothing.

Snape took a menacing step towards her.
“I am not your lover. Our marriage is a sham that, may I remind you, I was essentially forced into. The fact that we must consummate it regularly is repugnant to me in every way. Do not ask me to make love to you like some besotted Romeo.”

“I’m not asking that. I’m just wondering if our…consummations could be a little less…cold?”

Snape narrowed his eyes at her.

“I am sorry if I am not providing you with enough warmth, Miss Granger. As I said before, I am not your boyfriend nor your lover—”

“—no, you are my husband! And how dare you, once again, call me ‘Miss Granger’!! After what we have shared! What I have given you! You are my husband, though you don’t act like one!”

“Yes,” he hissed, his eyes flashing in anger. “By law, I am your husband. And by law, my duty is to protect you, which I have done, and to consummate our marriage physically each week, which I have done! Tell me where in our marriage contract it states I must in any way be concerned with fulfilling your teenage fantasies?”

“Teenage fantasies?! My God! I’ll be twenty in a few months. I’m hardly a—”

“Simpering schoolgirl? Oh, but your behavior is certainly that of one. You are certainly not a respectful, Pureblood wife!”

“I’m simply asking for a little kindness.”

“And have you been kind to me? The ‘greasy git’, ‘bat of the dungeons’, the slimy bastard of Slytherin, a lecher, I believe Ginevra called me? You managed to not only make my work as an Order member incredibly difficult for the better part of the last decade, but now you and Dumbledore have entrapped me against my will to serve you for the rest of my life! Not to mention what you have kept from my about your work at the Ministry!”

Hermione reached out to place one of her hands on his forearm. His dark eyes were full of rage, and she was desperate to defuse the situation, to make him understand.

He stepped back though, and turned his head towards his desk, cocking it in a silent warning. There was no way he would let her touch him. Hermione took a deep breath.

“I—I apologize. I know I am not what you ever wanted in a student or a war-time ally, or as a wife. I get it! Okay? I. GET. IT. You dislike me. You always have. But I want to find a way…for us…this is not what it should be like between a man and his wife! It’s not natural. I am your witch! And I have desires. I desire—“

Snape snorted at her choice of words.

“—Your desires are simply irrelevant.”

Hermione’s eyes closed, as a jagged pain tore through her heart.

What a statement!

What could she possibly say in response? Severus was truly made of ice.

She had run from one kind of hellish marriage in Lucius and found herself in another. With Lucius, he would have beaten her and hurt her, but she might have been allowed some occasional relief.
In fact, she believed Lucius would have forced her to enjoy his touch, pleased her, if only to confuse her even more when he later tortured her. Pain and pleasure were wrapped up together in his mind games. There would have been physical touch, even if it was unwanted and brutal at times.

Hermione was quickly coming to realize that she needed physical intimacy and an emotional connection through touch. Even if it was built on hatred, she would have had that with Lucius. They would have burned together.

With Severus, she would be denied everything. He couldn’t even bring himself to reveal to her his naked body, and he obviously had no interest in seeing hers, much less touching hers.

An idea suddenly popped into her head. Did Snape expect her to just lie there four times a month forever? For the rest of their lives? Never being an active participant in this most intimate of acts? Never exploring her own body or learning what she liked? Never allowed to feel her husband’s bare skin moving across her own?

It was absurd. She was a female heterosexual witch. She deserved to experience sexual intimacy with a male wizard. She was corporeal. Wasn’t it destiny? She looked down at herself — this was the only body she would ever have and she wanted to experience life fully through it.

He is truly a monster.

Hermione narrowed her brown eyes at him, and cleared her throat.

“Forgive me, Snape,” she sneered. “I forgot to whom I was speaking. You are right — you are the cold, emotionless bat of the Dungeons. No wonder I keep secrets from you, and you keep secrets from me! There can never be any honesty between us. I will make sure not to bother you with my desires, again.”

With that, she turned her back on the Study, and slammed the door.

Hermione moved to her bedroom and shut that door behind her as well. She wanted to fling herself on her bed and cry, but she wasn’t a child. No, she was a grown witch with a pained, half-broken heart.

She sat on the edge of her bed, fuming, staring down at the mattress upon which she had lost her virginity and upon which she had found no happiness.

If Severus Snape wanted a marriage in name-only, then that is what she would give him.

She would take her pleasures elsewhere.

She was done.

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Chapter End Notes

Happy 2019! Updates may be a bit slower now, as I have gotten quite busy again with work, but please know that I am not giving up on this story! Thank you for your patience, kudos, comments, etc. :)

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Chapter 53

The “Tempus!” revealed that it was only 3 o’clock in the afternoon, but Hermione laid on her bed, utterly depleted of energy.

She had gotten dressed, at least. But she couldn’t bring herself to do anything else with the day.

A black cloud hung above her; she was too depressed to muster her limbs, to shift off the comforter.

*My husband hates me.*

She was annoyed that she still took Severus Snape’s disapproval so seriously.

She had always wanted to please him. Since childhood. She had always respected his intelligence, even as she thought he was overly harsh and unfairly disposed towards the Slytherins. She had admired him as a teacher, and learned more from him than any other she’d had at Hogwarts. But now he was her husband, and everything had changed.

She had done everything and anything she could think of these past few weeks to make things work between them, to be a good *wife* to him, strange as the idea was. He was a terribly bright scholar, a wizard of tremendous prowess. But as a *husband*….

As a *husband*, he had broken her heart.

He was a failure.

His own heart was sealed up. Made of granite. Unreachable.

*There is no way forward,* Hermione thought, bitterly. *He will not allow me be his wife.*

She lay on her bed and wiped the tears from her eyes with the edge of her soft comforter.

Perhaps the hardest rejection was that he wouldn’t even *recognise* her as a *woman*. Hermione knew she was no femme fatale. She would never have men drooling over her or kissing her feet.

Girls always knew by a young age whether they were of that particularly gifted ilk that would be chased after by the opposite sex, and Hermione had quickly gathered that she was no Fleur Delacour.

But she had *hoped* (always secretly hoped) that one day she would find someone who would see her for who she was, and *love* her for who she was, flaws and all. A wizard she could *trust*. A man who she could reveal her inner thoughts and desires to — a wizard who would never be unkind to her or humiliate her, but accept her and appreciate her and *love* her, body and soul. Someone she could truly *give* herself to.

And Ron had been that for her.

When he had died, Hermione had mourned that loss, and with a great deal of melancholy, quietly assumed she would never have another chance at that kind of love. Her disastrous marriage to Severus only confirmed her worst fears.

*Why can’t he just...even *try* to make it work with me?!,* she wondered. She knew, rationally, it had probably everything to do with his own issues, and she had tried to break down Severus Snape’s
walls, but there was no getting through. It was too difficult. And perhaps there was something amiss with her?

Would another witch have been able to reach him?

*Why won’t he accept me as his wife?...He won’t even let me be a woman,* she thought bitterly.

*I want to be a grown woman, a grown-up witch.*

*I want to be wanted.*

She’d always prided herself on her independence and her intelligence, and she was saddened and a bit ashamed to admit that she *needed* a man.

Perhaps not ‘needed’, but ‘wanted.’ She desperately wanted a man to comfort her now. To show her that Ron’s love and admiration hadn’t been an anomaly or an aberration. She wanted a man to show her how to be loved, what it meant to be *physically* admired and longed for.

*Am I so shallow?*

Outside her door, Hermione suddenly heard the front door slam shut.

Then, silence.

At last, Severus had left the Dungeons.

She exhaled.

She finally had their domicile to herself. She lifted herself off the bed and crept to her bedroom door. She creaked it open and poked her head out. Everything was still and empty. Severus was really gone.

She stepped into the hallway and exhaled in relief, unsure of what she wanted to do next. She turned to the left and opened the study. Inside, all was covered in sheets. Moving boxes were stacked on either side of the desk. Hermione walked over to the lithograph of Snape Hall and stared at it.

The white-columned mansion and its surrounding moorland looked like something out of *Wuthering Heights.*

*Or a particularly depressing version of "Pride and Prejudice,"* she thought, sarcastically.

It looked older than Malfoy Manor, yet possibly *more* ominous, if at all plausible.

*Is this my future? To be locked up in a huge house with no one but Snape?! To work five days a week at the Ministry and then spend one night a week in Snape’s bed as he keeps me at arm’s length? How will I survive?*

*Can I truly live my life without love?*

*And how can Snape live his life without love? How has he done this so far?,* she wondered. *Well, he has had years of practice....*

She supposed Purebloods were simply *bred* to it.

Lucius and Narcissa had seemed to be in love — some sort of twisted version, at least. But they were probably the minority.
Snape seemed to want nothing more than for her to keep out of his way and then quietly accept his body upon her own once a week. Is that just how it was for Purebloods?!

Hermione tore herself away from the photo and exited the room. Back in the hallway, she found herself walking directly towards Snape’s bedroom. They had an agreement, after all. She could access his books. She grasped the doorknob and twisted it. A small flash of light signaled that she had activated Snape’s spell recording her intrusion, but she ignored it and slipped inside.

Snape’s bedroom was sparse — with only a large, King-size four-poster bed taking up the center, and the wall to the left made up completely of bookshelves. On the right stood a large armoire, a bureau, and next to it the door to what she presumed was Snape’s bathroom.

*He truly lives like a monk,* Hermione thought, as she glanced about. There were no pictures or paintings on the walls. No decor of any kind. Everything was utilitarian besides the books.

Knowing her time was limited, she moved to the bookshelf and scanned the titles, pulling several tomes that appealed to her current interests — works on the Darks Arts, Necromancy, and Pureblood heritage. She whittled her borrowed titles down to just five, as she didn’t want Snape to chastise her later for absconding with too many volumes, and she was just abruptly about to make for the door when a shiny bottle perched on the small bureau caught her attention.

She wouldn’t have noticed it except it was in a uniquely proportioned bottle — hexagonal glass, and sparkling a bright forest green. She adjusted the books in her arms and approached, lifting the bottle in one free hand. She pushed the stopper at the top with her thumb until it popped open, and she leant in and sniffed.

It smelt strange — a mixture of a sweet floral essence, lily-of-the-valley, with something earthier — sandalwood and... maybe dark chocolate. She placed it back down on the bureau and replaced the stopper. It was a strange scent. Unique, but rather oddly there was something about it that reminded her of Amortentia....

She walked two feet to the doorway and stopped.

Curiosity had her.

She paused and knelt down, placing the books she was borrowing on the carpet. She turned back to the bottle and took out her wand from her sleeve.

“*Egritudo!*,” she chanted, pointing it as the green bottle to call forth a diagnosis.

Above the small green cistern, a smoky puff arose and formed itself into one, cloudy word: *Aphrodisiac.*

Hermione took a step backwards, shrinking back into herself as the smoky cloud dissipated and disappeared. The bottle was a...a *stimulant!* Why would Snape have such a thing in his room?, her innocent mind wondered.

Then the realisation struck her like a punch to the face.

Snape had been taking a *sexual* stimulant.

Perhaps since their very first consummation.

*No wonder he hated their consummations!*
He wanted no part of it. In fact, he had been using a potion to “get it up” since the very beginning!

Hermione doubled over; her stomach churning. She felt ill.

How could she have been so stupid!? He had never wanted her! She’d been a fool to try and seduce him, or make her silly schoolgirl overtures. He’d always found her physically repugnant, and had required a potion to even get hard for her!

Lucius had been dead wrong — not even that part of him had wanted her. He’d had to rely on chemicals to dredge up even the most basic, heterosexual, male physical response to her body.

Hermione lifted her palm to her mouth. She felt queasy.

She bent down and gathered her books, then turned and fled Snape’s room for her own, tossing the books onto her bed and pacing her carpet, panicking.

Does he have no libido whatsoever? Is he impotent? Am I not what he wants in any sense? Does he prefer wizards? Or is it just that he cannot bear the sight of me in particular?

WHY would he be taking such a potion? It’s not like he is sleeping with anyone else! It’s clearly me he needs help with....

At this last thought, Hermione could feel the despair well up inside of her once more. She stuffed it back down.

I cannot live like this, she thought.

Oh, God! Is he unable to ever desire me? Will no one want me? Ever? Is this my life now? To just accept that I will never be physically loved? To never be wanted? I will not be treated like this! No! No! NO!

She left her room and ran back to the study, digging around in the desk until she pulled out the marriage contract.

She read it, and re-read it, and then re-read it. It said nothing about adultery, taking lovers, having mistresses, sexual fidelity.

Am I actually considering this?, she wondered.

But she knew she was too far gone. She was considering it. As hard as it was for her to accept, as against her morals as the idea of adultery was, she felt her decision seep under her skin like water under a flooded door. She couldn’t shut this part of her down.

She was too broken — too alone — too sad — too needy.

She wanted to be wanted.

Maybe that made her an imperfect human. Maybe only ‘good people’ had sex within the context of committed monogamous relationships. Maybe she was not a ‘good person.’

All she knew is that she was suffocating. And she couldn’t bear the idea of being carted off to Snape Hall tomorrow morning — forever to be locked up in Severus Snape’s family home. No one to talk to, or be with — no one who could understand her. She would be just a possession.

A thing.
She needed something more.

****

At 8 o’clock that evening, Hermione stood in front of her bathroom mirror, sipping from a tumbler of Blishen’s Cinnamon Whisky, conveniently purloined from Snape’s living room cabinet. He hadn’t returned to the Dungeons all afternoon, and Hermione was grateful.

She hadn’t intended to get drunk again.

But one whiskey on the rocks had been justified as necessary to deaden her hangover, two to quell her nervous energy, and three to give her the liquid courage to continue on this path. Now, she was sipping her fourth in as many hours, and feeling a tiny bit woozy, rather skittish, and yet increasingly galvanised at what she had planned for the evening.

She wore a knee-length sequined black dress cut into a moderately enticing V-neck. She’d transfigured the sleeves to her elbows, and with a flick of her wand tucked the dress a bit more tightly about her hips and waist. Beneath she wore a pair of black tights and elegant patent leather black heels with T-shaped ankle straps.

She’d pulled her hair back into a messy bun at the nape of her neck and put on some simple make-up — red lipstick and black mascara.

(It was difficult to know what type of make-up to wear to your first adultery session.)

Hermione shook her head. She was being despicable to herself. She caught her own eyes in the reflection.

It’s not you who are responsible for this, she thought. It’s him.

And by “him” she meant her husband, Severus Snape. He had turned her towards this path. She had so many conflicted feelings about Lucius Malfoy. Mostly, she…was supposed to hate him, right?

She knew who he was and what he had done. And she felt sick at the idea of giving herself to Ron’s killer.

But she was also so worn. down.

So depleted. So exhausted at being made to feel like nothing. She had not really sat with the brutality of the loss of her virginity — she’d shrugged it off and tried to move forward. But now it was catching up with her.

It had been horrible. She’d endured weeks of feeling like she was a disgusting, unwanted piece of flesh. That her body was repugnant. And she needed to feel wanted. She wanted a wizard to take her up in his arms. To kiss her passionately. On the lips. The nose. The forehead. The neck. To make it all up to her.

To say, "you are worth making love to."

And, "I see the woman in you."

And, despite their dark past, Lucius would give that to her.

Didn’t he say he’d wait for me every night at Hogsmeade? Didn’t he say he desired me? Didn’t he say he would take his time? Give me pleasure? Didn’t he say it was me he wanted in his bed? Didn’t
he say he would make me forget all about Severus?

Hermione was desperately talking herself into this. She ran her hands along her temples, smoothing out the wayward strands.

And why should exploring sex be SO wrong?, she wondered.

She turned around in the mirror, admiring her reflection. It was the most ‘grown-up’ she’d ever seen herself. The dress was short, but not too short. It made her feel a little bit like she was playing a role. That is wasn't really "Hermione Granger" who was about to have an illicit sexual liaison. It was this rather sexy, young witch reflected back at her in the mirror.

She sprayed some perfume that Ginny had given her on her last birthday as the finishing touch, and then reached into her closet and pulled out Harry’s Invisibility Cloak, wrapping it around herself. She knocked back the last of the the Blishen’s and set the crystal tumbler down on her bedside table.

Off I go, she thought.

“No, no, no, no!” whispered another part of her brain.

She ignored that portion with a flip of her head, and turned to her bedroom door, slipping out, Harry’s cloak wrapped around her. A little excitement buzzing beneath her feet.

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Ten minutes later, as Hermione moved through the secret chamber from Hogwarts to Honeydukes, she could feel the butterflies gathering in her stomach, mixing into the Blishen’s.

Am I really going through with this?

She trembled at the idea of taking Lucius-bloody-Malfoy as her lover. He was so much more experienced than she was. And that idea made her thighs quiver, just slightly.

Will I disappoint him? Will he reject me in the same way Severus had?

But somehow, she knew the answer would be no. He was so forward in his desire. He would delight in her acquiescence, and she instinctually felt that Lucius was not the kind of man who was brutal in victory. He’d need to prove to her that her capitulation was worthwhile. At the thought, she felt a little pleasurable shudder down her spine.

She was ready for whatever the handsome, devilish blonde wizard would show her.

Her feet carried her swiftly through Honeydukes, out into the Hogsmeade streets, through the now-familiar alleyway, and up the stairwell to Lucius Malfoy's flat.

Removing the Invisibility Cloak, Hermione took a deep breath in and rapped on the door.

****
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

I spent all damn day writing this, and I regret nothing.

This is only the 2nd chapter to exceed 10,000+ words. Like Chapter 27, it's a major turning point in the story. I hope I did it justice.

Enjoy! xo.

****

Hermione waited. There was no answer. She rapped again.

After a moment, she removed her wand from her sleeve and cast “Alohomora!” She was not particularly surprised that it opened with such a simple spell. No doubt Lucius had charmed it to respond to her.

She entered and closed the door behind her. It was almost 9 o’clock, but the flat was pitch-dark. She called out, cautiously.

“Lucius?”

Nothing. All was quiet and still.

Perhaps she had been presumptuous to assume Malfoy would have keep his word — wait for her night after night in this flat, rather than return to the Manor. Is he there, instead?

Hermione crossed to the bedroom, but inside she found it, too, dark.

He must be at the Manor; she briefly considering whether she should floo there via the living room fireplace. She was about to leave the bedroom to do so, when she heard an abrupt crashing sound in the living room, followed by a series of giggles. The doorway banged open on its hinges.

She pressed her back against the bedroom wall next to the door and listened. A woman’s high-pitched giggle filled the air, followed by the creak and slam of the front door closing. Footsteps. Then, a flirtatious voice:

“Oh, Lucius, you do have such a way with words! I can’t tell you how happy I was to see you tonight. It has been too long.”

Hermione’s entire body stood stock-still. Who was this?!

She listened intently. The only sound she heard next was the smack and soft suction noise of a kiss, following by a sensual female moan.

Lucius had brought a woman back to the flat!

Suddenly, all the blood drained from Hermione’s face. She felt like the biggest fool in the world.
To think I imagined him here, waiting for me, night after night, like some sort of penitent monk. My God, of course he hasn’t been waiting for me!

Hermione raised a hand to her mouth and cupped her lips in shock. She wanted to scream out in embarrassed frustration. Her cheeks burned. She had made an complete arse of herself.

As she listened to the mewling woman and the kissing noises, she could sense them getting closer and closer to the bedroom doorway.

“Mmmm. Take me to bed, Lucius,” Hermione heard the woman murmur.

Lucius said nothing in response, but as the kissing sounds resumed, Hermione, frozen in horror, could only imagine what was taking place on the other side of the wall. She heard the shift of bodies — and knew they were approaching. Her eyes flicked about the room. Should she go to the bathroom? What if one of them went in there? She quickly glanced down at the bed, and before she had thought it through flattened herself on the carpet and shimmied under it.

Beneath the mattress, she pursed her lips, desperate to quiet her breathing. She moved her eyes to the right — a pair of elegant red heels strode backwards into the room from the doorway, followed closely by a pair of black men’s dress shoes facing the opposite direction.

Hermione could hear every kiss and low moan. She wanted to cover her ears with her hands, but she was too panicked. Lucius was relatively quiet, but the woman he was with seemed to be enjoying his attentions rather enthusiastically.

Hermione wrinkled her nose as her stomach clenched. I’m going to be ill.

The springs of the bed above her bounced as the woman landed upon it. She giggled some more.

“Oh, Lucius! I am so happy. It has been far too long. But I haven’t forgotten…oh, no. I remember every…single… detail of our last night together.”

Hermione heard the bedsprings shift as Lucius crawled upon the bed as well.

“What now?” he whispered, seductively. It cut Hermione to hear him speak in such low tones to another witch. It was the first thing she’d heard him say.

*It’s not like he owes you anything…*, Hermione thought, disgusted. Yet it was sickening to hear him speak in such a seductive inflection to another woman, given she had heard that same inflection less than 24 hours ago in the greenhouse.

Hermione pressed her head down to the carpet underneath the bed, despondent. How can I get out of here?! Oh, Merlin, tell me this isn’t happening!

She suddenly had a nightmare vision of being trapped under the bed as Lucius made love to the mystery woman above her. *I can’t take that*, Hermione thought, panicking.

She glanced out from under the bed. There were only two exits from the bedroom — the bathroom door and the living room door. She knew from before the bathroom had no window, so her only mode of escape was the living room. It was wide open and she considered whether she should try to crawl her way towards it, but the idea of Lucius and the woman seeing her filled her with absolute horror. How could she explain her presence? It would be humiliation beyond anything she’d ever experienced if Lucius caught her crawling her way out from under his bed.

*Why did I even come here? I’m a completely gullible imbecile.*
After a few minutes of the kissing noises, at last Hermione heard the mattress springs squeak. The woman’s voice gave a low moan.

“Oh, Lucius…please…”

“Yes?”

“Will you…will you blindfold me like you did the last time?”

*Oh, God, he’s been with this woman before!* Hermione heard Lucius give a low chuckle.

“Certainly.”

She heard the woman giggle again as Lucius (evidently) applied the blindfold.

“It’s perfect.”

Another kissing noise. Then the mattress squeaked again.

“I’ll be right back,” she heard Lucius whisper, before stepping down off the bed. Hermione saw his shoes land back on the carpeted floor, and watched as they moved away from her to the bathroom door. Lucius entered and closed it, and Hermione heard the sound of the sink running.

*Now! Now’s my chance,* Hermione thought. She listened quietly and could only hear the woman’s quiet breathing above her.

*I have to go for it!*

Hermione glanced back at the closed bathroom door, nervously, then shimmied on her stomach out from under the bed and quietly crawled her way towards the living room door. At the threshold, she rose to her hands and knees, then stood her full height and turned to glance back.

She caught a glimpse of the woman on the bed — she was at least a decade older than Hermione, but younger than Lucius, and dressed in a tight, provocative red dress. She had pale skin, and her voluptuous, painted red lips stood out below the black cloth tied around her eyes. She lay on her back, exhaling heavily and eagerly anticipating Lucius’s return. She was reaching down to pull off her matching red heels, tossing them onto the carpet.

Hermione felt bilious once more. *So this is what Lucius Malfoy wants — some painted, submissive witch.*

She tried to feel anger towards the woman on the bed, but it seemed to Hermione that this woman was everything Hermione was not — glamorous, grown-up, fully at the height of her sexual powers.

Hermione heard a noise from the bathroom, and she quickly turned and tip-toed her way along the carpet into the living room, making a beeline towards the front door, careful not to make a sound. She had almost made it to the doorway, when she heard another loud creak behind her.

Turning her head to the left, she saw him.

The tall, blonde form of Lucius Malfoy stood in the doorway to the bedroom, evidently having just left the bathroom. He’d removed his shoes and socks, but wore dress-pants, a white Oxford shirt, and an unbuttoned velvet black waistcoat that hung about his hips.

He was staring directly at her.
His face was one of utter shock. Without another look at the woman on the bed, he whispered, “Just a moment, my dear,” and with an elegant motion, moved through the doorway into the living room, shutting the bedroom door after him with a flick of his hand.

Hermione turned and grasped the handle of the front door to escape, but with another lightning-fast bit of wandless magic, Lucius froze it in place. Hermione struggled for a couple seconds, then as Lucius approached, she jumped back from the handle, and backed into the living room.

“Muffliato!” Lucius whispered.

“Let me go!” Hermione demanded as she backed up, placing the sofa between herself and the oncoming blonde wizard.

Lucius’s eyes were filled with confusion. Hermione noted he didn’t seem angry, or even particularly embarrassed.

“What are you doing here?”

Hermione lifted her chin, defiantly.

“Nevermind that! I have clearly intruded upon something!,” Hermione spat out, “My apologies,” she hissed, sarcastically.

Lucius lowered his eyes — taking in her provocative dress beneath the shimmering Invisibility Cloak that still hung off her shoulders — the V-cut, the sequins that skimmed her thighs, the strappy shoes. She saw a flicker of excitement fill his eyes as he drew his own conclusions.

She shook her head, unwilling to be drawn into his desires. He smiled at her, the corners of his mouth upturning in victory. He suddenly seemed to know everything.

“You look…most entrancing.”

Hermione arched her brow and narrowed her eyes, anger rising up.

“Don’t play games with me, Lucius. I have obviously caught you in the middle of something. You can owl me at Snape Hall tomorrow if you have anything to say to me. I’m going!”

She moved towards the doorway, but he blocked her access.

“You look like a vision, Hermione,” he whispered, his pink tongue briefly dipping outside his mouth to lick his lower lip. Hermione swallowed.

He took a step towards her. Hermione took out her wand and pointed it at his groin.

“Another step towards me, and I’m afraid your lady-friend will not receive any satisfaction from you tonight!”

Lucius paused and lifted his hands in surrender. Hermione breathed in and out heavily. Lucius could not help but admire the way her chest swelled under her neckline as she did so. He cleared his throat.

“No doubt you are wondering who Clara is. She is the wife of a Pureblood associate. We had a night of passion some months ago, shortly after Narcissa left me. She has pursued me ever since, though I have no long-term interest in her. She found me at the Three Broomsticks tonight, and, weak as I am, I thought to take some pleasure with her this evening. Pathetic substitute that she is for you.”

Hermione made a face.
“You’re disgusting. I don’t want to hear it! It’s none of my business! And you don’t have to bad-mouth her. Just admit you want her. She’s beautiful, clearly.”

Lucius nodded in agreement.

“She is beautiful. And she desires me, which is always a delicious feeling. Yet, I cannot help but be callous about her charms, because she is not you, Hermione. She’s a temporary solution to a long-term problem.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. Lucius took a step closer, but Hermione raised her wand again, pointing it at his chest, her brown eyes flashing in warning. Lucius sighed and lowered his palms.

“Do you know how long it has been since I have had a witch, Hermione?”

Hermione shook her head, slightly, blushing.

“That’s obviously none of my business. Nor do I care.”

“Oh, but it is your business,” Lucius whispered. “I have not had a woman in my bed since the day our engagement was announced. Is that not strange?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Whether you believe me or not, it remains true. I was so consumed with thoughts of you, I hadn’t bothered to indulge myself with Clara or any of the other Pureblood women I know. Then I was locked in Azkaban, and afterwards, what I told you was true. I became so fixated on you, I had no thought for any other. I waited, patiently. In this flat. Night after night. Hoping that you would come to me. And now you have.”

Hermione tossed her hair back.

“I…I haven’t! I’m not here for…that. Anyway, what do you even need me for? You have whatch-her-name! You talk a lot of rubbish, Malfoy. The truth is, you just wanted me as cheap entertainment. You’d just use me and discard me, and I’d be nothing but an amusing conquest to you.”

Lucius stepped closer and lifted one hand to his neck, unfastening the cravat there and tossing it aside in frustration.

“You know I am not a particularly good man, and you are right, Hermione, to be cautious with me. But I am a man. Do you know how hard it was last night, to feel you against me? To have your lips upon mine? To hear you moan into my ear, and then to be denied you? To have you rip yourself away from me? After weeks of celibacy? I am not the kind of wizard who can be deprived of physical touch. Since the day I married Narcissa, I have never gone over a month without a woman beneath me. Did you expect me to hold out forever for you?”

Hermione felt the skin at the nape of her neck bristle at his language.

“I promised you nothing! Nothing at all! It is you who has pursued me!”

Lucius smiled.

“And what about tonight? Look at you. Why come here like this, unless you are here to pursue me? Why come here at all? Don’t tell me you needed some late-night advice on your marriage? Or perhaps you just wanted a cup of tea?”
Hermione felt her cheeks redden in shame. She looked at the floor, lowering her wand.

“Lucius?” A voice called out from the bedroom.

Lucius lowered the silencing charm with a wave of his arm.

“In a moment,” he called out, before raising it again. He took another step closer to Hermione, his pale blue eyes flashing wildly in the dark room.

“Just give me the word, and I will send her away.”

Hermione shook her head.

“You don’t want me, Lucius. You just want…distraction.”

Lucius came within arm’s reach of her, and slowly, oh-so-slowly lowered himself to his knees.

“Please, let me hold you. Let me touch you,” he whispered.

Hermione knew she should say no, but once again found the words dead on her lips. The betraying orifice was already emitting the sound she was trying to reign in: “Alright.”

Lucius lifted his arms and grasped her about the hips, leaning in and softly burying his cheek against the front of her hips.

“You look gorgeous, Hermione, in this dress. Did you come here for me? I know you did. And I ruined it, didn’t I? I am a fool! A true fool. It was torture for me to be with you — day in and day out in the Hall. Smelling your scent. Looking at your lovely tiny waist. Seeing the way you looked at me with sympathy. The way you extended your kindness to me….”

His arms slithered up and onto her shoulders, gently nudging the Invisibility Cloak from around her. It fell and landed in a soft heap around her ankles. Lucius exhaled as he flicked his eyes up and down, drinking in her exposed form.

“To be so close to you, and not have you was hell. I am a drowning man, Hermione. Forgive me, but I needed something. I wish I had waited longer. I should have trusted you to come to me.”

He slowly turned his head and looked up at her; he looked like a pitiable puppy dog. Hermione felt her abdominal muscles clench. There was something profoundly erotic about Lord Lucius Malfoy on his knees in front of her, his strong arms gripping her around her waist, his blue eyes staring up at her, pleadingly, illuminated by the moon’s glow filtering in through the French windows.

“Forgive me for being so weak. Let me send her away. Let me take you to bed,” he whispered, nuzzling his cheek against her center once more.

Hermione could feel another small clench — a ripple between her legs — the assured promise of further pleasures. Ron had never been able to make her feel such a thing with just his words. It was desperately enticing. She willed her arms to stay at her sides, even though her hands longed to lift up and caress Lucius’s temples, his smooth cheeks, his lips; her fingers ached to card themselves through this man’s soft blonde strands, which were now burrowing messily against her abdomen. He truly was cat-like in his seduction — his motions were always petting, rubbing, caressing. God, but he would give her everything her body craved!

Hermione felt the whiskey buzzing about her. She felt sick that she couldn’t deny herself, couldn’t say no when he asked to touch her. She loved to be wrapped up in his arms; he made her feel
possessed. She wanted to drink in all of Lucius’s excuses. He was slowly crawling his way up her body now. As he stood to full height, Hermione stared up at him, shyly, knowing she was going to let him take her in his arms.

“Honestly…Lucius… how many witches have you been with…since our…bethrothal?” she whispered.

“None,” he whispered back.

He leaned down and kissed her softly on the side of her neck. Hermione cooed quietly and bit her lower lip, tilting her head back.

“Swear on your wand,” she murmured, “On your Pureblood honor.”

Lucius pulled his wand out and held it up to her, one hand slipping from her body to make the vow.

“I swear it. On my wand, I have bedded no witch since I left Azkaban. I have truly desired none but you. It’s destroying me.”

Lucius lay his wand on the couch and leaned down once more. He grasped part of her dress at her shoulder, burying his cheek in the folds of it, rubbing it against his cheek like a cat marking its territory. Still holding the fabric, he stared down at her.

“May I kiss you?”

Hermione nodded.

Lucius leaned down, and gently tilting her chin upwards, placed a tender, searing kiss on her soft lips. He moved slowly, coaxing her own lips and tongue, encouraging them to seek out their own pleasure. He didn’t just take from her, she loved that. He drew her out, and smiled against her lips at her slightest response. It was wonderful how much he approved of her physical seeking-out, how much he wanted her response. He was everything Severus was not.

Within seconds, Hermione had her arms tightly wound around his neck, her tongue slipping inside his mouth. Her fingers at last finding purchase in his hair. She heard him groan, deeply, and she felt the pleasure spark between her legs once more. In that moment, he was the sexiest man she could possibly imagine — his confidence, his way of handling her body with firm but delicate instruction. She could feel herself melt into him; his pelvis was pressed into her abdomen and she could suddenly feel his very evident masculine need for her.

But is it for me? She pulled back, suddenly, gasping for air. Lucius moved his hands along her waist, softly squeezing her, nibbling at her neck once more in between sentences.

“Stay with me tonight. Just say the word,” he whispered, “I will send her away. It’s you I want, you silly witch. Gods, Hermione. I would do anything for you. To have you. Don’t you see that?”

“Lucius?” the witch in the bedroom called out again.

And suddenly, Hermione felt the sickness in her stomach once more. She was a witch who would be taking another witch’s place in Lucius Malfoy’s bed tonight. She couldn’t do this — she couldn’t believe what she wanted to believe — that Lucius had feelings for her. If he’d truly felt for her, he wouldn’t have brought this Clara-woman home with him. And now she would be, what? Sloppy seconds?

No!, she thought, sliding her hands from around Lucius, and pulling away from him.
No, I… I can’t be with him like this. What am I doing?

She stepped back, feeling Lucius’s powerful hands slip from her waist. She missed the contact immediately, but she suddenly realised she had made a terrible decision coming to the Hogsmeade flat. Lucius may desire her, but at what cost? The idea of being another notch in his bedpost sickened her.

“Let me send her away,” Lucius whispered once more, leaning down and kissing the back of her hand, his hungry cobalt blue stare never leaving her own brown eyes.

Hermione nodded, still somewhat entranced by Lucius’s intense gaze, and watched as Lucius turned and moved back to the bedroom, the door closing behind him. As the door shut, it was as if a spell were broken.

What am I DOING?!!

I can’t do this.

Now I am going to make love in that bed to a man who just a few minutes ago would have made love to another woman?!?!!

Oh, Merlin! What have I done?

Through her drunken, foggy brain, one thought occurred to her with absolutely clarity: Get out! Get out! Go!

The decision made, she leaned down and snatched up the Invisibility Cloak, tossing it about her person, then quickly ran to the door, flinging it open, and, not bothering to shut it, scrambled down the staircase.

Don’t look back!

She reached the alley and made her way to Honeydukes, still running. She tugged on the front door, only to realise with some annoyance that it had closed fifteen minutes earlier. She’d have no access to the secret tunnel.

She turned and headed quickly along Main Street at a steady trot, until she had left the edge of the village and was now crossing the dark expanse of field that separated Hogsmeade from the Hogwarts Castle grounds. She looked behind her, but Lucius Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

Thank Merlin he isn’t following me!

The wind had picked up considerably, and Hermione tucked the Invisibility Cloak about her. What it possessed in discretion, it more than lacked in insulation, and she shivered beneath the thin fabric.

She held out her palm and glanced up at the dark sky. Raindrops were softly landing on her outstretched fingers. She sighed and pulled her hand back under the Cloak.

She trudged onwards as the rain began to fall. With each step, she could feel the whiskey thumping in her head. Her footing was unsteady on the wet ground, and the heels of her shoes kept sinking into the mud, slowing her progress. She glanced across the wide field. It was empty, and she was facing a twenty-minute walk in the rain, all alone under the dark sky.

Penance for my foolishness, she thought. My ‘walk of shame’. How could I have convinced myself to take Lucius Malfoy as my lover?
He stumbled over a large chunk of mud, and picked herself up. It had splattered all along her legs now, but she kept trudging onwards through the sleet.

She’d gone to Lucius Malfoy. Willingly. And now he would know forever. She’d given in. She had been weak and pathetic, and gone to him to GIVE herself to him like some Knockturn Alley whore.

Her cheeks burned with the shame. What had she expected? That he would be quietly waiting on the couch, a book in his lap. That he would rise as she entered, elated?

“Oh, Hermione! My sweet love! I have so waited for this moment!”

She rolled her eyes.

She had been pathetic to construct any kind of fantasy like that. Of course Malfoy had been playing her. Whether his story about Clara had been true or not, he hadn’t REALLY wanted her. Otherwise, he would have waited for her. Right?

Hermione didn’t want to admit it, but her pride was brutally stung.

It was one thing to have a secret sexual liaison with a man who would kiss the ground you walked on. It was another thing to be just another witch to warm a wizard’s bed.

Hermione felt tears rise in her eyes. Why am I never good enough? Why am I no one’s first choice?

She’d never told anyone, but even Viktor had broken it off with her when he had returned to his school and found that his first love returned his feelings. He’d sent her an Owl and she’d secretly cried about it for weeks.

Why am I always second-best?, Hermione wondered. The fall-back. She could never compete with witches like Lily and Narcissa. She didn’t have half their beauty, charm, and womanliness. She was never going to be the one a wizard fell in love with, totally and utterly, never be like Ginny and get to have her “Harry.”

The only person who had ever remotely put her first was Ron. The one she had almost… almost brutally betrayed tonight!

What does that say about me?

She thought back on a memory of she and Ron cuddling one night in the tent.

“Even when I dating Lavender, I knew I was really with you in my heart,” he’d whispered.

Hermione had snuggled up against him and kissed his neck as sweetly as she could. He’d been her everything.

And now here she was. Dressed like…like a common slut, she thought, glancing down. You’re awful; you don’t deserve any forgiveness for what you have done!

She wiped the tears as they began to fall from her cheekbones. The rain was beginning to beat down more furiously, and now the wind mixed with the tears falling from her eyes, conspired to wet her face. She could sense her mascara running and was sure she would look like a mess by the time she got back to the Castle.

How could I have done this?, she wondered, as she continued marching to the Castle’s lights in the distance. I’m a complete and utter idiot.
If Lucius’s feelings for me were in any way real, he would never have been able to take Clara What’s-Her-Name back to the Hogsmeade flat for a one night stand, Hermione thought, as she looked down at her now ridiculous outfit.

And worst of all, I’ve betrayed everyone.

Ron, Harry, Ginny, Severus, McGonagall, Mott. Everyone in the Order. Everyone at the Ministry. Everyone I’ve ever loved or cared about, or who believed in me, who thought I was a good person — honorable and trustworthy. Who would understand? I don’t even understand!

She tripped again, and this time found herself on her hands and knees in the mud. She lifted herself up, sighed, and wiped her palms against her dress. Her tights were torn about both knees now. Harry’s Invisibility Cloak was impervious to the elements, but her dress was soaked through and there was now one long rip above her left thigh almost to her hipbone. The dress was ruined.

Hermione looked down. One shoe was firmly caught in the mud. Hermione tried to nudge her ankle left and right and shake it loose, then finally in her frustration she undid the ankle strap, yanked it from the earth, and moved onwards to the Castle. She was limping slightly now, her right foot squishing into the muddy grass, but she didn’t care. She tossed the shoe off to one side. Screw it.

It felt good, somehow, that her body was being made to endure the elements. Serves me right.

The storm had picked up — the early summer sky was flashing with lightening and thunder now with unusual late-season intensity, and the rain was now pouring down upon her in thick spattering droplets. Hermione felt her wet bun sticking to the back of her neck — tendrils on either side of her face plastered to her cheeks. She was moving slowly now, and shivering.

She leaned down and took off her other shoe, abandoning it to the mud. She glanced up, trying to focus on the lights of Hogwarts Castle. She was still about a half-mile away. She exhaled, shaking slightly. She would need a warm cup of tea and a seat near the Dungeon’s fireplace when she got there. She prayed her husband would not be waiting up for her. She had no explanation to offer him.

She moved on, both feet squishing into the cold mud now. Her tights were ruined, and her dress was dripping with water. Hermione ignored the unpleasantness, determined to reach her goal. This is probably the worst night of my life, she thought.

It was at that moment that Hermione came upon Ron’s memorial. If she hadn’t been so pre-occupied with her stupid shoes, she would have noticed the gleaming white marble earlier, but the moon was covered by clouds now, and there was little that could be seen under the rainy night sky.

Hermione felt the sadness hit her.

Oh, Ron.

Ron.

How could she think tonight was the worst of her life, when just seven months ago Ron had died, cradled in her arms.

Oh, God. Ron, I’m so sorry!

Hermione walked slowly up the steps, the rain now pounded down upon her, so hard that she could barely see the memorial no matter how much she wiped at her eyes.

She reached the engraved headstone and ran her hands across the words:
She sank to her knees, leaning forward until her forehead touched the marble below.

“She sank to her knees, leaning forward until her forehead touched the marble below.

“I can’t even honour you…you’re gone, and I can’t even honour you properly,” Hermione choked out in a hushed tone. She felt a choked sob rise up within her chest.

She leant forward, pressing the front of her body flat against the marble, her hands clawing softly against it.

“I’m…I’m so sorry, Ron. I don’t know what I was thinking. Please forgive me. I’m so lost without you. I miss you so much. I don’t know how I could think of Lucius…how I could consider….”

Hermione shook as she wept now, allowing her throat to open. Somehow in the brutal, slicing cold it made it easier to release her emotion. Her chest heaved, and she stuttered out her words in between heaving sobs.

“Forgive me, Ron. I need your forgiveness for surviving. I need you to help me. How do I go on? I don’t know how to continue my life without you. Everything I do is wrong. I don’t know where to go, or what to do…I’m so lost.”

Hermione curled into a half-fetal position, slowly moving her open palm against the marble below, caressing it as if it were Ron’s own pale chest.

She swallowed.

“I’d do anything for you to be here now.”

A strange, calm suddenly washed over her. She felt like a parishioner that had just made a full Catholic confession. Ron knew what was in her heart. Of course. He always had. Maybe he could forgive her this transgression? If she could just be patient. Maybe he would give her a sign.

I’m not leaving him. He’ll give me a sign. Please, Ron!

Hermione had no desire to get up. She wept for several minutes, until her breathing finally slowed and her body ceased its quaking. She lay there, quietly, feeling the rain continue to splatter against her shivering back. She knew she should get up and go inside — but inside was nothing but the Dungeons, and her husband, Severus Snape, and God-awful half-explanations he would see right through.

Couldn’t she put that aside for just a little moment longer?

So she lay there.

The girl with the messy brown-haired bun wildly strewn about the pale marble stone. The ripped tights, barefoot. The short, sequin dress now torn and decidedly inelegantly plastered about her hips. Her mascara wet and feathered along her cheeks. Her red lipstick smeared. She waited and waited, pressing her ear against the cool marble.

Of course Ron couldn’t give her a sign. Ron’s gone. She knew it was time to get up. To go inside. But she couldn’t make herself move.

Inside was Snape. Recriminations.

Her awful husband. Who would only treat her more terribly once he learned she had gone to Lucius.
Malfy. Harry and Ginny were off to start their own lives. She had no friends inside Hogwarts’ Castle anymore. She was no longer a student there. It was nothing to her now; it was just a big empty building. And tomorrow she would be taken to Snape Hall — another big, empty building. Only this one without her memories of Ron.

She couldn’t bear it.

Hermione tried to shift her limbs, but the shivering cold had permeated them; she flexed her fingers and was surprised that she couldn’t feel them anymore. Despite the freezing temperatures, she felt an unusual warmth in her torso. I just can’t try, she thought.

I just don’t want to try anymore.

Oh, Ron, please. I’m so alone. I need you.

Hermione felt her cheek sag even more against the frozen marble. She couldn’t feel her feet anymore and there was a numbness spreading up her legs and arms, but what did it matter?

She was in no rush. She just couldn’t bring herself to care anymore. Maybe I can rest here, just for a little while?

She closed her eyes, and felt drowsiness overtake her.

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The next thing Hermione felt, she was being roughly grabbed by the shoulders and hoisted up. Her eyes snapped open. The cold, sneering gaze of her husband bore down upon her.

“No! no!” she whimpered, half-unconscious still. She struggled in his arms until he set her down. She turned to run but slipped on the marble, landing painfully on her hands and knees. She looked up at Severus Snape, who was staring down at her with fury.

“Come inside,” he commanded.

“No,” Hermione responded quietly. “Leave me be!”

“I don’t know what idiocy compelled you to go out in this dressed like that, but if you are going to attempt self-harm, again, I’d really rather be given some advanced notice.”

Hermione opened her mouth in shock. How dare he use what he’d seen in her mind from the Astronomy Tower against her! She rose up, wobbly in her bare feet.

“I’m not…I’m not trying to hurt myself, you moron! I was just…caught in the storm! Can’t you leave me alone when I’m paying my respects to Ron?”

Severus rolled his eyes and reached for her arm, abruptly pulling her towards him. He marched them both down the memorial steps and quickly headed for the Castle’s front entrance. Hermione was too weak to resist, physically, but she would be damned if she let him manhandle her again!

“Let me go! You…you disgusting brute! How dare you physically drag me about! Is this how you treat women? You’re no better than Malfoy! You know that, right?”

At that Snape stopped. He let her go, and Hermione tumbled backwards, landing on her bum in the muddy grass with a loud “plop!” Squinting through the rain, Hermione could see the rage grow in Snape’s eyes, fury glaring out at her from his dark, wet bangs, now plastered to the sides of his head.
“Seeing as you have been spending long hours with Lord Malfoy at the Ministry, I can only gather that you aren’t opposed to that sort of company!”

Hermione’s eyes widened. *How long has he known!*? She chewed her lip, nervously and glanced around at the mud, trying to consider what she should say. She had nothing left now. Nothing but the truth. She lifted her chin and locked eyes with him.

“Yes! I have had to work with him at the Ministry. I hated it at first, but I have been so lost and lonely, I appreciated having someone to talk to! Someone who actually would listen to me!”

Snape looked at the rainy sky above them. It was coming down even harder now, almost hailing.

“We will continue this discussion inside!”

Hermione slowly stood, her feet splashing about on the puddled lawn, trying to hold herself upright. She was thoroughly exhausted, but she was going to damn well make a stand.

“No! You can’t order me about! If I want to spend all fucking evening out here, I bloody well will!”

“You utter fool. You do realise you had fallen unconscious! Your lips are blue, your temperature is below 35 C, you’re inebriated, and you are suffering the initial stages of hypothermia. Had I left you out here, you surely would have frozen to death by morning!”

Hermione’s eyes widened. She could tell he wasn’t exaggerating. Why did he always have to be so right about everything?

“And what would you care if I had?”

Snape cocked his head, slightly confused. He shook some water droplets off his cloak. He needed to get them both inside, and the last thing he wanted was to let her engage him in another tedious discussion about feelings.

“I said, *Snape*, what would you care if I died? It would be perfect for you, actually. You’d be completely free again. No more loathsome marriage. No more me. Why don’t you just go back inside and leave me out here? No one would know. Hagrid will probably find me in the morning. They’ll assume it was suicide and bury me with Ron. If you’re lucky, people might actually feel sorry for you.”

Snape took a step towards her and flung his cloak behind him. It billowed outwards, shaking off a small fountain of raindrops. Hermione gasped and stepped backwards, tripping once more into a puddle. She was shivering again, and now siting in six inches of filthy, muddy rain water. She could feel her eyes welling up with tears again, her shoulders shaking with a combination of the cold and her despair. She couldn’t stop the sobs from erupting once more.

“Don’t you touch me!” she screamed.

She reached behind her and digging her hand into the puddle, pulled out a handful of wet mud. She pulled her right hand back and launched it at Snape as hard as she could. It landed with a wet splat on the front of his tunic.

“Stay the hell away from me!”

Snape raised an eyebrow. Surely his wife had gone completely insane. Brainy, swotty Hermione Granger was covered head-to-toe now in mud and grime and shrieking at him like some sort of wild banshee. He put up his hands to try to calm her.
“Hermione, please. We will go inside and speak rationally.”

Hermione gave a mad, sarcastic chuckle. To Snape it sounded more like a low howl of pain.

“There’s no being rational with you! I have tried and tried! You’re the cruelest, stubbornest man I have ever met! I thought you were cruel as a teacher, but as a husband you are truly made of stone. You are dead inside, Severus. ‘Death-Eater’ is the perfect word for what you are. I thought Lucius would break me, but it turns out there is more than one way to break a person. You. Have. Broken. Me.”

Hermione lifted herself up and lurched towards him, letting out a weird laugh.

“God, I’m so broken I have actually been really considering letting Lucius make love to me. I almost went to his bed tonight! If only to feel something. That is what you drove me to!”

Hermione reached forward and shoved Severus with her palms. He took a slight step backwards, but made no move to defend himself.

“Even if I knew he was only doing it to hurt you. You’re a bigger sadist than Lucius ever would have been. At least he would give me pleasure — treat me like an actual flesh-and-blood woman! Do you want to know the truth?! I wish you had let him have me after all. I would rather be Lady Malfoy than Lady Snape!”

Hermione shoved him again. Severus just watched her. He parted his lips — her words were…he didn’t know what to make of this. She shoved him again now. She looked down at her — her trembling, lithe form, dressed in the rags of a black dress. She was shaking all over, hysterically crying. He wasn’t sure he had ever seen a witch in such a state. It reminded him of the Mudblood women he had tortured…the way some of them looked when they were being dragged off into the next room to be raped by Dolohov or Pettigrew. He tried to shake off the memory.

Hermione was beating against his chest now, hitting him, slapping at him. He couldn’t bring himself to stop her.

“The way you treat me, I am not even a ‘Lady’! I just lie on my back and let you silently fuck me like some sort of…some sort of Mudblood whore!!”

She spat out the last phrase at him in disgust, pummeling his ribs with her weak fists. Her strength was rapidly edging away, but her anger was still hot.

“Admit, that’s all I am to you. I am just your whore! You’re a monster! I hate you! I hate you, Severus Snape! How can you treat me like nothing but a possession? You’re…you’re killing me!”

Finally spent and emotionally exhausted, Hermione collapsed against him, her cheek sagging heavily against his chest, her limbs aching. She hadn’t hurt him, not really. Her blows had been wild and mostly glancing, and anyway he had endured far, far worse in his life.

Severus had no idea what to say. And Hermione’s throat was almost completely raw from her screaming and crying. She swallowed painfully as the emotion wracked her spine.

The two people just stood there for several minutes in the mud and the rain.

The tall, dark man, silently standing in his black robes, arms at his sides. The young brown-haired woman, sobbing uncontrollably against his chest, her hands moving now to her face in shame and misery.
Finally, Snape took a step back and separated himself from Hermione. The brown witch looked up at him. She looked awful — her eyes were bloodshot, mascara smudged everywhere. Her cheeks were bright pink from the cold. Snot ran out of both nostrils and she had a smear of lipstick on her front tooth.

Snape slowly lifted up his right forearm and offered her his hand. “Please. Come inside?”

Hermione nodded through her tears, though she looked suspiciously at his hand. She did not take it. Instead, she moved slowly around him and limped her way to the Castle. It was slow-going, but Snape did not rush her. He walked several feet behind her, his eyes flicking up and down her person — examining her for scars, bruises, and anything else that needed healing. It was clear she had a sprained ankle, and she needed her body temperature raised. And quickly.

In the Dungeons, they entered the foyer. Snape moved to his bedroom door and unlocked it.

“Please wait,” he murmured, and then disappeared inside.

Hermione stood in the foyer, dripping water and mud everywhere. She felt numb inside. Utterly spent. Her brain was barely functioning. If it had, she would have been screaming in horror at all the things that had just left her mouth. She had just told him everything. He must think I’m mental.

A minute later, Snape re-appeared in the doorway and gestured for her to enter. Hermione followed him inside his bedroom, and towards his bathroom door.

Hermione hadn’t seen it before — she had been too alarmed at the discovery of the Virility Potion to take a quick peek. In fact, it was the only room in the suite besides his Potions Lab that she hadn’t yet seen.

At the bathroom doorway, a warm foggy mist greeted her. It smelled of eucalyptus and bergamot and was utterly delightful. Great swaths of steam floated like clouds about the room. Though it, Hermione could make out a stunning, large bathroom with green tile and gold fixtures. In the center was a large claw-footed tub. As the steam parted, she could see it had been filled to the brim and was loaded with bubbles, herbs, and various essential oils. Next to it was a table with a stack of fluffy white towels and an array of various shampoos, conditioners, sea salts, relaxation and healing potions.

“I have put some healing potions in the water. Please,” he gestured towards it.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously. His tone was soft, cautious. He seemed almost afraid of her response. He stood stiffly and pulled the front of his tunic down.

“I will have tea and hot soup waiting for you when you are done.”

With that, he turned and left, shutting the bathroom door behind him. If Hermione wasn’t so exhausted she would have been shocked. Did Severus Snape just run her a bath?!?

Merlin, how bad do I look? She turned to the mirrors above the double-sink next to the door and gasped.

It was bad. She suddenly realised why Snape had been so alarmed. She looked like she’d been living like an animagus in the Forbidden Forest for a week. Her right ankle ached and she could see it was swollen and bruised. Her legs were covered in small scratches and she had a skinned left knee. My poor body, she thought. Between her abuse with Lucius, the torture she’d endured from Bellatrix, and her own high level of stress, it was a wonder she was still functioning physically at all. Why did I do this to myself?
She sighed deeply, and slowly began to strip off the remains of her dress and stockings. She couldn’t bear to think the evening over right now, or how strange it was that she was undressing in Severus’s private bathroom.

All she wanted was to get into the warm tub and rub some Essence of Dittany on her achy skin.

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Thirty minutes later, Hermione emerged from the bath and instead of the towel, she picked up one of Snape’s lime green terry-cloth robes. There were several clean sets of them folded by the shower.

She didn’t really want to walk into the living room before Snape wearing nothing but a towel — especially after all the terrible things she’d said to him. Did I really say to him that he treated me like a whore? Hermione shook her head in disbelief. That was the least of it!, she thought. And what I’d said about Lucius! My God! She lifted one hand to her temple and rubbed it. Is there going to be hell to pay? She sighed. So far Snape was being kind to her, but she was terrified at what might await her in the living room.

She looked at herself in the mirror again as it de-steamed. Her lips had lost their bluish tint and gone back to their usual pale pink pallor, and with all the make-up washed away, there was no permanent damage underneath. Her small scratches and bruises were also completely healed.

Nothing bruised but my pride, she thought, sarcastically.

Her teeth had finally stopped chattering and she glanced down at her legs. Whatever healing potions Snape had put into the water had worked wonders. Her ankle was almost totally healed, though it was a tad tender when she put a bit of weight on it.

She glanced down at her fingers and toes, flexing them. Thank Merlin there was no frostbite. She quite enjoyed having all of her digits. It could have been so much worse. She felt the alcohol had mostly absorbed into her system, and she didn't feel drunk anymore, just a little light-headed.

She exited the bathroom and Snape’s bedroom, and walked down the hallway. She paused in the archway. There was no light in the living room but for a large roaring fire in the fireplace. The aquarium-window was dark and half-covered, with only a few shadowy outlines of fish moving to and fro.

Severus was in his favorite green wingback chair by the fire, facing away from her. He wasn’t drinking firewhisky. Instead, next to him stood a teapot and a cup of steaming black tea.

He sat leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his fingertips pressed together thoughtfully under his chin. He was simply staring into the flames. For a moment Hermione wondered if he was performing a spell of some type, but then she realized he was simply lost in his own mind.

She entered quietly and walked over to him.

He spoke without looking at her. “The elves brought minestrone. It’s on the table if you’re hungry.”

“Thank you. But I’m fine. I feel better. Thank you for the bath.”

He made a small noise in acknowledgment, but still declined to look at her.

The silence settled again between them.

Hermione grasped the back of his chair. She supposed she should take the matching chair opposite
him, but for some reason she found herself moving to the thick rug in front of the fire and kneeling in front of it. It was warmer on the floor. It was funny. She used this fireplace each morning and each evening to go to the Ministry, but had never really enjoyed an evening in front of it. This part of the suite had always seemed to her Snape’s domain. She’d always felt so unwelcome.

She raised her hands towards the fire, palms facing front, and basked in the warmth against her fingers as she stretched and flexed them. It filled her with relief. She sat back onto the rug, tucking her legs under her near Severus’s feet and turned her neck to glance up at him.

He simply continued to stare into the flames, ignoring her.

Hermione had to say something. She didn’t know where to begin. She didn’t want to start an argument, or set him off. She didn’t want to annoy him or frustrate him. She didn’t want to cause him worry, or anguish. She wanted for him what she wanted for herself now — peace.

She couldn’t bear the trauma of their marriage anymore. It had burst her open tonight, and now all she could do was give her husband a simple apology. The things she said had been true — her true emotions — but she regretted hitting him, and the way she had attacked him. It had come from a dark place inside of her, and she knew it wasn’t (entirely) his fault.

She cleared her throat, finally.

“I…I am sorry, Severus.”

He said nothing. Severus was too disturbed by his own lack of clarity.

He had been in complete and utter anguish at the idea that Hermione might die. Not because he had romantic feelings for her, he thought with a sneer, but something about the evening had re-opened a vulnerability in him.

When she had suggested he would be pleased if she died -- that he should just let her succumb to hypothermia and that would make him happy….Gods.

He had spotted her form, prostrate on the memorial to Ronald Weasley and had found himself running over to her as fast as he could, taking the steps three at a time.

He had been truly scared. He had not felt anything like that since the night he had held Lily’s lifeless body in his arms. And the echo of that moment terrified him. The powerlessness. The feeling that he would not be able to protect her, that he would fail her. For a moment, he had wondered if she were dead. If she had committed suicide at Ron’s graveside. He had seen inside her mind before they had married. He had seen a grief, a deep unhappiness, an emptiness, and had glimpsed her thoughts of suicide. But knowing her as he had since she was a child, he had never imagined she was the kind of person who would actually have gone through with it.

Still, in those moments before he had checked her pulse and run a quick diagnostic spell above her unconscious form, he had questioned…and the fear had shaken him, re-awoken things he thought he had long-since buried.

If he hadn’t found Hermione in time… If it had been too late…Severus realized he would not have been able to bear it.

Not a second time.

It would have been unbearable, even though she was his wife in name-only (and body-only if he admitted to it). So, he stared in the flames, and considered what that feeling meant. And what the
things she had said to him meant.

Hermione didn’t know what else to say in the silence.

“May I sit here with you? I don’t want to bother you….”

Still, Severus said nothing. After a moment, Hermione began to lift herself to go.

“You may stay.”

Relieved he was finally communicating, Hermione leaned back down, folding her legs beneath her robe and wrapping the upper folds around her breast.

“I don’t want to cause you pain,” she spoke aloud quietly, looking into the fire.

He sighed.

“I believe you.”

Hermione thought back to the day she had burst into his classroom and begged him to marry her, to save her from Lucius Malfoy.

Those same words had brought her so much relief, so much comfort. They gave her the exact same feeling now. Why was that? Why was it so damned important to her that Severus Snape believe in her good intentions, believe in her honesty, believe in her pure-heartedness? She didn’t know. Perhaps she still was a child, seeking her teacher’s seal of approval.

Her mouth opened, and she found a voice speaking in her voice, but it wanted to say things she hadn’t expressed to anyone else. Not to Harry. Not to Ginny. She couldn’t keep it in.

The voice was quiet, low, but calm. More of the truth that needed speaking.

“I couldn’t leave Ron…when he died. At the Battle. He was already dead when I reached him. I thought about… still think about… what it would have been like if he had still been alive when I had gotten to him. If I had run a little faster, maybe I could have wrapped my arms around him and he… he could have felt me with him as he died, he could have felt my heart beating, and he would have known how much I loved him…And he wouldn’t have died without my arms around him…”

Hermione could feel two large tears, one from each eye, roll down her cheeks. She didn’t brush them away. She kept staring into the mesmerizing orange and yellow flames.

Severus moved his gaze from the fire to the back of her head. He wanted to silence her, to tell her he didn’t have time to listen to her inane prattle and ask her why-couldn’t-she-let-him-be-after-the-evening-she’d-put-him-through, etc, or one of his usual effective reprimands, but her voice had somehow found a tiny crack within his heart.

It had so quietly seeped in and grabbed ahold of something and he couldn’t remove it, couldn’t stop listening.

Maybe it was her mention of wrapping her arms around her dying lover as he passed from this world to the next….Lily, he thought. Lily. Lily.

Hermione continued, hypnotised by the flames.

“...I sat with my arms around him for an hour….Maybe longer. I don’t remember who finally pulled me away. I wonder if it was long enough. Maybe I should have held him longer, because after that I
wasn’t able to touch him again.”

More tears rolled from her eyes. But the voice stayed calm. She didn’t sob. She wasn’t hysterical. *This has to come out*, her inner voice said. She didn’t know what would happen if it never came out. *I would probably be like Severus*, she suddenly realized. She took another breath as another tear dropped. This time she was making the conscious decision to continue speaking. To confide.

“I think about him constantly…,” she whispered.

“When I wake up, when I go to sleep. I think about what our wedding day would have been like, where we would have lived, what our marriage would have been like, us in bed together, what our fights would have been about…I run through one scenario and then I cross it out and create a new one…I never knew before how much my mind could be my enemy…”

Severus could not take much more. The tiny crack had turned into a wedge. He felt like he was in physical pain. He grimaced. He couldn’t ask her to stop, but the pain seemed to be growing in his heart the more she spoke. He had to do something to stop it.

He lifted a hand out and placed it, carefully, cautiously, on the back of her head. Her hair was almost completely dry from the heat of the fire. It was soft, not frizzy. His fingers moved deeper into the chestnut curls until they connected with her scalp.

Hermione leaned back into his fingers. The tips of them began to move in a slow rhythm, gently circling the back of her skull. Severus didn’t know what he was doing, but Hermione had finally stopped talking, and the pain in his chest had lessened slightly. He lifted his other hand to join the first.

At the extra pressure, Hermione tilted her head back even more and closed her eyes. His were the most calming hands she had ever felt. The pressure inside her skull dissipated with every stroke of his thumb. She breathed out deeply. She felt…unburdened.

As she tilted her head back, Severus saw the tears that had fallen onto her cheeks slide sideways off her face.

He had seen her cry many times, but he had never seen her control herself before. She hadn’t whined or gone hysterical. She was simply… *experiencing* what was happening inside of her. What was really happening inside of her.

Severus realised that he wasn’t sure he’d ever done that. Or at least he hadn’t done it in twenty years.

Hermione leaned another inch back. Severus moved one hand closer to the nape of her neck and was gently pushing into the tight muscles on either side with his thumb and forefinger. Hermione felt like she was going to fall asleep in his hands. She felt so drowsy. She couldn’t help but whisper one last confession:

“I didn’t want to hurt myself…but… I couldn’t leave him tonight. The guilt was too much…”

It suddenly occurred to Severus that he had been only two years older than Hermione when Lily had died.

He had never made that connection before.

The thought of Lily distracted him for a moment, and he stopped massaging Hermione’s skull. She slowly opened her eyes and moved her head back upright.
She turned around slowly and looked up at him a moment later, blinking her soft, brown eyes into his flinty black ones. He wasn’t sure he had ever seen her so...present before. He was unnerved that he had massaged her neck the way he had — there was always the danger that she would misinterpret...but even he wasn’t sure why exactly he had had the impulse to soothe her with his hands. He didn’t want her to think he was trying to use her for his own physical pleasure. It had sickened him when she’d screamed that he used her like she was a “Mudblood whore,” but she wasn’t wrong. He’d underestimated Hermione’s survivor’s guilt. He’d never believed anyone could feel it anywhere near what he had felt. What he had carried with him, year after year.

He looked down at Hermione. She seemed so steady, so unflappable, not remotely concerned about what had just happened. She swallowed, sensing something pass between them. An understanding.

Hermione readjusted her robe as she slowly stood up, never breaking eye contact. There was something in his eyes she had never seen before — he looked...exposed somehow, vulnerable, despite the fact that only she had dried tears on her face.

Severus refolded his hands and held her gaze. His body language was carefully controlled as always. Hermione gave an almost imperceptible nod. There was so much more she wanted to say to him, but she was completely exhausted. She needed sleep.

“Goodnight, Severus.”

He gave her a small nod back.

And as she turned and exited the room, she realised a very important thing, and she exhaled in relief. She was no longer afraid of her husband.
I know it was a long wait, but maybe the length of this chapter makes up for it? :)

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Late the next morning, Hermione and Snape rode in a carriage pulled by thestrals across the Yorkshire countryside to Snape Hall.

Hermione had not been too surprised at the creatures, knowing that they pulled the carriages from Hogsmeade Station to Hogwarts, but she was surprised that they were so prevalent outside of Hogwarts. It felt strange, traditional, and she felt more than little weird riding in what looked like an 18th century coach.

She and Snape had awoken early and traveled from Hogsmeade to York by train, and now were proceeding inland along the English moorland by carriage. She’d only briefly wondered where Snape Hall was, and now as far as she could assess they were somewhere near the Yorkshire Dales. She wasn’t terribly familiar with the north-east of England, and the countryside outside the carriage both alarmed and intrigued her in its barren beauty. The entire journey seemed so old-fashioned, but she submitted to it. The entire morning in fact had been a strange exercise in submission.

She had slept in despite the fact that she hadn’t packed; Severus hadn’t waked her, and when she had finally awoken at 9 o’clock, she had discovered the elves had packed the last of her things in her trunk, and all that was waiting for the departure was for her to dress.

She was a bit hungover, and when she emerged from her bedroom and padded into the kitchen for a small breakfast, she had been surprised that Snape was seated at their dining room table calmly, an Ante-kraipálé potion next to him. He’d pushed it towards her and suggested she consume it all, as her weekend had been replete with over-indulgence. He hadn’t been unkind, merely emphatic, and Hermione took his suggestion and the potion, almost instantly feeling better. Her foggy brain had cleared and she had felt energetic and alert.

Snape had glanced down at her pajamas — this was certainly not the attire in which to introduce herself to the servants at Snape Hall, and he suggested she take the elves’ suggestions regarding her appearance. Hermione was still in a bit of a daze from the evening before and simply shyly nodded.

A few minutes later, she was shocked to find herself bedecked in white, opulent dress-robcs — they were cinched at the waist and rather “bridal.” The robes had long fitted sleeves edged in lace that fell elegantly over her wrists, and even more lace was gathered in a bustle around her hips and bottom. The bodice was fitted, though (thank Merlin) no corset was required, and the top was cut in an attractive V-neck.

She felt like Queen Victoria. Or a wedding-cake topper. It seemed like far too much.

But Snape had seemed pleased at her appearance, and he had placed her hand on his forearm and after a very brief goodbye in front of the Hogwarts gates with Dumbledore and McGonagall, Snape had guided her to Hogsmeade Station, where their trunks were summarily loaded into their train.
Hermione had watched out the window as Hogwarts Castle had faded into the distance in a plume of smoke from the train. *Goodbye for now*, she thought. She tried not to get sentimental, and she was pleased that no tears fell from her eyes. Harry and Ginny and Luna and, in fact, *all* of her friends had departed. It was time she mentally said her “goodbys” too. It was only the idea that Ron would be left behind that gave her pause... but she had tamped that feeling down and focused on her husband.

It had taken them less than 3 hours to reach York, and Hermione had dozed intermittently, gazing out the glass window at the scenery. Snape sat across from her, a copy of *Potions Monthly* upon his lap. She would steal glances at him as he read. She wanted to say something to him, but she was at a complete loss at how best to broach what had happened between them the night before.

She was desperate not to argue, but had a million questions. How did he *feel* about her admission about going to meet Lucius? Her accusations against him? Was he angry with her? Had he forgiven her? How would they proceed in this marriage? She was also dying to ask him about Snape Hall. He hadn’t told her anything about the place.

Yet, every time she opened her mouth to speak, she clamped it shut again. She was uncertain. Yes, he’d been kind to her when he had stroked her hair the night before, and he had truly *listened* to her feelings about Ron. For that she was deeply grateful. But she hadn’t said more to him than “please” and “thank you” since they’d left Hogwarts, and she didn’t know how to proceed.

Now that they were riding in the carriage in closer quarters, Hermione couldn’t stop herself from saying *something*. *Anything!* She measured her dark-eyed husband sitting opposite her in the carriage.

“Why didn’t we simply apparate there?,” she ventured, quietly, at last. “I assumed we’d do so from York Station. I mean, the carriage is beautiful, obviously, but…certainly it was a surprise.”

Snape closed his periodical and set it down. He’d been wondering how long it would take before he was peppered with questions. Frankly, he was rather impressed she’d made it this long.

“It is not the tradition,” Severus replied. “Purebloods view the Summer Season as a chance to indulge in the traditions of the past. Rest assured, we will not be simply Floo-ing and Apparating at will this summer. It is considered rude.”

“But what about my job at the Ministry?“

“I have arranged for one fireplace at Snape Hall in the parlour to be connected for your use. But rest assured, when it comes to socializing with *le beau monde,* we shall be obeying the traditional custom. I have informed Mott your hours shall be more limited, from 9 o’clock to 4 o’clock. Supper is always served a 5 o’clock, and you need time to change beforehand.”

Hermione felt her cheeks flush in slight outrage. *How dare he interfere with my career?!* But, from what she could gather, a career was a rare thing among Pureblood wives. She might achieve more if she bit her tongue… And anyway, she wanted to wait until she had assessed things at Snape Hall for herself.

She dipped her head politely. “I see.”

Hermione waited to see if he would continue, but Snape merely folded his long arms across his chest and stared out the window, lost to his thoughts.

*At least he doesn’t seem angry at all with me for last night*, she thought.
Several minutes later, Hermione stared out in surprise as they pulled up a long drive to Snape Hall. It was exactly as it appeared in the etching she’d seen in Snape’s study, although seeing it in real life made her gasp.

The gorgeous Palladian-style house was three-stories and had a long double-staircase leading up to a grand front door. White marble columns stood on either side, perfectly symmetrical. It was larger than Malfoy Manor, which Hermione had not been prepared for. Snape had always seemed to her as a rather blunt and rude man; she couldn’t imagine the idea that he grew up in such a refined house, surrounded by servants. It was incongruous. He was elegant in his movements, but not ostentatious in his dress. She had never considered that he might be truly wealthy.

Her mouth fell open as Snape exited the carriage and turned around to offer her his hand. Footman were unloading their trunks and baggage, and Snape led her up one side of the staircase. At the top stood a short, prim-looking witch in her seventies wearing black robes with a starched lace collar. Her face was severe but her eyes were kind as they apprised Hermione. She reminded her somewhat of Professor McGonagall. A large ring of keys were tied on one hip.

The witch gave a low curtsy to them as they reached her. Snape bowed in return, and Hermione felt compelled to respond with an awkward dip.

“Lord Snape, we are pleased to have you return.”

“Madam Kemp, thank you. May I introduce my wife, Lady Hermione Snape?”

Hermione gave another awkward curtsy. Madam Kemp looked bemused, but gave her a small nod.

“We are pleased to finally meet you. Come, you both must be eager to get inside and get warm.”

Snape and Hermione followed Kemp into the house. Hermione was stunned by the entry hall. The floor was Jacobean marble — black and white in checkerboard pattern. Coats of armor, tapestries, and enormous paintings depicting what she assumed were Snape’s ancestors lined the mahogany walls. A row of two dozen servants — both wizard and elf — were lined up alongside one wall. Hermione tried not to gape as Kemp led her along the line, introducing her to each of them. She forgot everyone’s name as soon as they said it.

For the most part, everyone seemed kind — but Hermione felt self-conscious. She was suddenly very aware that they were all examining her from head to toe. They’d been awaiting her arrival, no doubt wondering who their master’s young wife was that had been forced upon him by the Marriage Law. Behind her, she heard one of the younger elves emit a brief giggle. Were they making fun of her? Did they know she was Muggleborn? Hermione clutched her hands together nervously, and felt relieved when Snape periodically placed a hand at the small of her back.

After the introductions, Kemp dismissed the staff and Snape took his leave of Hermione.

“Madam Kemp will see you settled. I shall join you at dinner.”

He gave her a nod and then turned on his heels, his robes billowing behind him as he ascended the large mahogany staircase at the far end of the hall.

Kemp turned and examined Hermione up and down, then turned on her heel. “Follow me. I shall show you the house.”

Hermione followed Kemp through hallways, along back staircases, and down into cellars until she had glimpsed just about every room in the Hall. She had attempted to keep count, but gave up once they hit 50.
It was lavish.

The formal ballroom took up nearly the entire width of the West Wing of the Hall and was covered in gilded mirrors and sparkling crystal chandeliers. It reminded Hermione of something from Versailles.

“May I ask — how old is the Hall?” Hermione wondered aloud as they left yet another Long Gallery full of Greek and Roman sculptures and evocative Italian paintings of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Large pieces of pottery and jewelry from the Ancient World sat under glass cases. Evidently, someone in Snape’s bloodline had been quite the art collector.

“Snape Hall has been in the Snape family for over three hundred years, although it has obviously been remodeled extensively over time to suit the taste of various Lords and Ladies. The facade, for example, was redone completely in 1745. The East Wing is the oldest section. Your bedchamber is there.”

“I…see. And how long have you…”

Hermione wasn’t sure what the proper expression was. “Worked” here? She felt like she had taken a trip to a foreign country where she didn’t speak the language.

Madam Kemp smiled at her. “I have lived at Snape Hall since I was a child. My mother was the housekeeper before me. I grew up helping in the kitchens.”

“I see. And did Sna-…er…Sev-…um, my Lord. Did he grow up here?”

Madam Kemp paused, looking thoughtfully out a window.

“He did spend some of his childhood here, yes. Come.”

Overall, Hermione felt desperately intimidated by the Hall. Not because Madam Kemp was unkind, but its grandiosity was staggering. How did Snape move back and forth between a place as large as this and his, by comparison, shockingly small suite in the Hogwarts’ Dungeons? It made no sense to her. Snape’s personality just doesn’t fit with all this privilege, she thought.

She felt relieved and delighted when Madam Kemp showed her the Library — it was larger than the one at Malfoy Manor, though was rather dusty and looked as if it had gone unused for a long time. Sheets covered all the sofas and chairs, and the curtains over the windows were drawn. Many of the rooms in the Hall were like this.

“Can we…uncover everything?”

Madam Kemp arched an eyebrow. “You wish to put the Library to use?”

“Yes! If… that’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course not. I will have the servants air it out.”

“Thank you.”

After another half an hour of walking, Hermione could feel herself growing tired. She yawned, involuntarily and Madam Kemp stopped.

“Forgive me, I am sure you are tired from this journey. You have a good sense of the house now, I hope?”
Hermione nodded.

“I live in a cottage on the grounds. Any of the House-Elves can fetch me if you have need of anything, though they will attend you in the evenings. The human staff only work during the daytime.”

“Thank you for showing me everything.”

“I shall take you to your bedchamber.”

Up another flight of stairs and into a longer hallway, at last they came to a large door with a brass handle. Madam Kemp turned it and Hermione stepped inside.

Her trunk was in the middle of the floor waiting for her. The room was done up in a light pink and cream color. It very much reminded Hermione of Narcissa Malfoy’s bedroom in Malfoy Manor. There was a large King-sized four-poster dripping in satin and brocade, and various other elegant furnishings — a vanity table, a large wardrobe, a desk, and a white marble fireplace.

“Your lady’s maid is Bitsy. She’s a sweet, sensitive elf who will do everything you ask of her. You need only call. Welcome to Snape Hall, Lady Snape.”

“Oh, you can call me Hermione.”

Kemp blanched.

“I am afraid that would be inappropriate. You must always be referred to by your title. The Summer Season is a time to respect the old customs.”

*My title?!*, Hermione thought. This Pureblood world was certainly different than anything she had expected. She was beginning to understand how Snape described it as restrictive.

“Perhaps, ‘Lady Hermione’, then?”

Hermione couldn’t quite adjust her brain around the idea of having ‘Snape’ as a surname.

Kemp nodded.

“Very well, Lady Hermione. As you wish. Good afternoon.”

Madam Kemp gave a small curtsy and turned and exited the room. At last Hermione was alone.

_Sweet Circe_, she thought, *what a day!*, as she walked over to the vanity table. On it was a sterling silver vanity set. She picked up the brush and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was an unruly mess, and despite her beautiful white robes, she knew she did not look the part of “Lady of the Manor.” No wonder the servants had looked at her with such curiosity.

*I am definitely not of their world*, she thought.

As she brushed out her bushy mane, she noticed an engraving in the back of the brush. She turned it over. Embossed in silver were the initials “ES.” *Who is ES?*, she wondered, replacing the brush on the table.

Beyond the vanity table was a large picture window. Though it was the only window in the room, it was wide and had a charming tufted loveseat at the base of it. Hermione went over and kneeled on the loveseat, looking out at the grounds, resting her forearms on the sill. She opened the latch and swung one of the frames open.
She inhaled the crisp summer air. The grounds were breathtaking. She gazed into the distance and wondered where the boundary to Snape’s land was. Everywhere she turned there looked to be interesting things to explore — fountains, greenhouses, a rose garden, an orchard, a maze. The sky was overcast, but it did nothing to diminish the charm of the gardens.

She tried to imagine a Baby Snape growing up here, playing in this garden. She stifled a laugh. She couldn’t imagine he was ever truly carefree as a child — he was so serious and tortured as an adult.

*What was his upbringing like here?*

Madam Kemp had shown her the nursery and several children’s bedrooms, but they all looked like they hadn’t been used in a long, long time, and none of them struck her as particularly *Snape-ish*.

She heard a *crack* behind her and turned to see a shy little female elf with a pink ribbon around her neck.

“I is Bitsy, Mistress. May I put away your things?”

“Hello, Bitsy. Yes, I remember you from downstairs. I’m Hermione and I hope we can be friends.”

“Oh, I know!” Bitsy exclaimed. “You is very popular among elves, Mistress!”

Hermione laughed.

“Lord Snape has invited you for an early supper downstairs if you are available.”

“Yes. Tell him I’ll be down shortly.”

Bitsy grinned and was gone with another *crack*.

Hermione looked about her room. She glanced at herself in a long mirror next to the vanity. Should she change for dinner? Was what she was wearing formal-enough?

Hermione felt adrift in this enormous room. *How am I supposed to know these ridiculous customs?*

Snape had mocked her when she was reading up on Pureblood etiquette in anticipation of her marriage to Lucius, but how she wished she had that book with her now! Hermione sincerely hoped Snape didn’t expect her to go to work at the Department of Mysteries dressed like this! At that she’d draw the line.

She moved over to the wardrobe and opened it. It was full of rich dresses and robes — dozens and dozens of them. She didn’t have time to look at all of them, but they were clearly brand new. *Are these mine?*, she wondered, thinking back on the large trousseau that Lucius had ordered for her.

*It’s like I’m being bought,* she thought. She flashed back on the word “possession” from their marriage contract and shuddered.

Closing the wardrobe, she turned and noticed a door by the fireplace partially tucked behind a tapestry.

Going to it, she opened it to find a pleasant, cozy, immaculately-furnished sitting room. Directly across from her door on the other side of the room was a matching door.

*To Snape’s bedroom,* she realized. She was starting to understand the lay-out of these home and how it reflected their traditional ways. Her parents had always shared a bedroom. Almost all Muggle
It really is like being in a Bronte novel, Hermione marveled. Except Heathcliff actually loves Catherine, she thought, with a sigh. And Heathcliff doesn’t act like Catherine is physically revolting and doesn’t treat her like he’d rather be anywhere but in her bed. Oh Merlin, does that make me Isabella?!

Hermione had to face the truth of her situation. No, it wasn’t like one of those silly romantic books from her childhood at all. Muggle stories always were more romantic than Wizarding ones. Looking about the room, she was beginning to understand why. Have none of the Pureblood husbands and wives ever married for love?

Not wanting to make Snape wait any longer, Hermione closed the door to the sitting room and made her way out her room and down the large central staircase.

When she entered the dining room, Snape was seated at one end of a long oak table. Silver candlesticks decorated it with a long embroidered runner and bowls of fruit. The room was grand, but didn’t feel as dark and ominous as the Malfoy dining room had been in the Manor. He rose and pulled the chair next to him out, indicating for her to sit.

The elves appeared with a few simple dishes of prime rib, mash, and vegetables, and Hermione eagerly dug into it.

Snape poured himself a glass of red wine from the decanter.

“Château Lafite?” he offered.

Hermione nodded as he poured. The last elf departed the room, and finally they were left alone in silence.

Snape was still wearing his traditional black tunic, buttoned to his chin, and black pants, but had removed his traveling robes. She wondered what he had been doing while Madam Kemp had been giving her a tour.

His silver wedding band caught her attention as she watched him lift his crystal wine goblet to his lips and take a small sip.

His dark eyes watched her caustiously, noting her gaze.

He set the wine glass down and cleared his throat.

“I trust Madam Kemp has shown you the house. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, it’s beautiful. I’m still trying to take it all in.”

Snape nodded.

“It’s a rather absurdly large house, but as the last to bear the name of “Snape” it falls to me to keep it up. Most of the Pureblood families return to their traditional estates during the summertime. You can expect a variety of invitations to come your way—teas, garden parties, that sort of rubbish. The Summer Season is generally a time for the older families to socialise amongst themselves. Madam Kemp will assist you if you have any questions.”

“And will you be attending these events?”
Snape sniffed the air and leaned back in his chair.

“I shall do my level best to avoid them. The Midsummer’s Eve Ball is the primary celebration — similar to the Yule Ball at Hogwarts — and we shall both be required to attend it. But I do ask that you ask me before holding any group activities here. The last thing I want is for a gaggle of foolish fops and ninnies to be parading around my home. I value my privacy. In fact, while the entire Hall and grounds are at your disposal, my personal Study on the second floor is off-limits to you as is my Potions Laboratory in the cellar. Provided you are extremely careful, you may have access to my Greenhouses and Storerooms, but you may not pick or borrow anything without my express permission.”

“I understand.”

Hermione took a cautious sip of the wine. It was delicious. She took another much longer sip, swishing the red liquid around in her mouth.

Snape eyed her as she “hmmmed” in hearty approval. He lifted an eyebrow.

“You may want to go slowly. After the weekend you’ve had?”

All the color drained from Hermione’s face. She set her wine goblet down. Here we go again…, she thought. But as she looked up, Snape’s face wasn’t stormy in the slightest. Instead, there was the hint of a smirk playing across his mouth.

Relieved, she smiled back at him. She took a deep breath. She could wait no longer. There was so much she wanted to say to the dark wizard, her impossible husband.

“I…wanted to thank you again for the bath last night. And for finding me in the rain. You were right — I could have died of hypothermia. When you made the appointment for me at St. Mungo’s, I was furious, because I, too, value my privacy. But you were right about that, too. I was traumatised by Ron’s death, and the suddenness of the Marriage Law, and by what Bellatrix did to me…has done to me. And I was feeling very…well, lost, I suppose. And confused. So I think that is why, with Lucius —“

Snape lifted a palm to stop her. Unless she was finally going to admit to her involvement in Dolohov’s murder, he didn’t much want to hear her excuses. And frankly, he could admit to himself, the last thing he wanted to hear about were her tête-à-têtes with the pompous sadist that was Lucius Malfoy. She’d been right that Lucius could very well have been attempting to seduce her merely to irritate him. Lucius was a bored aristocrat. What else did he have left to do with himself? Nevertheless, Snape knew he had to make some effort. Hermione had been at the brink last night, and he couldn’t bear a similar episode.

“I... apologize for my anger at finding out that Lucius was working with you at the Ministry — that you had been seeing him. This is an arranged marriage, and not one you would have ever wanted. But to be clear, what I will not accept moving forward is willful deceit.”

“Truly, I didn’t mean to—“

“—Legally you are my property, and I am entitled to know your whereabouts and with whom you are spending your time. However, you should probably know that traditionally many Pureblood wives take lovers. You will see it soon enough in Pureblood society. It is only natural as we do not marry for love. If you intend to take Lucius Malfoy as your lover, I will accept it. He and I will negotiate the circumstances. I cannot say I would in any sense approve of your choice, but it is yours to make.”
Hermione’s eyes practically bulged out of her skull.

“Negotiate the circumstances?!?”

“Certainly.”

“And if you were to take a lover? Would I negotiate those ‘circumstances’?!”

Snape snickered, slightly.

“Of course not. If you have an official paramour, it is my duty as a husband to know who this wizard is, so your physical safety is assured. Were I to take an official maîtresse, you would be courteously informed. However, I would be well within my rights to keep it from you entirely. Most Lords bend over backwards to ensure their Lady-wives never cross paths with their maîtresses.”

Hermione stared down into her food. Surely, these Pureblood rituals were about as arse-backwards as anything she could imagine. He would do her the courtesy of informing her if he was going to screw someone else?!

She wanted to throw her plate against the wallpaper and scream in frustration, but she knew that it would achieve absolutely nothing. This talk of having “official” lovers was disgusting to her. Was Snape planning to have a maîtresse in the future? Seeing Clara in Lucius’s bed last night had made her feel truly physically sick, and she and Lucius were not even lovers!

The idea of Severus consummating their marriage each Saturday night and then spending other nights with another witch and then returning to their marriage bed…ugh…I can’t even contemplate….

She needed to stay calm. Negotiate, Hermione. That’s what works with Severus. Don’t just assume the worst. Think about what you want. Think like a Slytherin, she thought.

She took a breath and then lifted her eyes to Severus’s discerning onyx orbs.

Just be honest, she thought. Mum always used to say that honesty calls forth honesty.

“Severus…,” she began, tentatively, “This is a lot for me to adjust to, but I want you to know that I meant what I said before. I don’t want to give up on our marriage. I wish our consummations were less…difficult, but I promise I am not blaming you. I know I have been rash and argumentative. But I… I want to try to be a good wife to you.”

Severus took this information in. What more did she want from him? He, too, was sick of their clashes and would prefer a little more harmony. But what would he have to give her in order for that to happen? He leaned back and clasped his hands together, scrutinizing his little wife.

Hermione sat before him in her white robes still looking so much like a child-bride. He knew he had hurt her, but he couldn’t give her what she truly desired. He could only give her the truth, or a semblance of it, but he needed her to speak plainly.

“Hermione, describe what you want in our marriage.”

She took a deep breath, her brown eyes gazing into the middle-distance as she carefully considered her response.

“I… I want to have free, easy communication. I don’t want to simply read aloud to one another. I’d like to at least be able to talk over meals. Not feel like I have to walk on eggshells, or that you’ll
always roll your eyes at me or insult me. Perhaps we could discuss my work at the Ministry, or your Potions research? I have truly always admired your intellect, and if I promise to be polite and keep my pestering to a minimum, it shouldn’t be too much of a burden on you.”

“Agreed. Granted. What else?”

Hermione gathered herself, encouraged.

“I want your promise that you won’t make me quit the Ministry. It scared me when you went behind my back and arranged this day off with Mott and limited my hours. I’m afraid of having no more self-determination.”

“I see.”

“You know my personality, much as you don’t like it. When you tighten the reins on me, you know I don’t react well. But this way, if we can talk freely and you don’t treat me like a student anymore, I think I will…well, I will try my best not to embarrass you in Pureblood society. I know that as a Muggleborn, it’s not an ideal situation for you…”

Severus leaned forward, his eyes flashing and his baritone deepening.

“Let me make this clear, if I am ever angered or embarrassed by you in the future, it shall never be because of your blood status, Hermione, but rather because of your own choice of behavior. You should know enough about my past to know that is true.”

Hermione bit her lower lip.

“I believe you. Now, promise you’ll stay true to the contract. You won’t interfere with my career?”

“You have my word. The floo in the downstairs parlour has been connected. Your days are your own.”

Hermione felt more than a little relieved. So far this wasn’t going too badly. They weren’t screaming at one another, she thought sarcastically. Snape tilted his face and looked down his long nose at her as she nibbled a piece of meat thoughtfully.

“Go on. Anything else you require of a marriage?”

“I guess it’s not a requirement, but I had hoped to have…intimacy. Of a kind.”

Severus let out a deep sigh that to Hermione’s ears sounded almost like a groan. She felt her heart sink. She wished he wouldn’t act like their time together was so distasteful.

“You desire intimacy, more connection between us, and I desire privacy, the ability to live my life unencumbered. Pray tell, oh, She-Of-Perfect-NEWTs, how do you suggest we overcome such a conundrum?”

Git, Hermione couldn’t help but think. But she wasn’t going to dance around it anymore. Not after last night.

“Sex,” Hermione breathed out.

Severus lifted an elbow and placed it on the table, resting three fingers against his temple and leaning his head against them with a subtle shrug of his shoulders. No doubt what was coming next would be a list of ways in which he was deficient as the romantic lover of her dreams. This should be
Hermione swallowed. He looked bored beyond belief, as if he already knew 99% of what she was about to say. Nonetheless, Hermione vowed, she would say it!

“I need a little more emotional intimacy. We don’t have to spend our work or leisure time together. Our shared meals are enough on a daily basis to fulfill the requirement, clearly, and that should allow you plenty of time to continue your Potions research and have your privacy. I won't interfere with your life here. But I…I can’t be shut out like this...in the bedroom. When we're together, the way we…”

Hermione trailed off and she felt her cheeks becoming inflamed. This was absolutely mortifying. How do you tell your husband he is supposed to want you? It felt unnatural. She knew she was immature and physically scarred, but weren't wizards supposed to be lining up for her? Wasn't she, allegedly, in the "prime of her life."

She sighed. No, of course they'd never been "lining up" for her. Her true love had been ripped from her. Her fantasies had been dashed, and all that was left was the truth between herself as she stood now and her husband of less than two months, no matter how embarrassing it was for her to articulate.

She gnawed briefly her lower lip for a moment, and then continued, folding her arms in front of her, steadfastly.

“I'm young, Severus. And you know I wasn’t exactly...experienced when we...well, when we were married...I know it was a sacrifice for you to fulfill the contract, and I have felt that guilt ever since our wedding day. I have tried to be what you want me to be when we're...together, but I can’t live my life not...experiencing…”

Snape lifted his head, annoyed.

“As I told you, you are free to select a paramour to fulfill your desires.”

“Please, listen! I don’t want to just jump into another wizard’s bed, Severus!”

“Isn’t that what you almost did last night?”

Hermione stopped dead and looked back down at her food. She felt like she'd been slapped once again. Fuck this!, she thought. She'd done her best, but it was too much. She scooted her dining room chair backwards with a rough scrape on the floor, and tossed her messy hair back, flinging her white sleeves about her.

There was only so much she could endure in one day. She was terrified of this strange house, and this strange wizard, whom she was spending time with outside of her boarding school for the very first time, was not helping her in the slightest. Here she was with bloody servants and a title and having to act like some sort of 18th century lady! All to appease, whom? A husband who would never let her in? She shook her head in mounting fury.

“You have no idea how hard this is for me! You have no idea what it’s like to be me, Severus! I’m done with our conversation, and with dinner. Thank you. We can discuss this later.”

Hermione turned to stomp out, but felt a hand reach out and clasp hers, pulling her back. She turned, but Severus held her fast. He stood quickly and she felt him pull her into his chest. She glared up at him, defiantly.
“If you leave now, the elves will consider it most rude,” he intoned. Hermione couldn’t tell whether he was being sarcastic or not.

She could feel the warmth from Severus’s chest against her own as they stood inches apart. He was still holding her left hand with his right one and he tightened the grip on her, lacing his fingers through her own.

“What is it you want from me?” he whispered.

“I want…I want…,” she was distracted by his fingers lightly caressing her own.

She wasn’t entirely sure he wasn’t doing it on purpose. He never touched her if he could help it. It was strange and yet not unwelcome to feel his fingers on the back of her hand.

“I just want you to try….” she whispered back.

Snape lifted her hand and placed it on his own chest directly above his heart. She felt her silver wedding band tingle slightly at the contact with his person.

“I cannot love you, Hermione. There is nothing in here for you,” he said, tapping her palm on his breast. “I don’t say it to be cruel; it is a mere fact.”

“Because of Lily?”

Snape furrowed his brow but didn’t admonish her.

After a long pause, he merely gave the smallest nod of admission.

Devastated, Hermione looked over at the candles on the table.

It was a romantic setting — the room, the candlelight, the meal. But she remembered what Lucius had confirmed for her and she now knew it to be true.

Severus could never truly love anyone; he could only serve. And he was so wholly consumed with serving the memory of Lily, with loving her ghost fully. How can I compete?, Hermione wondered. She turned back to him.

“I won’t ask you to try to love me. But would you let me….I don’t know…Try to express a little affection for you? I think I need to give love as much as I need to receive it. And if you’re kind to me, then I think that will be enough for me to…well, to be comfortable with what we do on Saturdays.”

Snape let her hand go, and Hermione let it fall gently to her side. Snape gestured to the table and she sat. He rejoined her, studying her pained expression.

I don’t want her to suffer, he thought. Somehow the more she suffered now, the more he felt he was suffering, too. Why was that?

“I will allow you to do anything that makes you comfortable. As long as you harbor no expectation that I will suddenly transform myself or fall in love with you, you may explore your desires in whatever way you wish.”

Merlin, he’s so Goddamn passive about it!, Hermione thought.

But this was progress. And she would take every last scrap of it.
As they ate the rest of the meal, Hermione tried to keep her questions to a minimum, but soon she had him giving her a brief history of the Snape family and the architecture of Snape Hall. She praised the stately home ceaselessly, and he seemed somewhat pleased at her enthusiasm, though his manner continued to be reserved and formal.

She didn’t dare ask about his childhood. One intense conversation with Severus Snape was more than enough for one evening.

When they had finished their custard for dessert, Snape rose when she did and bid her a good night.

He straightened and disappeared out the doorway first. She watched his lean form move along the corridor. He held only one of the candlesticks from the table for light. Was that tradition, too? To use wand-magic as little as possible? So many of the paintings in the house were still, and none of the staircases moved as at Hogwarts. It was Muggle in so many ways, and then in other ways, not Muggle at all.

Hermione yawned. It had been a long day and she was ready for bed. She took the other candle and made her way up the stairs to her second-floor bedroom.

Her mind was running through the conversation still. *He can’t love me, but he won’t shut me out.* That bodes well, she hoped, thinking of their upcoming Saturday night. Though it was only Monday, she felt like it had been a year since Friday.

So much had happened: Harry’s wedding, the Leaving Ceremony, her awful night in Hogsmeade. She was exhausted. A “*Tempus!*” revealed it was only 7 o’clock. She was looking forward to unpacking and then having a hot bath and a good hour of reading in bed before turning in early.

Her thoughts still on the wizard who was perhaps only two doors away at that very moment, she failed to notice the very obvious display when she first re-entered her bedroom.

Sitting on her vanity was a large glass vase in which two dozen pale pink roses were artfully arranged. Hermione moved over to them and smiled. *It must be Madam Kemp or the staff’s doing.* They were gorgeous and made her feel rather welcomed into her new home. Outside the window, the sun was dipping below the horizon, and the pale pink color of the flowers were especially lovely in the lush red and orange sunbeams.

She called out to Bitsy, who appeared with an immediate crack. The elf smiled politely.

“Yes, Mistress?”

“Bitsy, where did these come from? From Madam Kemp?”

“No, Mistress. They’s delivered just a few minutes ago to the servants’ hall, Mistress. For Mistress. Very pretty. Did Mistress enjoy supper?”

“Very much, thank you.”

“Would Mistress like to be undressed and bathed?”

“No, Bitsy. I prefer to do those things myself.”

“Oh, I see,” the elf responded, sadly.

“No, no! You’re doing a wonderful job. You’ve been so sweet and I think we’re going to be great friends. I just…I’m used to doing that kind of thing on my own back at Hogwarts. If that makes
sense?"

Bitsy instantly smiled and nodded.

“Yes, I see. Whatever makes Mistress happy!”

“Why don’t you help clear the dining room table and then you can have the rest of the night to yourself?”

“Thank you, Mistress!”

Bitsy curtseyed, clearly ecstatic to have free time, and with another crack was gone. Hermione knew she was never going to get used to ordering house-elves about. At least the ones at Snape Hall seemed to be relatively happy.

Hermione turned back to the flowers. She knelt down to drink in their perfume. They truly were lovely, but she felt her stomach churn with an uncomfortable suspicion. There was no way Severus would have given her flowers, given the conversation they’d just had. And it was unlike Harry or Ginny to send something so elaborate.

A small white card was tucked between two stems, and there was her name on the front, written in silver ink by a cursive hand she now knew too well.

Trembling slightly, she lifted the card and opened its tiny envelope. She pulled out the note inside.

_Hermione,_

_I waited all night after sending Clara home, desperately hoping for your return._

_And all day I have been in agony at the thought of disappointing you once more. You are the one person who has given me reason to hope that I may one day be a better man._

_Please forgive me. I remain—_

_Your devoted servant,_

_Lucius_

Hermione pushed the card back into the bouquet and took a step back.

She wanted to burn it. She wanted to destroy it. She knew she should. She’d burnt other letters he’d sent her. She should have destroyed the flowers. Had Bitsy throw them into the rubbish pile.

But she didn’t.

In the dark, unfamiliar bedchamber that was now hers and hers alone, when the trunk was unpacked and she had bathed and read and there was nothing else to do to distract herself, she felt lonely, accompanied by no one but her strange thoughts of all the Lady Snapes who must have come before her.

Her single candle still glowing from the bedside table, she rose from the bed.

And she pulled the note out of the bouquet once more and read it over and over again as she lay back down.
And finally, when sleep began to claim her, she blew out the candle.
And tucked the note under her pillow.
And fell asleep with Lucius’s words just a few inches below her ear.

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Chapter 56

Tuesday morning Hermione awoke early and headed to work at the Ministry.

She wore a simple skirt and blouse underneath a set of work-robes that she’d brought from Hogwarts and after a quick breakfast, she floo’d from the parlour fireplace to the Ministry Atrium. She hadn’t seen Severus long enough to speak with him, passing him in the hallway as she headed into the breakfast room. He nodded at her politely and simply continued walking.

It was odd how he could simply treat her as if she were “Miss Granger” and he were “Professor Snape” and they were passing one another in the halls at Hogwarts.

As if he hadn’t been inside of her.

Hermione heard nothing more from Lucius and her work at the Ministry was continuing apace. It was nice to get back to the quiet of the Hall of Prophecies and the glowing orbs therein. She’d had lunch with Mott in his office, and they discussed several interesting projects the Unspeakables were working on that she could jump on once she was done with the prophecies. Overall, he seemed pleased with what she’d done so far.

Now, she stood back in her room at Snape Hall, looking out her large window onto the garden. It was just after four o’clock and she had floo’d back to Snape Hall immediately, not wishing to be late for dinner. Snape had made a point that it was at five o’clock, and that she must not be late.

It was beautiful outside. The sun was beginning to go down and it was a sunny day with fluffy clouds in the blue sky. Maybe I’ll just take a short walk, Hermione thought. She turned and made her way down the staircase and into the back hallway of the Manor, opening a set of French doors and stepping onto the beautiful marble patio that overlooked the grounds. She clutched her work-robes around her as the wind picked up and began to walk.

She wasn’t sure where she was going exactly, but it was nice to be outside after all day inside the Ministry, and the air was crisp and felt cool on her skin.

She thought about Lucius’s letter for the millionth time. She’d firmly decided not to reply, but hadn’t been able to bring herself to burn it. Instead, she’d slipped it into the top drawer of the small desk in her room.

So lost was she in her thoughts, that she almost didn’t notice when she turned around a hedge and saw her husband, clad in his black trousers and tunic, standing in front of a beautiful two-story owlery. His back was to her and when he lifted himself up and turned towards the sound of her footsteps, she saw that perched on the forearm of his outstretched limb on a leather glove was a stunning, speckled burrowing owl. She stopped as Snape’s black eyes fixed on her.

“H-hello!” she called out, lamely.

He tilted his head at her in acknowledgement of her presence, before returning his attention to the owl.

She walked along the gravel path to him slowly, scanning the owlery behind him. Through various niches she could see there was a variety of breeds inside — barn owls, snow owls, eagle owls.

As she came upon him, she noticed he was feeding the owl that was perched on him a treat. Hermione watched the beak nibble at the piece of meat held out.
“She’s very pretty.”

“Yes, he is. His name is Kip. He’s an owlet.”

“I didn’t realize you were fond of owls.”

“The Snape family has always had an owlery on the grounds.”

“But you don’t have an owl at Hogwarts.”

“As well you know, I do not have time during the School Year to indulge in the care of a familiar.” Hermione nodded.

“Yes, of course not. I…I’ve been meaning to ask you. Would you be opposed to me asking Luna if I can have Crookshanks back? Her parents have been taking care of him, and I do miss him.”

Snape sighed. “If you can ensure that mongrel you call a cat doesn’t destroy the antique furniture of my forebears, I will consider it.”

Hermione bit her tongue. She didn’t want to argue, but poor Crookshanks deserved better.

Snape took two steps along the gravel path, then turned back towards her.

“He’s being trained on the glove and needs to be walked. Do you want to take a turn around the garden?”

Hermione smiled and took two steps to join him. They began to walk, and Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. She knew even allowing her in his presence was a huge olive branch on Snape’s part. She didn’t want to annoy him, but the sight of Snape with an owl on his forearm was too intriguing.

“Do you take care of him yourself?”

“We have a keeper for them, but I enjoy seeing to them myself when I can.”

“I’ve never really interacted with them, much. I secretly always thought Harry’s owl Hedwig didn’t like me,” she said with a small, wistful laugh.

“Do you want to hold him?” Snape asked, gesturing towards Kip.

Hermione hesitated. “I’m not sure I know how.”

“Here.”

Snape reached for her right arm and held it out, then carefully and quickly slid the glove off his arm and onto Hermione’s hand. Kip fluttered his wings and Hermione leaned her face away from him, grimacing.

“I’m not sure if he likes me, either.”

“He is merely adjusting. Keep your forearm flat and straight. If you lower your hand like that, he’ll soon be on your shoulder. Or perhaps on your head.”

Hermione made a face at the idea of an owl in her hair. Snape smirked, more than slightly enjoying her discomfort.
“Keep your pinky to the ground, thumb facing up.”

Hermione followed the instruction and soon Kip had settled back down onto the glove. Hermione noticed the tie around his talon.

“What’s that?”

“A falconer’s knot. It’s to keep him on the glove.”

“Would he fly away otherwise?”

“Probably. His parents died, and he requires a bit more attention to be trained. Owls are remarkably intelligent, resilient, loyal creatures, but they must be shown patience and respect.”

Hermione smiled. Sounds like a certain Slytherin I know….

They continued their walk, and she politely asked Snape a few more questions about the owls, until they had completed their circle and were back at the owlery.

He took Kip back from her and placed him back inside the owlery. Hermione marveled at all the beautiful colors and patterns of feathers on the various bird of prey.

She stood awkwardly before Snape, trying to figure out what to say to him. Was now the right time to bring up Dolohov? Or the Virility Potion? Should she tell him about Lucius’s flowers? Merlin, she felt like there was still so much unsaid between them! And would it do her any good if she did tell him these things? Snape cleared his throat and broke into her thoughts.

“It is almost supper, and we should both change. We are expecting company.”

Hermione straightened.

“What? Who?”

“Lord and Lady Vaisey. They own the estate next to Snape Hall.”

“What?! Oh my gosh, why didn’t you tell me this before?”

Snape shriveled his nose.

“I am telling you now.”

Hermione pulled her wand out and cast “Tempus!”

“I only have twenty minutes to get ready!”

“Well, then, I suggest you hurry.”

Glaring at him, Hermione slipped out of the owlery, and then turned and ran along the gravel path back towards the house as quickly as possible.

What the hell?, she thought as she ran. It’s like he makes things harder for me on purpose.

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Exactly thirty minutes later, Hermione emerged from her bedroom wearing a brand-new dress that Bitsy had helped her pull from the wardrobe.
It was a lovely mint green color with a white sheer sheath over it that began at the waist and flowed to the floor, with green sleeves to her elbows and an elegant scoop-neck. She had never been so grateful for elves and their expeditious magic in all her life. Bitsy had done her make-up flawlessly, and coaxed her unruly hair into soft curls that she tied up into a high bun with several tendrils falling about her face. It had been a mad dash to finish and she’d heard voices downstairs and quickly realized that Lord and Lady Vaisey had arrived.

She ran down the stairs and screeched to a halt outside the parlour doors. Attempting to catch her breath, she twisted one of the handles and swung the door open.

As she entered, Snape and their guests — a dignified looking man in his early forties with broad shoulders, and a lovely round-faced woman in her late twenties rose from the settee they were on and turned to greet her.

“At last,” Severus muttered under his breath.

“Apologies for being late,” Hermione exhaled.

Carolus Vaisey stepped forward and took Hermione’s hand, bending low to kiss the back of it. He had mirthful brown eyes that made him look a decade younger and wavy short brown hair parted to one side; he was dressed in a stunning three-piece suit made of silk, the jacket of which had tails and was heavily embroidered.

“No matter at all. It is lovely to meet you, Lady Snape.”

Miranda Vaisey stepped towards her as well. She was perhaps a decade older than Hermione but still quite girlish in appearance. She had beautiful dark blonde hair that was curled about her face delicately and she wore a terribly elegant full-skirted red gown. Hermione couldn’t help but feel she was a tiny bit under-dressed. The woman smiled widely and curtseyed to her.

“Such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Snape.”

Hermione curtseyed to them both in response, then flicked her eyes to Snape. He lifted his chin, slightly, in what she thought was perhaps a subtle sign of approval, and outstretched his hand to take her own.

“My wife, Lady Hermione Snape, is honoured you are our first guests. Shall we all go in to dinner?”

Smoothly, Hermione felt Snape wrap her hand around his elbow and he guided her outside the parlour and into the dining room with Lord and Lady Vaisey behind them. She was nervous, and though the Vaiseys seemed kind, she couldn’t help but feel like this was some sort of test of Snape’s. Some sort of Pureblood NEWT examination.

Dinner was formal, much more so than the previous evening, and Hermione watched Miranda closely to see which utensil to pick up with which course. The wine flowed freely and though she knew she had work the next morning, she drank several glasses to calm herself. She was nervous about what to say, but Lord Vaisey and Snape led the conversation — mostly discussing business arrangements between the Pureblood families — the buying and selling of estates, the recent engagements and marriages, and the upcoming Midsummer’s Eve Ball.

Hermione felt out of sorts, but feeling Snape’s eyes on her, she refused to look uncomfortable, or give him the satisfaction of seeing her struggle. Instead, she made small talk about the weather with Lady Miranda.

Finally, as the dessert course was cleared, Lord Vaisey and Snape stood and excused themselves to
retire to the parlour. Hermione felt nervous to be left alone with Lady Miranda. Despite her kindness and youth, the older witch seemed terribly sophisticated. What could she possibly discuss with her?

A few awkward seconds passed and Lady Miranda’s eyes scanned the room, looking at the paintings. Hermione knew she was supposed to be a proper hostess, but felt more than a little out of her depth. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat.

“Do you like the paintings, Lady Vaisey? There are many more beautiful galleries upstairs. Would you like to see them?”

Lady Miranda smiled eagerly. “That would be lovely.”

Minutes later, the two women were in the Long Gallery that contained all of the beautiful paintings of Ancient Rome and Greece and the incredible sculptures Hermione had seen the day before on her house tour.

Lady Miranda seemed terribly impressed. She sat on a divan in the center of the room and craned her neck about — examining everything. Hermione sat next to her, and it suddenly occurred to her how much she missed sitting next to a female confidante. How she missed Ginny!

Miranda turned to her. “This room is absolutely beautiful, Lady Snape!”

“Oh, please, just call me ‘Hermione’.”

Lady Miranda laughed. “I couldn’t possibly. Maybe ‘Lady Hermione’?”

“‘Lady Hermione’ will be perfect.”

“And you can call me ‘Lady Miranda.’ Forgive my prying, but you must tell me everything! I don’t mean to distress you but rumours are flying. Is it true you were Lord Snape’s student at Hogwarts? Quel scandale!”

Hermione felt her ears turn pink and she lowered her face. Lady Miranda hugged her, impulsively, then pulled back.

“Oh, no, my dear, please don’t take offense! I’m sorry. I was merely teasing. You see, Lord Vaisey and I are fifteen years apart. When we married two years ago, tongues wagged, but now our marriage is accepted amongst society. I insisted to Lord Vaisey we be the first to meet you, because I know how hard it is, and how judgmental Pureblood Society can be. I just wanted you to know you have a friend in me, and I do hope you will come to the Midsummer’s Eve Ball. We’re hosting it this year at Vaisey Park, and it’s going to be bigger than its ever been. We’re spending a fortune on the fireworks alone! We have a wizard from Bulgaria coming in -- apparently he’s the best at magical pyrotechnics in the world!”

Hermione pressed her lips together. Lady Miranda's enthusiasm reminded her so much of Ginny’s, and despite their formal attire and traditional surroundings, perhaps she had found a person she could relate to.

“That is too kind of you, Lady Miranda.”

“I have to be honest with you, I never imagined Lord Snape would marry. He only ever came to Snape Hall during the Summer Season, and even then only for a month or so. He’d barely accept any invitations and never hosted any parties here. There were many Pureblood mothers who went to bed at night frustrated that they couldn’t find a way to shove their daughters in his path!”
“He was…desired by a lot of witches?” Hermione pondered out loud.

“Well, desired for his money, shall we say. Snape Hall is one of the wealthiest seats in the country, and Lord Snape’s position at Hogwarts has allowed his inheritance to remain untouched in Gringotts. As the only son of an only son, everyone knows he could live on the interest alone. It was frustrating to the Purebloods to see such a wealthy bachelor throw off the old customs and take up a teaching position. It was, forgive me for saying so, considered rather 'middle class.'”

Hermione inhaled, taking all of this in.

“Well, there was a War on….”

Miranda’s face became solemn.

“You don’t have to tell me. My younger brother died at the Battle of Hogwarts. He was a Ravenclaw. Decius Latimer? A fourth-year?”

Hermione shook her head.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know him.”

Miranda sighed, sadly.

“That’s all right. He was autistic and had difficulty making friends. He used to spend lots of time on his own; he invented loads of charms, though. He was so clever and determined, and his unique intelligence was recognised. I was so proud of him. So many of the older Pureblood families turned pacifist and tried to stay outside the War. Of course there were whispers that certain members of the ton were working for the Dark Lord, but there were many of us who saw what was happening and were quietly working for the Light. Decius knew right from wrong, and he gave his life for his beliefs, to protect our old way of life. To protect all of…this.”

Miranda gestured about the room. Hermione reached out and squeezed Miranda’s hand.

“I lost someone very close to me, too, Lady Miranda. And he was a Pureblood. Please don’t think I have any judgments at all when it comes to bloodlines. I am very sorry for the loss of your brother. I wish I had known him.”

Miranda grinned at her.

“I can see why Lord Snape fell for you,” she chuckled. “You’re a sweetheart, Hermione! And I’m so happy to have a friend so close to Vaisey Park! Now, you have to tell me when you’re planning your garden party!”

“My…garden party?”

“Why, yes, of course, you must invite all of the Pureblood ladies here. You know they’re just dying with curiosity to finally see the inside of Snape Hall! Most people haven’t been here in two decades! It’s an amazing house, Hermione. It falls to you to restore it to its grandeur.”

Hermione rose and moved over to one of the glass cases under which a large painted urn stood. She ran her fingers along the glass, slowly.

How on Earth was she expected to play hostess here when Bellatrix was still on the run and she had her work at the Ministry and everything was still... up in the air with Lucius?
“I…I’m not sure I’m up for it, Lady Miranda.”

Lady Miranda rose and waved one hand about, swishing her red skirt along the parquet floor.

“Oh, nonsense! You’re absolutely charming, Lady Hermione, and I can already tell you’re going to be a hit. I can help you with the planning. We’ll sweep out the cobwebs of this house and make everyone jealous that you finally won Lord Snape’s heart and became the mistress here!”

Hermione tried to protest but Miranda held up a palm.

“No, I will not take ‘no’ for an answer. Talk to your husband and owl me the best date and we’ll start planning! I love a garden party!”

Hermione felt truly helpless. She wanted to fit in, and Lady Miranda, slightly pushy and gregarious as she was, seemed genuine, and they had several things in common. She desperately could use a female mentor and friend. Hermione acquiesced.

“Erm…yes. I’ll ask him. He may not agree, however. He’s not a big fan of parties….”

Lady Miranda’s eyes flashed with mirth.

“Oh, none of our Lords are, really. You just have to reward him. Besides, we’re the ones who know how to best spend their fortunes!”

She winked at Hermione, and then looped her arm around Hermione’s elbow and escorted her from the room.

Hermione bit her lower lip thoughtfully as she and Miranda strolled back to the grand staircase and the front entry hall.

This world of Pureblood lords and ladies seemed so fake to her, so unnatural. The insinuation that somehow Snape was some sort of prize simply because he was rich, or that she’d have to somehow reward him, sexually or otherwise, for allowing her to have a stupid, sodding garden party… It was disgusting. Despite the beauty of the house and the beautiful dress she was wearing, Hermione suddenly felt deeply uncomfortable in this new world she was living in.

Is this why Snape fled?, she wondered. She’d been at Snape Hall for less than 48 hours, and she could feel herself itching against the invisible restraints it contained.

Downstairs, they met Snape and Lord Vaisey once more, the men having finished their cigars and brandy, and with several more bows and curtseys, Lord and Lady Vaisey were dressed in their traveling robes and were guided by several foot-elves by lantern down the outside stairs to their waiting carriage.

Hermione watched them pull away from the front window of the parlour, before turning back to Snape. He was replacing the crystal decanter of brandy back in its cabinet.

“Was that some sort of test?” she all but shouted.

Severus stopped and turned back around. So typical of her to think everything had to do with herself.

“It was merely an introduction.”

“I thought you didn’t like company.”

“I couldn’t very well refuse them. Lord Vaisey has been a confidante for nearly a decade. And I
assumed that Lady Vaisey would be a good first acquaintance for you to make as she is closer to your age.”

Hermione paused. She couldn’t argue there. Still, Snape *discounting* her, making decisions without her, treating her like she was a child, brought up so much anger inside of her. She could feel her face getting hot, and she knew some of her frustration was irrational, but she couldn’t tamp it down.

She was angry she wasn’t wearing *jeans*, angry they weren’t curled up in front of a Muggle television on a sofa eating *curry*, angry he didn’t *love* her, and that her life wasn’t normal.

She missed Hogwarts and she missed the Muggle world. Those were the only two places she really understood. This Pureblood Society was not for her. How could she survive until the fall?

“Could you just not…*spring* anything else on me before the weekend? I’m exhausted and I’m stressed out, and all night I was panicking that I might *embarrass* you by picking up the wrong *fork*, and I just can’t worry about that right now. Please…*please*, can I have a few days of quiet just to settle in?”

Snape folded his arms and looked at her for some time, not giving her an indication one way or another. With a huff, Hermione turned and moved to the doorway. She stopped as she grasped the handle and exhaled.

It was up to her to make things better between them, she knew. She needed to work on her temper, and she knew he would only see her as a child when she pouted. *I’m going to take the higher ground,* she thought.

She turned and, looking at the deep-set black eyes glittering across the room at her, she swallowed some excess saliva, then lifted her neck, proudly.

“Thank you for my beautiful wardrobe. This dress is lovely as are all the others. And thank you for showing me the owlery, and for the dinner. I like Miranda a lot and I think she could be a good friend for me. Goodnight.”

With that, Hermione turned and left the room, smiling smugly at the way her expression of gratitude had caused a mild flicker of genuine surprise to cross her husband’s visage.
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

Your eyes do not deceive you. Two updates in one weekend! :)

I want to thank those reviewers who keep commenting chapter-after-chapter. Honestly, this one is for you. xxoo, stella

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Hermione couldn’t possibly ask Snape about hosting something as ridiculous as a garden party at Snape Hall.

Never mind the fact that she didn’t particularly want to host one, and she knew he probably would not favor it, but their paths had crossed so irregularly over the past three days since Lord and Lady Vaisey had visited that she hadn’t determined the best way to broach the subject.

They ate dinner together in the dining room each evening at five o’clock, true, but mostly they spoke in platitudes — Hermione would compliment an aspect of Snape Hall, and Severus would provide a few terse sentences of history about said aspect.

She had managed to cross paths with Madam Kemp a couple times and asked her some questions, and though the older witch had been unfailingly polite, Hermione could tell their relationship would always be rather formal. Madam Kemp clearly did not think it appropriate to consider being Hermione’s friend, and she provided no specific history or gossip on Snape’s parents, the Vaiseys, or anything else related to Pureblood Society. The decisions Hermione made about her conduct and wardrobe were really left to herself and…well, Bitsy.

Thank Merlin for the fashion-advice of upper-class female House-Elves, Hermione thought with a smile.

Her wardrobe was so overwhelmingly extensive, each night she would look at the hundred or so frocks crammed into her armoire and feel at a total loss until Bitsy made a suggestion or two for what was appropriate “dinner-wear.”

She knew she wasn’t the only one feeling self-conscious — she got the sense that she and Snape were both a bit more self-aware now — eager not to upset the other or cause a row.

He wasn’t as dismissive of her over dinner; he didn’t insist on the ‘reading aloud’ business, and allowed her to prattle on about the various prophecies she had examined during the daytime.

He never discussed what he did during the daytime — Hermione assumed he was in his Potions Laboratory, but she hadn’t seen it, just as she never saw his Lab in the Dungeons. His research was something he steadfastly kept from her. Why?, she wondered.

Truthfully, it irritated her. She wondered if he thought she wasn’t intelligent enough to keep up with it, and the possibility wounded her ego.

After dinner each night, Hermione would slip into the Library and read for three or four hours, while
Snape presumably went off to his Lab. She had a stack of tomes three feet high piled next to a comfortable brown leather armchair in one corner near the Library’s enormous fireplace, and she requested Madam Kemp not order these volumes re-shelved.

The books were full of Pureblood history and she began to learn about this unique aspect of the Wizarding World that she had never known before, growing up Muggle. These were the Wizarding families who had been in control of Great Britain since before the Roman Invasion — the descendants of the Druids and the inheritors of the magic that was fundamentally rooted in the land. It was thrilling, heady stuff.

She learned there had been a division at some point between the Brits who had fully embraced the Old Ways and the magic of the land and those who had ignored it and adapted to the Roman culture, changing their beliefs and practices for financial gain and social standing, and who had become more invested in the practices of the outsiders.

Thus, the division between Muggles and Wizards was born. After three generations, those who had chosen to forget the Old Ways were too far gone to even recognise those early signs of involuntary magic, and so began to be referred to as ‘Mugs,’ or ‘those who are ignorant.’ And within six generations, the Wizarding World had ceased trying to bring them back into the fold and had decided to permanently hide themselves from the Muggle one. Within nine generations, the Muggle world had completely forgotten the Wizarding one existed, except in the occasional reference in oral tradition. Yet, generation after generation, gifted witches and wizards were still born of Muggle parents, and the Wizarding World did not give up on those born with these gifts.

They were always sought out and absorbed into the Wizarding World. “Et videamus nos,” so the saying went. “We look after our own,” Hermione thought.

Hermione found it all incredibly fascinating. Why me?, she had often thought when she was younger. Why was I born a witch when no one else in my family had these abilities? It appeared there was no rhyme or reason, genetically, but she liked the idea that somewhere in her lineage there had perhaps been a powerful Druid priestess.

Reading these books, her imagination and self-image positively soared, and she felt less like the weird little Know-It-All “Mudblood” who never fit in than part of a larger, natural trend— Muggles who were somehow re-discovering the power that lay within them.

She wanted to talk to Severus about all of this, and specifically about what had happened with Dolohov — how she had thrown off the Imperius. She had always had a strong sense of faith in her abilities. Well, at least her academic abilities, but when it came to practical magic she had sometimes been nervous and felt she had let herself down. She still couldn’t fly a Nimbus worth a damn.

Lucius’s surprise when she had described breaking through the Imperius had galvanised her. What does it mean?, she wondered. She had been thrilled at her perfect NEWTs, but that kind of scholastic achievement had been something she had somehow known she was capable of, deep down. Breaking through an Unforgivable… it was empowering and terrifying! She never could have anticipated that!

Her ego made her want to believe she was somehow “special” like Harry was, but she also wasn’t sure whether Lucius had been merely complimenting her to try to butter her up so he could more easily seduce her, or if what she had done had been truly so unique. Lucius had said that he’d only know Bellatrix and Snape to do it.

She’d also begun to delve more deeply into Necromancy in the past couple of days. She’d attempted to ask Snape more questions about the empty graves (and Bellatrix) over dinner the night before, but...
he had shut her down, insisting that he himself was no longer investigating and was leaving it up to the Aurors (and, with a frown-that-bordered-upon-a-sneer, strongly implied that she should do so, too).

Now it was Friday night, and busy as she was with her books and with answering the letters that had come to her from Harry, Ginny, Luna, Neville, and their other friends, as well as Lady Miranda, Hermione had almost forgotten about Lucius Malfoy when Bitsy delivered yet another letter to her in her bedroom just before she was ready to turn in for the evening.

“Thank you, Bitsy,” she said. “I appreciate it. That will be all.”

With a pleasant grin, Bitsy departed with a crack, leaving Hermione to stare down once again at the familiar, foreboding cursive script that was scrawled across the outside of the letter. What if Snape had intercepted it? She would have been horrified. She still hadn’t mentioned Lucius’s first letter to him.

“Miss Hermione Granger, Snape Hall,” Lucius had written on the front of the missive.

He’s deliberately choosing not to write ‘Hermione Snape,’ she thought.

She opened the letter slowly, seated at her desk, which sat against the wall opposite the foot of her bed, sandwiched between the fireplace on her right, and the pretty unicorn tapestry that hid the door to the sitting room on her left.

Her fingers nervously twitches as she unsealed the wax stamp.

It read:

Hermione,

Please let me know you are well. Even if all you tell me is that you need distance from me, I shall be satisfied with the response.

I wish nothing but your happiness and peace of mind, though I worry about you, all alone at Snape Hall with your cruel husband.

Do you know how much I wish you were in the room next to mine here at the Manor? Or better yet, curled up next to me in my own bed.

It continues to be too dangerous for me to be seen at the Ministry, but know that I have learned more about Bellatrix’s plans. I received another letter from her. She intends to return to England before the autumn, and she continues to boast of her gathering forces. I believe she intends to mount a direct assault on the Ministry.

I have informed Mott as well as the Aurors. My instinct is that she may be hiding out in Belgium, but it is difficult to precisely ascertain her next move. I hope to draw her out.

Have you found any prophecies yet that related to Rabastan and Bellatrix? Perhaps Trelawny made none and it is all conjecture, but if she did, it might give us a considerable advantage against Bellatrix if she does stage an assault.

I do not know if Bellatrix suspects I am playing both sides, but the former Death-eaters I have met with here in England seem convinced of my loyalty.
**Know you are constantly in my thoughts. Trust no one. Protect yourself.**

*When I find myself tempted by Bellatrix’s hollow promises of power and glory, I think of you — your loveliness, your goodness, your clarity of what is right and what is wrong.*

*I know you are not mine, but I remain—*

*Yours,*

*Lucius*

Hermione set the letter down on the desk and placing her elbows on it, pressed her face into her hands.

*How on earth am I supposed to deal with this?*, she wondered. She took out a piece of paper and a quill and scratched a quick note:

*Lucius,*

*I am well. Thank you for letting me know what Bellatrix wrote. I have not found any prophecies regarding Rabastan and Bellatrix; there may be nothing in the Hall at all, but I should be finished my work there in a couple more weeks. It's obviously a bit more slow-going without you.*

*I…don’t know how to feel about your compliments, and I don’t know your intentions. Do as the Aurors instruct you.*

Hermione set the quill down and stared at what she had so far. What else should she say?

*“Remember that time you killed a man so he didn’t rape me? Could you do me a favor and not tell anyone? Oh, and also can we not talk about how I almost threw myself at you? Oh, and also please continue to make sure your batshit crazy former sister-in-law doesn’t come after me? Finally, if you could do me the favour of never talking to me again that would also be fantastic. P.S. Don’t get yourself killed, because against my better judgment I do care about you. A little. Maybe.”*

Hermione put her head in her hands again and slowly slid her fingers down her cheeks. She was simply knackered and figuring out how to respond to Lucius was the last thing she wanted to do this evening before bed.

*Do I send this stupid thing or not?*

Finally, she crumpled it and threw it in the desk drawer, then took out a fresh piece of parchment and wrote:

*Lucius,*

*I am well. I feel safe at Snape Hall.*

*I need time.*

*-Hermione*

Satisfied (but not satisfied), she called for Bitsy, who agreed to attach it to an owl personally and with the utmost discretion.
The next day was Saturday. Tonight they would have to consummate again. Hermione could not help but feel unsettled about it.

She awoke early. Snape was nowhere to be found in the breakfast room, so she munched on some toast and then busied herself in the Library in the morning.

She assumed he would be avoiding her until supper, so it was with some surprise in the early afternoon she heard the Library door squeak open and Snape strode in, purposefully. He paused the moment he saw her, clearly surprised she was there.

Hermione sat up in her armchair, dusting some biscuit crumbs from her jumper (snacking while reading was one of her favourite things), and swung her feet back to the ground, standing awkwardly.

He raised a hand.

“No need to disturb yourself.”

“Oh, are you here for a book?” Hermione asked, wincing at the stupidity of her question as soon as it came out.

“Remarkable deduction,” Snape responded, dryly.

Hermione cleared her throat. “I can go if you’d like.”

Snape shook his head. “No need. I am merely retrieving a reference guide and I shall return to my Lab.”

Hermione nodded and sat back down in her armchair.

“Accio Karolinska Glossary, Volume 4.”

A book from the far side of the room flew off the shelf and towards Snape, who caught it with a twist of his wrist.

“What kind of Potion are you working on?”

“At the moment I am working on nine different brews. Would you like to know the names, brewing times, and characteristics of all of them? Perhaps I shall submit a list of them for your approval?”

Hermione closed her book.

“Actually, I would like that.”

Snape tilted his head.

“I’m sure you would.”

Hermione opened her mouth in protest.

“And before you say it, I am not prying. I’m genuinely curious. Academically, that is. There is a difference, you know.”

Snape rolled his eyes.
“Those who are curious exhibit wonder; those who pry exhibit wonder and then continue to pester their former Potions Professor over and over again despite his repeated affirmation that he would like his research to remain private.”

Hermione looked down at the floor. He had her there.

Snape sighed. Referring to himself as her former instructor was clearly a mistake. He knew it was Saturday. Why do I insist on making things more difficult for myself?, he wondered, bitterly.

Well-aware of what they would have to do in just a few hours, Snape took a few steps closer to her and folded his arms behind his back. He gestured with his chin to her pile of books.

“And what academic curiosity are you satisfying currently?”

Hermione lifted her head and smiled, shyly.

“I finished the Compleat Historie of the Schism, and I really enjoyed Therodatore’s perspective on the idea that Muggles contain magic within them, but Muggleborns are simply better able to tap into it. Rather than portraying Muggleborns as an aberration, he explores the way our brains and neurons function at a higher level of development, suggesting we’re perhaps evolving more quickly than our peers, and may in fact be able to discover new magic that can be shared with our Pureblood kin.”

Snape’s black eyes widened, slightly. Her summation contained two small factual inaccuracies, but was nonetheless a rather impressive encapsulation of the dense text that combined lengthy swaths of scientific data.

“Your assessment is accurate. It won’t surprise you, therefore, to learn that the Dark Lord ordered every copy burnt.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open.

“Burnt?! That’s ghastly.”

“Indeed.”

“How do you have a copy?”

“I prescribe to the Muggle writer Heinrich Heine’s adage: ‘Where books are burned—”

“—ultimately people will be burned,” Hermione finished for him.

“I see you know your German philosophers.”

“A little. I mean, not really,” Hermione blushed, slightly.

“The Dark Lord ordered us to find and burn many books — anything that showed Muggleborns to be part of the natural evolutionary order. When I could, I saved them and brought them here.”

Hermione sat up.

“I think that’s wonderful of you!”

Snape stiffened, her compliment hit him between the shoulder-blades as if someone had clapped him hard on the back. He wasn’t used to such praise.

“I did not do it to appear ‘wonderful,’ but rather to try to save generations of knowledge from being
destroyed.”

“Well, whatever the reason, I think it was bang on! Anyway, it certainly gave me a new perspective on my heritage. May I ask, do you think Muggleborns and Purebloods might be different, neurologically?”

Snape shrugged.

“There is no data whatsoever to support it, other than those absurd, pseudoscientific pamphlets published by those with a racist agenda. If you are looking to be amused some evening, I suggest you read Sir Batholomew Nott’s nineteenth century work, *Phrenology and the Muggle-Mind*. It is, what is the Muggle expression? A 'laugh-riot.’”

Hermione grinned.

“By a relative of Theodore Nott’s, no doubt?”

“Of course,” Snape replied, his own thin lips curling slightly.

“Well, anyway, I truly am enjoying the Library, so thank you again.”

Snape nodded and turned to take his leave. He found himself strangely pleased that she was making use of the Library. *Someone might as well*, he thought. It had been a refuge for him as a child, in so many ways, but as an adult he had preferred to read in his own Study as it was closer in size to his familiar Dungeons quarters at Hogwarts.

As he reached the door, he paused. It was still early in the afternoon, but he was sure Hermione’s mind had been on their evening plans as well. She had been clear that their previous consummations had made her deeply uncomfortable, and he wanted to make this… *violation* he must commit upon her to be as painless for her as possible.

He turned back to her. The girl’s face was already buried back in her book, her nose sticking out behind a wall of bushy curls.

“Hermione.”

She looked up at him with her clear, brown eyes and forthright expression. She had a way of looking so young sometimes….

“Would you perhaps feel more comfortable if we… *proceeded* this evening without having a formal supper first?”

Hermione bit her lower lip. *Does he not want to spend any more time with me than is necessary?*

“Um…sure. If you think that is easiest. Should I… meet you in your room?”

Snape shifted his weight from one leg to the other. He preferred his bedchamber to be his own private space, but it suddenly occurred to him that all of their previous consummations had happened in her bedroom in the Dungeons. Was that part of the reason she disliked them? When she lay down to sleep, was she tortured by the memories of what he had done to her in her own bed? Forcing himself upon her? Stealing her innocence? He frowned.

“I shall expect you at eight o’clock.”

With that, he swiveled back around and strode out the room, shutting the large door behind him.
“Tempus!” Hermione cast, almost as soon as she heard it click.

It was not even three o'clock.

She had five full hours to idle away between now and then.

And she could feel her palms already getting a little sweaty with nerves.

Merlin.

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Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

Quite possibly this chapter should be rated 'Explicit'. Hope not to offend anyone, but I suppose if you've come this far... :)

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Twenty minutes to eight, Hermione found herself nervously pacing her bedroom.

She had bathed in her bathroom suite, connected on the far side of the bedroom, and Bitsy had helped her scrub her back and shampoo her bushy tresses — Hermione wanted to be as clean and presentable as possible tonight. She was sure the sweet little elf had noticed her scars as she'd attended to her, but she had not said anything. Hermione had sent her away, soaked for a few minutes, shaved her legs carefully, washed her face, then gotten out and wrapped a towel around herself, and, finally, called Bitsy back.

The elf had helped her charm her hair dry and relax it into loose curls so it wouldn’t become a frizzy mess, and then Hermione had dismissed her for the evening and, returning to the bedchamber, she had opened her large wardrobe and perused the numerous elegant (and some rather scandalous) bedtime options tucked into the top drawer, before selecting a simple black silk nightgown that fell slightly below her knees and didn’t show too much décolletage. The garment only had a tiny bit of lace at the bottom hem and the cut at the top was a tasteful v-neck of satin and was not edged with lace. She felt it struck a good balance.

She didn’t want to wear any of the white or pink ones, and anything too "sexy" was simply out of the question. She wanted Severus to see her as an equal, an adult. *I'm not a virginal bride, or a little girl, or a student,* she thought. *I'm his wife.*

Now she paced the carpet floor in her bare feet. She had already cast the Lubrication Charm, rubbed some lightly-scented lotion onto her skin as she sat nervously in front of the vanity, and checked her figure in the full-length mirror about a thousand times.

She felt desperately nervous — almost as anxious as she had been their first night together. Snape had promised to allow her to try to show him affection — to allow her to do what she needed to do to be a little more comfortable. This was their first night as man-and-wife in Snape’s ancestral home, and Hermione desperately wanted for them to feel some mutual comfort. *So I'm not some awful yoke around his neck.*

But will he make an effort? She thought back at how she had screamed at him in the rain — told him he treated her like a possession, nothing but a “Mudblood whore.” Hermione felt her cheeks go red and she buried her face in her hands.

He must feel awful. *He’s not attracted to me; he doesn’t want to do this, and on top of that I basically accused him of using my body for his own pleasure. How are we going to make this better?!*

She sighed and dropped her hands to her sides. She had no idea, but she would be damned if she’d
just lay there in the darkness again, an unwilling participant.

He might shut me out, but he promised…he promised to try. At least, physically.

And he had touched her…sort of.

She thought about his gentle hands on the back of her head, massaging her neck. It hadn’t been unpleasant. She knew he had been attempting to comfort her, a little bit, in his own way. Maybe.

And maybe it opened up a possibility for something, some type of loving…kind touch between us?, she mused. Hermione knew at least now Severus was capable of loving touch. He had dropped the mask briefly and demonstrated he was not completely made of granite.

But how would that translate to their bed? Would it make their evening together less perfunctory? Would Severus touch her head again, or…look into her eyes during the act itself?

God!, Hermione flopped back onto her canopy bed and stretched her arms above her head. She realised more than anything, how much she wanted that! To have a man look right at you as he is inside of you!

The idea seemed irresistibly erotic.

Hermione wondered if it would be possible to negotiate with him further. They didn’t even have to be fully naked, and he didn’t have to take his time, or attempt to give her pleasure. Hermione knew it was too soon to ask for the moon. Right now, if he would just touch her cheek or her hair, or look into her eyes…it would be everything.

Please, God, don’t let him be cruel. Don’t let him grimace. Let me please him. Somehow, let him want me!

****

Severus paced back and forth in his own bedroom.

He was deeply uncomfortable.

His Potions work had been all but impossible to concentrate upon. Not because he was feeling excited about having sex — frankly, sex with Hermione Granger thus far ranked fairly low in his experiences of intercourse.

Sex between them had been a repugnant duty up to this point. But things were different now. It was harder to keep thinking of her as his student now that they were at Snape Hall, and she had asked him for more and he’d... agreed to concessions.

“I don’t want to give up on our marriage,” she had said. It was…sweet? No, puerile and naive, of course. She was so devoted to the bizarre idea that "marriage" meant something.

But he supposed the fact that she was still talking to him was fairly miraculous, considering he’d been a complete bastard to her. However, it had been her fault as well. These past weeks she had continued to act like a petulant child, whinging and sneaking off without telling him where she was going, making a scene at Harry Potter’s wedding, involving herself in Merlin-knows-what with Dolohov, and he couldn’t even bring himself to consider what she had been discussing with Lucius at the Ministry.

She had plainly hid things from him and then had the gall to ask him for honesty in their marriage!
All the while silently looking at him with those sad brown eyes.

“You’re killing me,” she had yelled at him in the rain. “You’re killing me!”

Snape shook his head and sat in an over-stuffed armchair by his window overlooking the garden. Despite her failings, he had not liked seeing her distressed.

He did not like her torn black dress. He did not like that she had gone to Lucius. And he did not like to see her wet and shivering, crying in a muddy puddle.

*Why do I care?,* he wondered.

He knew he did not love Hermione Granger. Nor was he “in love” with her. Both of those ideas were absurd. But there was now a small flicker of tenderness he could not deny, and he was alarmed by it. His instinct was to crush it.

He knew their brief mechanical couplings hurt her emotionally, and he did not want to hurt her. He was exhausted by how much energy they had expended arguing and fighting. But at the same time he couldn’t lie to her with his body. He knew if he removed all of their clothes, laid her back on his bed, and did all the things he enjoyed doing with a witch, there would be absolutely no going back. She would expect him to “make love” to her every time. He was her first; she couldn’t be expected to separate the pleasure of sex from her emotions. *Most witches can’t,* he snorted.

She might misinterpret and think he loved her, that he could be looked to for emotional intimacy and support. She would readily believe they had a “real” marriage. She was far too impressionable. Far too young. Didn’t she know by now he could provide her with nothing of that sort?

And Severus was steadfastly determined that they were never going to have a “real marriage.” The only woman he could truly love was Lily. *She knows this now. I am not lying to her.* He would not allow Hermione to try to engage his deeper affections or distract him from his devotion.

No, best to keep the sex as business-like as possible. Not only to mitigate Hermione’s expectations, but to keep himself in check.

At that moment, a sharp knock came at the door to the adjoining sitting room.

“Come in,” he called, rising from the chintz armchair.

Hermione entered. She wore a shiny, black silk nightgown with a matching robe. Her hair was down, parted down the middle, and flowed elegantly about her neck and shoulders. *Elf-magic,* he thought, with a tiny curl of his upper lip.

Her wardrobe was appropriate, and he thanked Merlin she was not wearing some sort of absurd stockings-and-garters get-up. The last thing he needed was bookish Hermione Granger attempting to "look sexy" or, Heaven forbid, *seduce* him. Still, the way the satiny fabric clung to her form was not…unappealing.

Severus had seen her sitting on her bed in the Dungeons waiting for him several times now, and usually the sight of her just prior to their consummations had filled him with dread, annoyance, anger, frustration, queasiness, and a multitude of other highly negative emotions. But in addition to those other feelings, tonight, for the first time, he felt slightly *drawn* to her.

Something had indeed changed, and Severus knew at once he was right to invoke caution.

Hermione closed the door behind her and stood awkwardly, surveying Snape’s stunningly decorated
room. It was a mirror of her own — though in place of the vanity he had a second large bureau, and he did not have a full-length mirror. The colors here were a masculine sapphire with dark carved mahogany trim. She noticed above the fireplace a large coat of arms hung on the blue damask-covered wall. Below, the flames of a fire were dying out.

“Is that the Snape motto?”

Her dark-eyed husband nodded.

“Tutam ac firmam.”

“What does it mean?”

“Sure and steadfast.”

Hermione smiled, shyly. “Well that…seems like a good one to have. It’s rather ‘Gryffindor’ actually.”

Snape stared at her, blankly. She coughed. Awkwardly, she pulled her robe around her, a little chilly.  

Don’t bring up Hogwarts’ houses now, Hermione!, she thought. Stupid, stupid!

How the hell was it than thirty seconds ago she was crossing their sitting room, head held high, convinced she was a sexy, independent witch who was going to take what she wanted, and now she felt like an ungainly child again, about to be criticised for her latest faux-pas?

She had planned to ask for something more tonight, or at least initiate some type of communication about their respective desires before things got…underway, but she couldn’t open her mouth to speak on such a topic.

Severus stood just by the window, looking much as he always had when he had come to her room to do his duty — reluctant, imposing, with his ominous, piercing gaze. She broke eye contact and moved over to his bed, sitting upon the dark blue quilted coverlet, her legs dangling down.

He hadn’t moved from when she had entered. She noticed he was wearing an embroidered black dressing gown, and from the bottom she could see black silk pajamas peeking out.

The fact that he was at least wearing “night-time clothes” as opposed to his regular buttoned-up tunic and pants seemed like progress. I think he’s trying, she thought. I hope so.

Summoning all her courage, she reached a hand out to him.

Severus looked at the extended arm. She had never done this before. Never really initiated anything, other than her ridiculous attempt at a kiss their first night. He reached out and took it, and she gently pulled him down until he was seated next to her on the bedspread. No barking orders, no commands.

They sat next to each other on the bed for several quiet seconds, her left hand’s fingers slowly entwining with his right hand’s fingers.

He looked down at his right hand when he felt a small flutter of increased touch. She was slowly moving her fingers along his own, enjoying the feel of his long, elegant digits against her small, feminine ones. He does have nice hands, she thought.

Severus could not say he hated the sensation, but after a few seconds even that tiny movement became too uncomfortably intimate. He needed to get on with things. Don’t linger. Get it over with.
Sensing his discomfort, Hermione abruptly stopped her movements and shifted her weight backwards on the bed. She leaned all the way down and put her head on the closest pillow. She tugged him to her with her left hand slowly, forcing him to lean over her until both their palms were pressing into the mattress on her left side.

She gazed up at him.

For the first time, she seemed to see through him. His lips, his skin, his hair — all of these things which individually she did not find particularly attractive somehow had combined to make him an oddly alluring man.

His past cruelty was not who he really was, she reminded herself, and who he really was was someone who had known a great deal of pain. As she knew pain. She wanted to comfort him, to let both of them find comfort.

“Please,” she said.

Severus looked down at her. She was asking for him to begin. This had never happened. Her pink lips were parted, and he noticed she was breathing a little more deeply than usual. She seemed relaxed, willing.

For the first time, he oddly wanted to kiss her, press his lips to hers and breathe her in. He didn't know if it was the fact that they were at Snape Hall or her black silk-clad form, but he could feel himself react to her the way he would any attractive witch.

This was bad. This was getting dangerous.

“Nox.”

“Wait, wait!”

“Lumos!” Snape commanded, almost leaping back from her.

Hermione sat up.

“No, I’m sorry, I was just surprised. I liked what was happening!”

Snape eyed her, suspiciously. She scooted a little closer to him.

“Every time we’ve done this, we’ve always had the lights off, except that…one time I turned them on...in the middle. I was hoping maybe we could have them dimmed but not totally off this time?”

Severus sighed, deeply.

Hermione looked into her lap. His obvious disappointment was such a stab to her heart.

“I’m sorry, forget I suggested it. We can do this in the dark, if that makes you comfortable. I understand that I am scarred and you don’t need to look at that. It’s understandable you don’t find them attractive.”

Severus turned his head to her, sharply. His stern brow softened as the sheer absurdity of her implication seeped in. He flicked his eyes down over her robe and nightgown, which covered her chest and upper-arms, then moved back up to find her round chocolate-coloured irises offering him nothing but sympathy and apologies.

“Hermione…,” he exhaled in sheer wonder. “Hermione, you believe you are undesirable because of
what has been done to you?”

Hermione nodded slowly. He was making her feel stupid and small again. But isn’t it natural? It’s what he always did.

*You’re the one who has to take a Virility Potion to be with me!,* she wanted to say. *Of course I feel unwanted!*

Severus turned his head away and glanced at the low-burning embers in the fireplace. He wished that she had just let him *get on with it*, as they had before, but he felt he had to correct her in this regard. She was being foolish. He straightened on the bed and faced her.

“Hermione, I believe that it is easier for both of us to behave less self-consciously in the dark. Given the intimate nature of what we have been forced to do together, I found it…necessary. It is not the case that I find your physical form…distasteful.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. *He doesn’t find me distasteful…He DOESN’T FIND ME DISTASTEFUL!? Then why…? Why the need for any of this?,* she thought. *Why can’t we just BE together?!*

She pursed her lips together as a swell of emotion overtook her. The man who had taken her virginity, the only man she had ever known, did not find her body a mere disgusting ‘chore’! That belief had been *so integrated* into her being -- Snape and his disapproval. His disapproval of her in *every* way. In this most *intimate* and *hurtful* of ways. To know now it was *false*…to have that confirmation… a small tear fell from one of her eyes. She quickly brushed it away.

“Sorry. I’m not crying. I swear. I just…all this time. I thought I…I truly thought my body disgusted you.”

“That is inaccurate. Your body is as pleasing as any belonging to a witch your age.”

*Bit of a backhanded compliment,* Hermione thought. But she’d take that! She’d take anything remotely resembling a compliment from Snape. Hermione felt a little rush of possibility down her spine.

*He doesn’t disgust me. And I don’t disgust him! He doesn’t think my body is gross. My scars don’t revolt him! We can do this…She could feel tension melting from her trapezius muscles; she was so relieved.*

She rubbed her now-sweaty palms against the silk on her hips and twisted her body towards him, angling one knee on the bed.

*It’s now or never, Granger!,* she thought.

And with a determined grasp, Hermione reached down and took up the hem of her nightgown that had fallen about her waist and pulled it as fast as she could up and over her head, tossing it to one side, along with her robe.

She’d done it so fast, Severus hadn’t had a moment to stop her, and his mouth fell open slightly, as he realised that she was almost fully exposed to him, for the first time, clad in only her black silk knickers.

Hermione looked at the pale wizard, sitting a foot away from her on his massive canopy bed. She felt cool air around her breasts and nipples, but didn’t dare look down. Her cheeks burned in embarrassment.
I’m naked, she thought. I am actually naked in front of Severus Snape!

She stared at him, chest moving up and down quickly with her nervous breaths.

Well, this is me, she thought.

This is me. For better or for worse.

His dark eyes moved slowly as he took in every detail of her.

His eyes fell down to her feet first — small, delicate. Up her ankles — strong, a mole on one of them. Along her calves — lean, but muscular. Up her thighs — creamy, with several cute dimples of cellulite near the hips. Over her knickers — an enticing triangle of black silk. Up her belly — taut yet feminine. Until at last his eyes found the beginning of the scar from Dolohov’s curse. It ran along her ribcage and over her sternum and was about ten inches long. Purplish red, slightly raised.

To him, it was nothing. He smirked, slightly. If she was shocked at that, she’d probably scream in horror if she ever saw his naked body.

His eyes stopped at her breasts.

Her breasts. They were larger than he expected — she’d hidden their development well under her Oxford shirts and Muggle jumpers. Skin that looked like untouched peaches-and-cream rounded about two perfectly-shaped rose-coloured nipples, hardening in the cool air. Pale — devoutly pale, like a Greek statue. He could see the bluish veins underneath. Even that was somehow enticing!

They were absolutely perfect. Delectable. He wanted to reach out and squeeze one while covering the other with his mouth.

He did neither. He sat perfectly still as he felt himself harden beneath his silk pajamas. Perhaps he was damned for thinking this way about a former student. But he was only a man. And Merlin just look at her! So ready, so firm, so yielding to him. It roused such strong desire he had to remind himself of his plan — his need to keep control.

He fought against his own baseness -- the depravity, the darkness, that desire for power that had attracted him to the Dark Lord in the first place. The promise of having anything he ever wanted.

Finally, he tore his eyes from her perfect breasts and moved up to her face. She was flushed with nerves and trembling slightly; he could tell she didn’t know what to do next. Merlin, but he wanted to leap on top of her and devour her. It had been so long since he’d had a naked woman like this in his bed. His abdomen clenched as he felt the blood rush to his groin.

Hermione slowly lifted her arms to him and tilted her elbows inwards, displaying the “MUDBLOOD” and “WHORE” carvings on her upper arms.

It’s only right he sees, she thought. I want him to see all of me.

Snape glanced down at them and then reached out his hand and, placing it on top of her forearms, lowered them gently to her lap.

“They do not mar your beauty,” he whispered. “Do not think on them.”

Hermione swallowed and nodded. It wasn’t the deeply-felt acceptance she craved, but he was allowing her to sit next to him, topless. He had looked at her, and it had been undeniable: there was heat between them. She could feel the wetness gather between her legs, and she knew it was more than the Lubrication Charm.
Hermione leaned back on the bed, moving the covers aside, and slid her legs partially under, leaving her upper body exposed.

“Please, I am ready,” she whispered.

Severus turned and swallowed — the sight of this girl with her lovely breasts lying in his bed and asking for him to…to…he knew he would remember this image for a long, long time.

“The lights?” he murmured.

Hermione nodded.

“Nox,” he whispered.

The room was pitch-black, but for the tiny glow from the dying embers.

Hermione felt him shifting his clothes, removing his robe and pajamas. She reached down and slid her panties off, tossing them off the bed.

_I'm naked in his bed!,_ she thought, slightly thrilling at the idea. His sheets were cool against her skin. She felt wanton and free, and…_playful_, almost. Like a baby Kneazle.

The mattress creaked slightly when he knelt back down over her. She could feel his breath on the side of her cheek, suddenly, and she spread her legs and made room for him to adjust himself between them.

There was a long pause while he hovered over her, and she suddenly realized he was naked. Actually, fully naked! There was no fabric against her calves or brushing against her arms. Just _skin_. She didn’t understand why he wasn’t proceeding as he usually did, but she was enjoying the anticipation. The Lubrication Charm was still working -- she felt a lot of moisture all along her centre, and she felt as wet and open as she ever had been. She moved her legs even further apart, and paused in nervous anticipation. Was she not doing everything she was supposed to do?

Suddenly, Snape leaned his head further down and she felt his warm breath against her ear. It tickled her and caused little prickles of pleasure throughout her body. Still he hesitated. The only sounds in the room were their breaths, in and out.

She was surprised that there was no dread, no hesitation as there had always been before. _I want this_, she understood at once. _For the first time, I want him. Not just good sex. Not just pleasure. But him._

She wasn’t sure she had ever been so aroused. Maybe in a quiet moment or two in Gryffindor Tower with Ron…She moved her hand away when she felt one of his own large, elegant hands on her upper thigh; he lifted her leg, wrapping it around his body, making more room. Then he was pressing against her entrance, hard and hot.

Severus moved into her slowly, a little more slowly than he usually did. _Don’t hurt her. She doesn’t deserve any more pain._

She felt so incredibly good around him, as she always did, and he tried to concentrate on what he had thought of during their previous evenings— what he had prioritised — moving himself in and out, building quickly, chasing his finish as efficiently as possible, sparing her his weight and his grunts. But somehow, tonight, he couldn’t keep his focus, couldn’t keep the detachment, the _business_ of it. Her nakedness and her breathy cooing and the realisation that a part of her did want him to _see_ her body, to _lie_ with her, to _take_ her….
He paused when he was completely inside of her, and for some odd reason he found he couldn’t bring himself to move backwards. He suddenly just wanted to *be* with her.

Beneath him, Hermione tried hard not to make any sounds. She knew in the past her sounds had annoyed him, but the sensation of him stopping while fully seated inside of her was so overwhelming, she had to bite her bottom lip to keep from letting out a moan. She felt so full the way he stretched her, but he had been so slow and gentle when he had entered. There was no anger or aggression in his movement. He had come into her with such tenderness, she felt a huge swelling of gratitude. There was no pain anymore, not like the first or second times, and her slickness was making it easy to adjust to him.

He wasn’t moving yet and his pause gave her ample time to breathe in and out, mentally relax her lower body and will herself to open up to him. The more she breathed into her pelvis the more she could sense her body giving in, welcoming him, unfolding for him. In fact, though the pressure inside was intense, it felt better than it *ever* had before. It wasn’t overbearing and uncomfortably foreign anymore, she realised; it felt…*nice*.

She tried to wait, to be patient, but after a few more seconds her body was starting to scream at her to find more sensation. With an exhale, she experimentally squeezed her pelvic muscles around him. *What would that feel like?* Above her, Severus let out a groan. *He likes that,* she catalogued.

She knew he might chastise her or tell her to stop at any moment, but it felt *good* to try this out, to test him. She pressed her tailbone down into the mattress and felt him retreat from her body an inch. She squeezed her inner muscles around him again. Then released and pushed her hips slightly upwards into his, pulling her abs in.

The ripples of pleasure this was causing were incredible and *extremely* intense, better than the sensation had even been that time she had almost found release. *Oh Gods!* Now that she had found *this,* she couldn’t stop. She repeated the action two, three, four times, slowly rocking him in and out just an inch or so. Finally she couldn’t contain what it was doing to her anymore. She tilted her head back and let out a long, low moan. *This…this feeling! I need more!*  

Severus was frozen. He hadn’t even *started* and he was almost undone. She was beneath him, trying to *fuck herself* on him. He needed this, and it was clear she needed it too.

**Pleasure. Sex. Fucking. Whatever it was.**

Whatever it was they could give each other, without giving each other everything.

With a soft moan he began in earnest, moving his own hips backwards until he was almost completely outside of her, before sliding back in. He didn’t want to be rough with her or get it over with — *this* time, he wanted to *prolong* it. He knew he would regret it later and he knew he was crossing a line that he had drawn for himself, but he couldn’t help himself. He was tired of maintaining the distance, and exhausted by keeping his resolve.  

He wanted to feel her pressed against him. Her desire was plain and it was intoxicating. She was soft and wet and she *wanted* it, too. It was obvious.

He moved his body a little above her, moving his head a bit closer to the headboard, and, exhaling, lowered himself to his forearms. He had never let their torsos come so close before.

His long, lean body aligned with hers, and he could feel the pressure of her breasts below him, pressing up into his chest. They had never pressed their upper bodies together before. Snape let out a deep groan at the sheer pleasure of the skin-to-skin contact. God, it had been *so* long since he’d had
the soft flesh of a woman pressed against him from neck to thigh. He was rapidly losing the ability to think clearly. Overtaken with the animal instinct, he bit his lower lip so hard it almost bled to prevent himself from bending down and suckling on her neck.

Hermione exhaled in satisfaction. *Oh yes,* she thought. *Oh! This was better than it ever had been!* He was patient, moving slowly, but each time his hips rolled, his chest rubbed against her breasts, driving her absolutely mad with desire.

His mouth was right next to her ear again, and she could hear every inhale and exhale. She loved his hot breath there. It made all the tiny soft hairs on her neck stand on end, and made her toes curl. She gripped the sides of the sheets with her fists, because the urge to *grab at him* was so strong. She was terrified that touching him would cause him to stop as it had before. And if he stopped now, she'd beg him. Weep. Plead. Do anything he wanted as long as he’d keep doing…. *this* to her!

As he continued to move in and out, she felt for the first time that he was “with” her, that she wasn’t merely an object he was *doing* something to, but that he was sensing her and *responding* to her. That they were doing this *together.*

Snape lifted a hand and placed it on her right shoulder, then softly caressed down, cupping the outside of her breast, slowly running it along her ribs, pausing to massage the narrow of her waist, then glided his palm down over her hip and along her thigh, before squeezing the skin above her knee, kneading at the flesh with his long digits.

At this caress, Hermione could barely breathe. Especially when he next began to press his hipbone even more firmly down into hers. She suddenly fully conceived that she was truly *more* than just a repugnant duty to him. For the first time, she felt, in her body, *wanted.* At that thought her inner muscles squeezed involuntarily; his caress meant the world to her and he slowly repeated the sensual gesture along the left-side. *All* along….she keened at his touch, loving the way he was petting her entire length, the way his slightly-calloused palm pressed so firmly into her skin.

*God, this was how it felt to be wanted by a man?*

He was clearly taking pleasure from touching her body.

*He wants to do this with me. He’s enjoying it. He wants me!*

Ron had always given her emotional support and had been physically loving, but what they had experienced was *nothing* like the sensuality overtaking Hermione now.

“Ohhh…,” she exclaimed quietly as one of Severus's bare nipples grazed her own. She threw her head back and began to moan louder. She couldn’t stop her response, and she was pushing her hips into his now, desperate to seek him out, to find more of that place inside that he would press into that would cause the *most* pleasure.

*This is a mistake,* Severus thought. *Don’t do this,* he tried to order himself.

It was all in vain. He wanted pleasure, and he wanted it *with* her. For the first time, her soft coos and moans were enflaming him rather than annoying him. He liked it; he liked all of it. It had been so long since a woman had screamed beneath him. He felt smug and powerful and deeply, erotically masculine every time she moaned and thrust up towards him and wiggled herself about. Her response was intoxicating.

*She wants this,* he kept thinking. *How she wants it.*
It drove him onwards. A tiny voice in his brain reminded him to keep his distance, to keep her desire at bay rather than stoke it. This will only lead to more complications, it said. This is a perversion.

But Severus shushed that voice one last time, and instead one of his traitorous hands moved down her body once more and firmly attached itself to the side of her hip, moving her with him.

Faster. Harder.

Showing her the way.

Hermione moaned even louder at this. Oh, yes, she thought. Touch me. He could touch her anywhere.

She could not stop herself now from writhing beneath him. It was as good as the last time. Better.

Her body was building up, and she wanted it so much. She was so scared he would stop if she was too loud or too enthusiastic. She clenched the fabric of the sheets on either side of her until she had two fists full. She was close.

But she needed him to show her how to get there. She was desperate to know what this kind of build up would lead to. Oh, please, oh please, oh please, her brain spun on repeat. Take me there. She could feel through his fingers on her hip and his own soft groans and she felt deeply that in this moment he truly wanted her; it was making her body do things she didn’t know it could do.

It was overwhelming. The feeling for the first time of being sexually desired. The feeling of a man needing her to find her pleasure in order to make his own. And it was making her feel delicious and wanton.

His hand on her hip pushed and pulled her in time against him, and she followed his lead, moving her hips to his instruction, copying his rhythm. The way he was guiding her was gentle, but deeply passionate. How does he know what feels so good to me? But all logical thought soon left her mind as he thrust deeply into a spot inside of her that caused her to see stars.

Severus could feel her desperation. She was clenching on him so tightly. She moaned loudly in his right ear, and he was beginning to lose himself in the sensations. He couldn’t stop it anymore, couldn’t hold back. He would give her what she needed. What they both needed.

Consequences be damned.

Severus moved his right hand down and lifted her left thigh so that her leg curled around him even higher on his hip. With his left forearm he pulled his body weight another inch above her, and pressed his lower abdomen against her pubic bone more forcefully, fusing them together.

He began to rock his hips at a different angle, moving them in a steady circular motion against hers, grinding down on her as he pressed down and forward. Hermione pressed up into him, her breasts pushing against him in a most vulgar arch. She moaned loudly. “Oh, Merlin! Oh yes, Severus! Yes!”

Yes, just like that, he thought, giving her another hard downwards thrust followed by the steady circular motion.

Hermione couldn’t be quiet any more, couldn’t do anything but feel.

He had never moved against her like this before. He had never pressed his weight into her like this. It was indescribable, the way the pleasure went on and on.
She writhed beneath him uncontrollably, trying to press every part of her into him. Desperate he wouldn’t lose contact. She couldn’t hold on to the sheets anymore. She needed to touch him. Any part of him! She let go of the sheets and stretched her fingers up to him. The joints in her digits were sore from how hard she had been grabbing the bedding, but she barely noticed. She lifted her hands and placed them on both sides of his naked hips.

Severus slowed for a moment when he felt her bare hands on his skin, one of them lightly caressing his backside. He paused his thrusting.

She dropped her hands immediately back to the mattress. No, she thought. Not again! Oh, please no! No!

Panic flooded her. I’ve ruined it. It’s over.

She was so worked up, mind and body, the thought of him stopping almost caused her to burst into tears.

It’s like before.

It took all the strength he possessed, close as he was, but Severus stopped his movement entirely, stilling his hips, still buried inside her tight heat.

He knew this had been a mistake. It was too much, too passionate. Too electric.

The overwhelming need to take her and guide her and _fuck_ her was simply far too intense.

And it was wrong. He _knew_ it was _wrong_.

He considered pushing himself up to sit back on his heels. Then he could simply finish the evening with the disconnected thrusting of their past couplings, but her proximity was intoxicating and her need for pleasure was endlessly enticing. He lifted his head and peered over at her face through the darkness. He could see that her eyes were closed. She looked like she was praying. Her lower lip was drawn into her mouth. Their ragged breaths mixing in the air between them.

Hermione was doing everything she could not to beg him. She wouldn’t beg. She _wouldn’t_.

She exhaled and opened her eyes, staring up at him in the darkness.

He couldn’t make out her expression, but could see tears in the corner of her eyes. One silver tear escaped and rolled down the side of her right temple.

Crying again. All he ever did was make her cry.

Finally, Hermione couldn’t bear it anymore. If begging would get him to keep going, then she would beg. Anything for _more_ of him. _Anything_.

She cast off the last of her pride and squeezed him as hard as she could with her inner muscles, causing both of them to moan in pleasure.

“Please,” she whispered, as quiet as a murmured prayer.

“Oh, _please…show me._”

And with that, it was all over for him.

With a deep groan, he moved his hand off her hip and picked up her own hand, setting it back on his
flesh, pressing her fingers into his hip. The gesture told her that her hands could resume their exploration. She breathed out in relief.

Their hands squeezed and caressed each other’s hips and she lightly skimmed the side of his bottom again. Hands permitted more access than ever before.

His skin was smooth and firm, and she barely noticed the raised flesh and indentations of his own scars. She began to gently squeeze and knead at his skin. It felt incredible to be grasping his flesh, touching hip and bottom. So intimate and new.

His movement resumed. He began to consciously build her up again. Harder. Faster. Her hands pushing and pulling him into her with every thrust. She cried out when he moved his hips in a figure-eight motion again.

He was relentless, and she responded as much as she could, sliding her body up and into his, trying to cover every square inch of herself with him. She loved the feel of his muscles clenching under her hands as he thrust, and when she used them to pull him into her, he let out a guttural moan that caused her to shudder in a sharp spasm of pleasure.

“Oh!” she whimpered. She felt as if he was breaking her into an entirely new level of physical pleasure. Her mind was fogging up, and it was only sensation now that came through. She could feel herself melting away completely, giving over to it entirely. Her whisking brain finally turning off and now she was pure instinct and unconscious, primal sensuality.

It was a relief to be an animal. To simply mindlessly fuck.

“That’s it,” he whispered into her ear when she arched up into him. He did it again.

And again.

“Oh, Severus! I…It feels so…so…so…oh, oh, yes!”

She could hear herself blubbering a stream of nonsense punctuated by vowels.

He pushed even more of his weight into her, stroking and massaging. There was the place they were joined…and that was incredible, but Hermione felt him everywhere now. His lips at her ear, the intimacy of his warm belly pressing against her own, his forearms resting just outside hers, her breasts against his chest. Anywhere they were connected, flesh-to-flesh, inflamed her.

She felt like he was upon her, and all she could go was grasp at him and try to meet him.

Sweat poured off her body, mixing with his own. They were truly joined as one.

Hermione dug her fingernails into his skin at his hips, hanging on for dear life. She knew she was probably hurting him, but she couldn’t un-flex her hands. She shifted her legs up higher on his hips until they were almost around his waist and was rewarded by even deeper, more pleasurable sensations.

She swung both her arms up from his hips to wrap around his torso as tightly as possible, hands scrambling on his back for purchase, nails digging in.

Severus was single-minded now—a man possessed. One of his hands, betraying the last of his self control, lifted up and shifted between them to grasp one of her breasts. The feeling of him encasing her, his palm pushing against her nipple, caused her to buck up beneath him even more furiously. He
massaged her breast tightly and then he groaned again, right in her ear.

“Ughhhhh….”

The escalation of his own strangled sounds thrilled her. He pushed into her as hard as he could. In and out at a furious pace as she clenched, clenched, clenched, moaning and begging him shamelessly.

“Oh…oh, please…please…I want to…I want to…please, make me…I want to…I’m going to…,” she whispered over and over, a stream of moaned syllables.

“Then do,” he commanded, whispering low into her ear in his desperately low baritone, before lightly nibbling at her shell-like earlobe.

_Oh yes, yes, yes_, her brain replied.

But suddenly, it was too intense. She almost felt a _pain_ between her legs as he pushed into her, her brain seemed to be telling her to back down. Her clitoris felt raw, over-stimulated. _Ooh, ow! It’s too much! It’s too much!_

She was worried she would have to ask him to stop, but her body almost continued against her will.

And she realised that this is what she had always wanted — to give in. To accept herself and this, to let a man _have_ her. To be pushed past her boundaries. But could she? Dare she?

_Yes_, she answered. _Oh, yes. Yes! YES! Have me! Have me! I am yours!_

With one last roll of her hips, she pushed herself up into him one last time meeting his own thrust, and there was a shuddering of pleasure that started at the place they were joined and pulsed through her vulva, expanded throughout her pelvis, then spread up her spine to her entire body. She could feel her clitoris pulse against Severus’s pelvis, almost as if it were bobbing up and down. The force of it almost hurt, but then there was an immediate wave of transporting pleasure, as her inner muscles involuntarily squeezed around his member.

She heard her voice cry out his name loudly, and her legs and arms tremoured around him as her lower body convulsing in delight, her feet and calves curling into his, her head thrown back against the pillow, her throat exposed to him. Within a few seconds the power of the initial wave of it was over, and she sagged back into the bed, unable to move a muscle.

She was so delirious with the aftershocks of pleasure softly rolling through her that she barely noticed when Severus thrust into her a final time and found his own release seconds later with a deep moan of satisfaction.

He collapsed on top of her, his face pressed into the mattress above her right shoulder, nestled into her curls, his firm, manly chest heaving against her soft bosom; he did not immediately move away.

Hermione exhaled deeply as her panting slowed. She felt almost felt like she had poured herself into him, instead of vice-versa. For she was the one wrapped around him, clutching him to her and inside of her, her arms and legs still around his torso, though unable to hang on.

Hermione lay there, covered in sweat, suddenly aware the sheet below her was covered in sweat, too, and she was pressed down into the mattress by the heavy yet welcome weight of the lean, muscular wizard above her; she had never felt so content.

Her breath returned to her, even as her body slowly melted away into the mattress. Her arms and legs
by now had fallen off Severus’s body in spent exhaustion, turning to jelly against the sticky mattress. Her whirring brain was back in action, and already attempting to sort the information from her body and calculate the sensations and configure "what it all meant."

Oh, those sensations!

It had been breathtaking.

Her first orgasm.

_Finally!,_ she thought, with a shy smile. She _knew_ it had happened, at last. No more of those "was that it?” moments when she’d touched herself for the better part of an hour in Gryffindor Tower. Only to give up in frustration 90% of the way there when she couldn't quite make it over the edge.

There was _no_ mistaking it this time.

It. Had. _Happened._ She felt a tiny bit smug.

It was both overwhelming and underwhelming. She suddenly felt acutely aware that her body was capable of more than she had ever imagined. She was almost _proud_ of her body, but she also felt an instinct to laugh at the way orgasms had been so “built up” in her own mind.

It _had_ been intense, but it had also been somehow _quieter_ than she had thought it would be. More of a _real_ experience than the giggling, over-the-top descriptions of torn bedsheets and “everything going white” she had overheard from the girls in Gryffindor Tower.

She raised a hand and petted the back of Severus’s lank hair. He was still panting above her, his back beaded in sweat, catching his own breath. He hadn’t quite recovered enough to remove himself from her body, and it was rather wonderful to feel him still there, between her legs. Not abandoning her. Not pulling out of her and running away. She liked the full feeling.

It occurred to her that _he_ had been a large part of what had just happened. She used to think perhaps orgasms were something to be ashamed of, something to pretend you had had even if you hadn’t, something tied to bragging rights, or “being a woman,” or having some mighty authority over your own body, but now she realised the best thing about an orgasm was that it was a sacred, _shared_ thing.

Like sex, it was something that he had _given_ her and she had _given_ him. And other orgasms she would have in her lifetime would be different from this one; this one was special because it was so _new._

Eventually Severus pulled himself up and slipped out of her, rolling onto his back on the other side of the bed. They both continued to lie there, breathing heavily in and out for another minute. Even though she couldn’t see him in the darkness, Hermione felt him close to her. Their shoulders were touching, and she still sensed the physical connection. She reached over and laced his hand in her own.

She wanted to _thank_ him, _praise_ him, _describe_ how she felt to him, but she could barely catch her breath and she was sure he wouldn’t welcome her blubbing. And, besides, words would fall completely short to describe how she felt at this moment — loved, content, peaceful, _awakened_!

She felt tears slip out of her eyes. She wasn’t sad, but she felt herself suddenly at the mercy of powerful, primal emotions. She felt so _close_ to Severus. He had been so _careful_ with her, so attentive, not cruel as he had been before.
He had seen to her. Despite the pitch-black room, it was like he had witnessed her and attended to her more than he ever had before. He had not rejected her. Not told her she was buck-toothed little girl, or an insolent chit. Not acted like she was a revolting child he was being forced to rape. Not said her scars made her less-than-desirable.

He had allowed her to be a woman, and had commanded her to take her woman’s pleasure.

Was there anything more erotic a man could do for a woman?

She felt worshipped, and she wanted to throw herself around him and thank him with her body and soul, but she knew that even just holding his hand was probably a lot for him.

Maybe this is what happens for women, she wondered. Perhaps it’s true that witches confuse sex with love more than wizards do? Because we have this deeper need? She wasn’t sure if it was true or not, but she was already feeling hungry for his nearness, and he was only a few inches away from her!

She wanted more than holding his hand. She wanted to smell him, to hold him, to be wrapped up in his arms and caress him all over. Already his tiny physical distance from her was painful. She so wished he would soothe her, hug her to him, kiss the top of her head, tell her that she was okay, that everything that had happened between them was right and good and natural. That he was happy with her. That she had pleased him.

But it was all so new, and she was nervous about his reaction. Surely, he had been with other witches and made them orgasm before. She didn’t want him to find her reaction ridiculous, especially since he’d made it clear he couldn’t love her.

After another minute of total silence, Severus unlaced his hand from hers, sat up, and moved around the bed.

In the darkness he picked up his clothing and slid his black silk pajamas back on. He briefly entertained the notion of closing his tired eyes and resting next to her, but then realised the idea was absolute madness.

He had enjoyed, more than enjoyed, satiating her, but he knew she would get the wrong idea if he slept in his bed together and all he could do now was damage control.

And anyway, sharing a bed and cuddling? It wasn’t his way.

“You may sleep here. I have some work to attend to,” he murmured.

Without a word he turned towards the door and left, closing it behind him, putting the evening’s events into a container and placing it on a shelf in his mind.

The sex had been deeply pleasurable, and her enthusiastic response had magnified the experience for him ten-fold, though he was more than slightly disgusted with himself for not sticking to his original intention.

The idea of possibly having a willing witch regularly in his bed was beginning to form in his mind, but he shunted the idea back into the farthest reaches of his mind palace.

She is not here to satisfy your sexual urges, he thought, with disgust, as he walked to a guest bedroom further down the hall. She’s the wife of a Pureblood wizard in an arranged marriage. She’s
young and she’s lonely. Don’t confuse her youthful sexual exploration with anything more. You’re a vessel, just as she is. You could be any wizard to her, just as she could be any young witch. It’s a given you will, on some level, arouse one another. As her former professor and the older party, you set the tone. It is up to you to do what is right, you snake. Don’t take advantage.

Minutes later, he splashed cold water on his face in the loo adjoining the guest bedroom and patted himself dry with a hand towel.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Dark hair slicked back. Eyes alight with possibility. His very "aliveness" always had a tendency to engender revulsion and self-loathing. It never led to anything good.

*I will find a way to control this dark desire somehow, moving forward,* he vowed, as he looked at his wan face in the mirror.

*You must be a better man than you were.*

****

Hermione lay on the sweaty, rumpled King-sized bed that belonged to Severus Snape, a damask canopy of folded blue cloth above her, the embers in the hearth now completely burnt out. She was all alone in the dark, feeling the familiar wet trickle between her legs.

She pulled the soft sheets around her and tugged the soft blue quilt over her head, curling onto her side in a cave of bedding. She thought about going back to her room, but she wanted to stay here, in Severus’s bed. *In case he comes back,* she hoped. Her strange, passionate husband.

This wizard had just given her *everything.* And then left her once more with barely a word.

She had no idea what to make of him now.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience! I wish this was longer, but hopefully I'll be able to get another chapter up soon!

****

Hermione woke to a sudden shaking grasp on her right shoulder.

Her eyes fluttered open and in the very early dawn light filtering in through the window she saw her husband standing at the bedside, his dark fathomless eyes filled with anger.

“Come!” he hissed, and yanked her out of bed by the arm. Hermione barely had time to grab the sheet off the bed and wrap it around her naked form before she stumbled across the carpet and was dragged into the hallway.

“What’s going on?” she mumbled, shocked and still half-asleep.

Snape was wearing his black silk pajamas and didn’t look back at her, his left-hand pulling her forward, his dark hair covering his visage.

“We’ve made a stupid mistake,” he intoned, accusingly, pulling her along the corridor.

Down the main staircase, along a hallway, and down another backstair, and soon they had arrived at the door to his Potions Laboratory. Snape opened it with a wave of his hand and pushed Hermione inside in front of him.

She stumbled a bit, and tucked the sheet she was wearing even more tightly under her armpits.

What the hell was going on?!

As they’d moved, she’d felt a soreness between her legs again — their enthusiastic coupling the night before had left her with a sensitivity she hadn’t expected and it had been a bit uncomfortable to take such long strides. She’d tried to move gingerly, but Snape had dragged her after him without a thought to her comfort.

“Lumos!” Snape ordered, and the entire room lit up.

Hermione looked about the room she now found herself in — it was large, about the size of the Potion’s Classroom at Hogwarts, and there were about a dozen work-tables set up around the periphery of the room, with four more in the center. Every table was taken up with various cauldrons simmering over burners. The walls above the tables were lined with shelves of ingredients and on the far side was a door she was sure led to his private Conservatory. Some early morning daylight could be seen through its opaque glass.

Snape moved to the closest table and quickly ladled a pink liquid from a cauldron into a nearby vessel, then carefully sifted it and poured it from the vessel into a small test-tube. He lifted the pink vial towards her face.
“Drink.”

Hermione made a face at his command.

“What is it? What is going on?!”

“It’s your Contraceptive Potion, obviously. We… forgot,” Snape uttered, bitterly.

Hermione’s eyes widened. She hadn’t even noticed! Oh, God! How had it not even crossed her mind?!

She took the vial immediately and drank it down, quickly. Snape’s shoulders seemed to lower several inches as he watched her. She set the vial down on the table.

“I… didn’t realise,” she admitted, regaining her breath.

“No, I don’t see why you would,” he muttered, sarcastically.

Hermione straightened her spine, offended.

“Don’t put this on me! I was so nervous last night, I was practically shaking! How was I supposed to remember? You’ve always taken care of—”

“—Well, perhaps you should learn to take more responsibility!” he hissed.

Hermione shut her mouth and looked down at the floor. What a bastard.

After several seconds she lifted her eyes to face him. He had placed both his palms flat on a worktable and was leaning over it, facing away from her, his eyes shut tightly. He looked like he was in pain.

“If you give me a supply of the potion, I promise I will remember to take it each Saturday,” she spoke, quietly.

Snape lifted his form and turned to face her. His face was drawn and unsettled. The frown-lines in his forehead ran deep. He nodded, solemnly.

He leaned over and, lifting the cauldron, poured the remnants into a large decanter-shaped vessel and set it on the table, stoppering it with a large cork, and sealing it with a flick of his wrist.

“That amount should last at least two months and its potency will not diminish. Take one vial’s worth before each…consummation…and it will suffice. Let me know when it is low.”

Hermione nodded as he slid the decanter towards her.

“I am trusting you,” he spoke, in his almost-threatening manner.

“I’ll remember,” she replied, earnestly. She dipped her head slightly, glancing at the floor. “I don’t want to… I’m way too young to…”

Snape cleared his throat and folded his arms.

“It must be taken within an hour… before or after in order to be most effective…” he muttered. “We should not have risked…”

Hermione glanced about the room. She wanted to poke around and look into the various cauldrons
but Snape was evidently deeply uncomfortable in her presence.

She felt weirdly naked in his Potions Laboratory, wrapped in just a sheet. She didn’t have her wand, but she closed her eyes and focused on her dress, then quickly muttered a wandless Transfiguration spell that McGonagall had taught her in a private lesson. She felt the sheet transform into a proper robe around her body, fitted, but demure.

She exhaled as the spell completed and opened her eyes. Snape was staring at her with mild approbation. She pulled the front of the robes down and lifted her neck, proudly, staring directly into the black eyes of her 6-foot-something husband. She was willing to own her mistakes, and she would not be intimidated by him.

“I apologise for not thinking about…birth control last night. I was naive.”

Snape lowered his head to his chest. She always had a remarkable ability to discern the exact way in which he had failed her, and by changing herself into something more suitable, was clearly demonstrating she was uncomfortable with her state of undress.

They had both failed. Again, he reminded himself not be cruel. He had promised to try. He sighed and lifted his chin.

“I did not intend to frighten you, but if we had waited until later in the morning, you do understand there would be a chance…”

“And would that have been so terrible?” Hermione wondered aloud, cocking her head to one side to examine him.

She knew she was too young to be a mother and she and Snape had agreed to circumvent the Ministry’s horrific attempt to force them to breed, but was it because he truly hated the idea of reproducing? Or being a father?

A dark, stormy cloud formed over Severus’s features.

“The Snape line shall die with me. It is what I intend.”

Hermione’s eyebrows raised, and she folded her own arms across her chest in disbelief.

“But…why?!”

“You do not need to understand the details of my choice. Consider yourself lucky I am not using you as a brood-mare.”

“But…what if one day I wanted to have children?”

“The Marriage Law may very well be revoked within two or three years, and I shall grant you an amicable divorce. Assuming you are healthy, you likely will have 15-20 years of fertility ahead of you. Plenty of time to be a prolific breeder of brats.”

Hermione snorted.

“It’s kind of you to be so precise.”

“I am merely stating the obvious. Do you truly believe a Marriage Law such as this one will be enforceable for the next two decades? The Ministry may be able to continue the practice for several cycles, but my estimate is that soon the social pressure will make their position untenable. As the
horrific memories of the War fade, it will have less and less support. Within four or five years at maximum you will be a free witch, I imagine. If you desire offspring, you shall be able to re-marry and subsequently produce them.”

Hermione stared at the dark wizard, her jaw slowly hanging open. He was so disjoined from true emotion. Sometimes she wondered if he was truly human at all.

“Do you intend to divorce me as soon as the Law is repealed?”

“I intend to give you your freedom as soon as you are legally entitled to it.”

“Why?”

“Because this is not a real marriage, as we have discussed. You desire romantic love, Hermione, and an equal partnership. I have no interest or ability to satisfy you in such a way. I never wanted a wife —”

“—Yet, you married me!”

“To keep you from Obliviating yourself, you shortsighted simpleton! Your mind and magical abilities are too extraordinary to have been wiped due to such a commonplace event as an arranged marriage! It was ego alone that led you to such a conclusion!”

Hermione paused. She felt a swell of pride at his compliment, despite the cold practicality of his words and his unfair accusation.

“Well… I suppose in the mean time…,” she spoke in measured terms, “we should just make the best of things.”

She refused to allow him to engage her in an argument.

Her hook-nosed husband settled back on his heels and examined her closely. He didn’t like that she was inside his Potions Laboratory and he could see her roving eyes moving all over the various ingredients and bubbling brews.

He sighed. She was here, now, and short of manipulating her memory there was nothing he could do to keep her out of his Lab. He pulled his wand from his sleeve and with a wave, transfigured his own silk pajamas into his head-to-toe black uniform of tunic and pants.

Hermione barely reacted as he buttoned the top slits up to his throat, his lank locks partially covering his face. His forehead was creased in concentration. When he finished, he looked back down at her. She glanced back at him, shyly.

“It is early yet. Do you wish to return to bed?”

“No, I… well, I suppose I’m awake now.”

“I have work to attend to — if you would like to breakfast early, the elves can fix you something.”

“I would rather… Well, seeing as I am here, perhaps I could assist you? I can stir better than a Stirring Charm, at least. We can both agree on that, despite my inflated ‘ego’ as you say.”

Severus frowned. It was true. She wasn’t incapable of bettering those Charms, and today he had at least a dozen Potions that required his attention.

Hermione cleared her throat and moved her hands behind her back, grasping them in what she
imagined was a gesture of pleasant capitulation. She hoped he would take her offer as that of a
dutiful Potions Apprentice. She wanted to help him, if possible. The Lab held much curiosity for her,
and she was dying to know what was outside the far door.

Severus stared at her — his dark eyes boring into her own. His cold demeanor was unchanged.

Hermione shivered. He was so guarded, so intimidating, and yet he had moved with such passionate
abandon against her body only hours earlier! How was it possible? He was an enigma, two men
living in the same black-shrouded body.

“How, precisely, do you believe yourself capable of assistance?”

“What?”

“I perceive by your slack-jawed staring you have something to say to me?”

“Oh! Um…I…well, you yourself granted me an Outstanding on my Potions NEWT, so I suppose I
am not a complete imbecile, unless your evaluation skills are highly over-rated. Seeing as I don’t
have plans today, if you have work that I can assist you with, I’d be very interested in doing so…that
is, if you want me to help you.”

“I don’t want anything from you. But seeing as you are dressed and here, I shall make use of your
two hands.”

And with that, Severus pointed to a far cauldron and shouted out a command. Hermione obeyed, and
they spent the next two hours moving around the Laboratory. Hermione stirred, added ingredients,
chopped, measured, tasted, sniffed, and bottled to Snape’s precise specifications. Her attention was
acute and she followed his barked instructions to the letter, giving him no reason to upbraid her. It
was almost lunchtime when the last cauldron had been set to bubble and there was no more work to
be done.

Snape stared at her from across the Lab. She’d mentioned nothing from the night before — did she
not believe he had violated her?

As an assistant, she’d been thorough and conscientious with his commands — if Potions had been
her interest, she would have made a fine apprentice. He needed only one more ingredient before his
work for the day was completed.

He turned and moved to the back door that led to his Conservatory.

“How do you need help?” Hermione asked.

He didn’t, but it was clear from the way her eyes had flicked periodically to the door that she was
desperate to know what lay behind it. Her insatiable curiosity was equal parts grating and amusing.

“I require the cap of amanita delcis. Are you familiar with the magical properties of fungi?”

Hermione shook her head.

“For your own safety, you may as well be informed.”

He moved to the door and opened it, holding it ajar for her. Hermione gathered her robes around
herself and moved from the dark lab into the blinding early-morning sunlight of a large glass-ceiled
Conservatory. It was at least two hundred feet wide and nearly the length of a Quidditch pitch, and
each section contained boxes of neatly labeled and organised plants — ranging from vegetables to
innocuous herbs to animal-plant hybrids and dangerous species.

She padded after Snape in her bare feet along the dirt paths that separated the box rows (she still hadn’t had time to transfigure shoes), until after a couple minutes he stopped at a rectangular row of mushrooms. They were all different shapes and sizes in neat rows — circular, lopsided, small, large, red-capped, brown-capped, white-capped, etc. Hermione knew very little about fungi, and she reached for one large fuzzy-topped bright orange mushroom in particular, drawn to its unusual shade.

She felt a sting as Snape slapped her hand away.

“That is amanitum venenum! It is the most poisonous mushroom here. If you touched it and then accidentally put your hand to your mouth, you would be dead in minutes! It stops respiratory function.”

Hermione quickly drew her hand back.

“I… I’m sorry! I don’t know what came over me!”

“It’s orange colour has an intoxicating effect on the central nervous system. It subconsciously encourages the desire to touch. You must never come to the Conservatory without me. The plants will prey on your naivety, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded, chastened. Pomona Sprout had certainly left out a great deal in her instructions.

“I understand. I promise not to come here without you.”

“The derivatives that come from such plants can be powerful when manipulated for use in Potions, but must be handled with utmost caution. Only a wizard with knowledge of botany, biochemistry, as well as potions can be trusted to their care.”

“I see.”

“For example, notice how the cap of the amanitum venenum does not have any white circles. It looks very much like its innocuous cousin amanitum delcis. Yet one causes the complete cessation of the respiratory system while the other encourages healthy regulation of the bowels. A minor difference in color, yet the results make all the difference in the world, would you not agree?”

Hermione bobbed her head, taking all this in.

“Your knowledge of all of these plants is extraordinary,” she murmured.

“Potions is a field of ingredients. It is fundamentally the practical application of Botany.”

“So you have Professor Sprout’s knowledge of plants, and then some.”

Snape smirked, slightly.

“And then some.”

Snape bent down a cut a small nip from the cap of the amanitum delcis and pocketed it. He turned around and Hermione dutifully followed him back to the Laboratory. The mushroom clipping ground into paste with a mortar and pestle and deposited into a cauldron, Snape at last turned to Hermione.

“That is all for now. Do you desire a meal? It is getting late in the day and neither of us breakfasted.”
Hermione nodded and smiled. Severus called out for Eula, one of the kitchen-elves, and instructed her to lay out a meal, and by the time they had made their way from the Lab to the dining room, a beautiful tea-service of scones, sandwiches, croissants, and fruit was indeed laid out on the table.

Hermione sat in the chair to the right of Severus, who took up his now-familiar position at the head of the table, and nibbled at a egg sandwich. Her husband sipped Earl Grey from a china tea service and had his long nose buried in a book he had brought with him from his Lab — *Thermodynamics of Tracheophytes*.

She almost wanted to laugh at the idea that Severus Snape was at heart a researcher and a scientist. She knew, of course, that he was one of, if not the, most well-respected Potions Master in England, but because of his fearsome personality and his history with the Dark Lord, she had always felt he was more warrior than scholar.

How was it possible a man who is so intellectually curious about ingredients could torture human beings for Voldemort’s pleasure? She knew the Dark Lord had preyed on Severus’s emotions as a young man — perhaps he had even offered him intellectual bounty. *He’s curious*, she thought. *He’s a deeply curious person. Like me.*

Yet his default position was always unkindness.

He had to work at being kind, whereas most people Hermione had met in her life had to work at being cruel. *Why is he cruel by nature?*, she wondered.

*Lily must be a part of it. And his unhappiness at Hogwarts. Of course, the Dark Lord must have encouraged this side of him. But his unhappiness must have larger roots than this. His parents are both deceased and he’s an only child. Did they neglect him? Did he grow up totally alone?*

As she surreptitiously watched him read, Hermione felt deeply conflicted. She didn’t love him, and certainly didn’t like him, but she felt more aware of his physical body.

When he brushed crumbs from his chin, she thought to his hand squeezing the flesh at her hip. When his pink tongue emerged from his thin lips to lick a spot of tea on one corner, she could feel those thin lips pressing erotically against her ear. She watched his long, elegant fingers flick the page and she imagined them curled around her breast.

Hermione coughed a little and sat up straighter.

She did want to speak to him. She knew he wouldn’t welcome it. But she couldn’t pretend that last night hadn’t happened, and she was grateful he hadn’t held back. She wanted him to know that it had…meant something to her.

He had tried. And she was deeply, profoundly appreciative that he hadn’t simply “done his duty.” He had upheld his end of the bargain — let her have a small amount of emotional intimacy. Embraced her, at least in the physical sense. *And it had been…well, sexy!,* she thought.

It drove her crazy how calm he appeared — casually eating and reading. Clearly last night, for him, had not been revelatory. He’d probably had many such experiences and encounters. But for her… how could he not realise?! *How is he acting like what happened between us wasn’t…important?!*

Hermione cleared her throat and set her sandwich down. *Here goes nothing.*

“I just wanted to say thank you. For last night.”

Snape sniffed the air and lowered his book several inches, flicking his gaze to her and narrowing his
She was thanking him? For what?

Decent sex? Merlin, she is still such a naive little girl. This is almost as bad as the time McGonagall requested I fill-in for an ill Pomfrey in Sex-Ed….That particular teaching day had been probably the worst experience of his life, which included experiencing many bouts of Cruciatus, torturing innocent Muggles, and having his mind routinely searched by the Dark Lord’s especial brand of brutal Legilimency.

Despite his disapproving mien, Hermione swallowed and continued. He may not want to hear it, but she needed to say it.

“It meant…it meant a lot to me. Thank you, Severus, for being kind to me. In that way. That was the first time I’ve ever…ever had….a…erm…a…um…you know.”

Snape narrowed his eyes even more in confusion. Surely she wasn’t implying…

“An orgasm. I’d never had one before. So…I guess what I am saying is… thank you.”

Hermione stared down into her teacup, her cheeks red-flushed with embarrassment.

At least he knew now. She had gotten it out. And she had thanked him, which frankly seemed, at a minimum, the polite thing to do.

She stood up and drank the last of her tea. Sitting there in any more silence was too much.

“Have a…nice rest of your day,” she uttered, blushing. Then turned and rapidly exited, heading to her room.

Snape sat there in the empty dining room, digesting this new piece of knowledge. Fuck.
Chapter 60

Monday morning, Hermione sat at her desk in the Hall of Prophecies, reading through an extremely dull prophecy made a decade earlier involving the relationship between wand weight and transfigurative efficiency.

She found her mind drifting.

She was trying very, very hard not to think about sex.

Though she did still feel a tiny pull of tenderness between her legs from the vigorous activity 36 hours earlier, her brain was spinning with thoughts of their next consummation. A week suddenly felt like so long.

She realised that now that she had had a taste of carnal pleasure, she wanted more.

A lot more.

So embarrassing. How am I supposed to get work done? She shifted in her seat and felt a pressing spark of pleasure at the way her full bladder felt against her…other parts.

This is ridiculous, she thought. Even needing the stupid loo is making me… aroused! She stood up and exited the far door.

In the bathroom, Hermione relieved herself and exited the stall. She washed her hands, staring at her pale, professionally-outfitted self in the mirror. She looked no different than she ever had, but inside all she could feel was an eagerness for her husband’s body, pressed against hers.

She had thought about Severus non-stop for a long time the previous evening, attempting to fall asleep in her bedchamber, staring out into the darkness of her room. She had resisted the urge to touch herself, or get up and cross the sitting room between them and rap on his door; at last sleep had claimed her a few hours before dawn.

Her buzzing mind was beginning to construct possibilities and fantasies. To ignore them hadn’t been easy, particularly. But she wasn’t even clear what her fantasy entailed.

What am I going to do? Knock on his door and throw myself at him?

She hadn’t seen him after they had had breakfast on Sunday, and she was convinced that he had been avoiding her. He was likely not going to appreciate a midnight intrusion into his bedchamber. She’d supped alone and read in the Library before retiring to bed early. She’d asked about him, and Bitsy had said he was in his study, and had taken him supper on a tray.

“Do you wants me to call him, Mistress?,” the elf had inquired.

“No, Bitsy. Nevermind,” Hermione had replied, sheepishly and more than a little forlornly.

“Please don’t be sad, Mistress Hermione. You and Master should be happy. I am sure he would love to spend time with you.”

“I’m…not sure you’re right about that. But thank you, Bitsy. That’ll be all.”

Bitsy had frowned and disappeared with a crack, leaving Hermione alone to ponder the utter strangeness of going to sleep yet again while being separated from her husband by only two walls.
She didn’t want to be emotional about it. She knew she was "being a girl" about it, or worse, the cliche overly-attached virgin, but what could she do? It wasn’t really his fault. Severus had been more than clear that she should temper her expectations, but it still cut her to the quick that he hadn’t made any effort to see her since they had shared breakfast. Since her admission.

In the Ministry bathroom, Hermione shook herself from her thoughts and splashed a little cold water onto her face.

At least I don’t look like some wanton hussy on the outside, she thought with a grin, evaluating herself in the mirror.

Get it together. It’s just sex. You had pleasurable sex with Severus Snape. So what? Just because it was good once doesn’t mean it will be like that every time. Who knows, Severus could want to go back to how it was before. He could be disgusted with himself. Disgusted with you.

But he did seem to enjoy it…didn’t he? He definitely did….

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Monday evening, Hermione floo’d back to Snape Hall and was greeted with an urgent missive from Lady Miranda Vaisey, dutifully delivered by Bitsy.

**Lady Hermione,**

_Please do let me know if this Saturday is convenient for a garden party? You can't put me off! You know I'll never take no._

_I promise I'll do all the hard work. You just have to "work" on getting your Lord's permission. I have a tennis lesson in the morning, but can come by afterwards to help you plan?_

_Sincerely,_

_Lady Miranda_

She sure doesn’t give up, Hermione thought. She was also a little annoyed that Miranda didn’t realise she worked every day at the Ministry until 4 o’clock. _But why would she?_, Hermione considered. _It's not like any of them have jobs._ She was trying hard not to judge, but the lives of the idle rich held no interest for her.

Still unsure how to discuss the situation with her husband or how to respond to Miranda, Hermione read in the Library for an hour, researching the Dark Arts and the implications of Necromancy for a few quiet minutes, until a grandfather clock in the far corner chimed 5 o’clock, and she knew it was time for her to meet Snape in the dining room. She knew he would be there; they hadn’t met the Marriage Law’s requirement of daily conversation, and as much as he disdained Hermione’s intrusion in his life, the last thing he wanted, she knew, was the reappearance of Fitzherbet Radziwill in their fireplace.

Hermione entered the dining room minutes later, dressed in a yellow tea-length gown of silk that Bitsy had pulled from her wardrobe, her hair pulled back in a simple, elegant French twist. Snape sat in his usual seat at the head. He wore his dark tunic and pants, as always, and gave only a barely perceptible nod at her entrance.

She pulled out her chair and took the seat at his right-hand.
“I believe Bellatrix is collecting corpses to create an army of inferi,” Hermione announced, so
casually that Severus thought for a moment she was commenting on the weather.

She was never one for wasting time.

“What?”

“I’ve read almost everything you have on Necromancy in the Library, and it’s the only logical
conclusion. The graveyard robbing coupled with her ambition. There aren’t enough living wizards
and witches to support her. But if she can create many inferi, over a long period, and hide their
existence, the time will come when she will feel unstoppable.”

Severus paused and took a sip from his water glass. He’d come to the same determination a month
ago, but he decided to coax out Hermione’s thought process.

“Plausible. But it would take her the better part of a decade to compile a force of undead that could
threaten the Ministry. Why would she invest that time? It’s a plan that requires a great deal of
planning and long-term evasion in order to execute.”

“Well, perhaps she is simply being…patient.”

“Why not simply mount an attack next year with what forces she can?”

“I don’t know. She’s a diehard fanatic, isn’t she? Who knows why she’d do anything.”

“‘Patience’ and ‘Bellatrix Lestrange’ are mutually exclusive, in my experience.”

“It’s possible your first-hand knowledge is clouding your logic. The facts speak for themselves.”

“Do they? There were very few corpses taken. You saw the open graves at Highgate.”

“What if that was just the beginning? What if she’s being doing the same thing on the Continent?
And all over Britain?”

“Potentially.”

“You understand her better than most. In her past she may have been more focused on quick
gratification, but why would she even bother to violate those graves unless she had a larger plan? She
must be playing a long game. The Ministry needs to know.”

“If it will quiet your anxieties, I suggest you stop by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement
tomorrow, or discuss it with Mott.”

“It will. And I will. Thank you.”

They ate the rest of the meal in silence. Hermione didn’t know what else she could say to him. She
was amped up from their conversation about Bellatrix, but she felt like she needed more. She was
noticing tiny details about him. The way he held one hand on the napkin in his lap, and moved it
rather daintily up to brush it across his thin lips from time to time. His posture — the way he always
held his shoulders back, proudly. His movements were always so economical, so controlled. She was
feeling a bit of a blush spread across her cheeks.

She looked down into her dessert. Merlin’s pants, she thought, please tell me I’m not getting a crush
on him.

She thought having better consummations with Snape would leave her less confused, but her heart
sank as she realised she was more mixed up than before. At least before it had been clear — Snape had been just Snape. Now that he was Severus-the-Wizard-Who-Made-Her-Come, it was getting more difficult to accept his rules and his cold indifference.

As they finished their tea and dessert, Hermione decided upon a suggestion.

“I noticed there is a gramophone in the parlour. I look at it each morning when I floo to the Ministry. I don’t mean to be nosy, but I’ve never heard one — do you mind showing it to me?”

Snape sighed.

He didn’t like the memories these Muggle artifacts brought forth, but she seemed to need something. She was squirming about in her chair like she had mites in her knickers.

He nodded.

****

Minutes later, they entered the parlour, and he moved to the dusty victrola, bending down to start it, placing a record under the old turntable.

Hermione settled on a brown leather settee directly across from the machine.

“I haven’t heard a proper record since I was a child,” she said.

“Did you listen to much music?”

“Not really. But Dad had a cassette deck in his car, and Mum owned a record player and also a CD player, but she preferred the vinyl. She had a really great record collection — mostly from the 1970’s and 1980’s. David Bowie. That sort of thing. They weren’t musicians themselves, though.”

Snape frowned. He had no idea what a “cassette deck” or a “David Bowie” was.

“Why do you have one?”

Severus stood as the strains of two violins, a Bach concerto, crackled from the ancient speakers.

“This belonged to my mother,” he spoke. “She found Muggle technology amusing. Much as yours preferred the novelty of records to…”

“…CD’s,” Hermione prompted, with a smile. This was the first time Snape had mentioned anything about his parents.

She watched as he poured himself a thumb’s worth of whiskey and sat in a dark brown upholstered chair across from her, sipping from the crystal glass. Hermione wished in that moment she herself had something to numb the awkwardness, but Snape hadn’t offered her any.

“I wanted to apologise…if I made you uncomfortable,” she began. “When I told you…well, about my…”

Snape took a long sip from his glass and stared at the brown-haired witch. Her palms were nervously playing with the shoulder-rest of the couch upon which she sat. She still looked so young and nervous, seated across from him.

He hated when she made him feel like he had to assuage her fears and be her confessor. He’d hated it from the moment she’d run to him for advice on her contract with Lucius.
“You did not make me feel uncomfortable. Your response was natural.”

Hermione exhaled. It lifted a weight off her that he used the word ‘natural.’ She’d wondered, probably unreasonably, if she was somehow sick or deviant — was she wrong to have enjoyed their intimacy so much, since he was so much older and her former Professor? Was she a freak?

“Thank you. I…I was embarrassed. But I wanted you to know the truth. That I…I liked being with you. I…I liked it.”

Severus inhaled sharply, feeling a sudden tightness in his lower abdomen. It was difficult to ignore how arousing her plain-spoken language could be. That same youthfulness she had that disgusted him also inflamed him. He gripped his glass a little more tightly.

“I think that was what I was missing and what I had been trying to explain. I wanted to be open with you. In that way. And I know now that we are..compatible, I know we can please one another. So Saturdays don’t have to be…well, they can be…nice. We can enjoy ourselves. It wouldn’t be wrong to.”

Her brown eyes were almost shining with excitement and she was sitting on the edge of the settee, leaning towards him, her elbows on her knees. She was almost pleading. She looked like a Fourth Year desperate to be asked to Yule Ball. He had to nip this idiocy in the bud.

Severus set his glass down.

“Hermione.”

“What?”

“Don’t conflate pleasures of the flesh with love. You are I both derived physical pleasure from one another, in one isolated evening, which may not happen again. And even if we do find regular physical compatibility, do not equate physical love with emotional affection. They have no correlation.”

Hermione couldn’t help her curiosity from bursting forth immediately from the tips of her synapses.

“How can you so totally separate physical love from emotional love? Of course there is some correlation! When you touch someone, you’re touching…well, them,” she proclaimed. “I know you don’t love me and you can’t love me, but you were loving towards me. I felt your care for me.”

“When you were my student, I had a Care of Duty over you — to protect your life. As a Pureblood Husband, I have a similar Care of Duty.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Please, we are past all of that ‘duty’ now! You didn’t have to consummate the marriage like that. You’ve have a choice each time. You chose to be more open and affectionate and kind to me. So your emotions did play a role in our pleasure.”

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. This entire discussion was rapidly becoming insipid.

“You are inexperienced, so I will ask you to defer to my greater knowledge.”

Hermione clenched her jaw. That pissed her off royally.

“No, I am making a valid refutation! We exist in this world through our physical bodies. It’s not like
you can have sex with a person and then pretend their physical body doesn’t exist for you. You don’t have to be in love with me, but when you touched me, there was a kind of affection between us. There was trust. We can’t just lie about that.”

Snape’s upper lip curled, slightly. Oh, but we can, he thought.

“You are naive,” he responded, correcting her. “It is entirely possible to find physical pleasure and release without emotional connection or familiarity. Pretense can provoke pleasure as much as honesty. More sometimes.”

Hermione sat back in the couch and let her hands fall into her lap. She looked at the unlit fireplace to her left.

“Well, that’s just…sad.”

Severus bristled. He didn’t need this little 19-year-old lecturing him on the morality or propriety of a short-term liaison.

“Sex is one of the strongest driving forces of human kind. Even those with the most steadfast determination fall prey to it.”

“And have you ‘fallen prey’ to it?”

“Haven’t you?”

Hermione sucked in some oxygen. She’d never been asked to be so honest with anyone.

“I reject the phrase ‘falling prey.’ In no way is sex something I am at the mercy of. I admit that I thought maybe with Viktor….I would want to. I wanted him, I thought, but in hindsight I just wanted that experience. He didn’t love me. He had a sweetheart back home, and we hadn’t spent enough time together. We never did anything much. I just liked the idea of someone outside Hogwarts. When Ron first pursued me, I rejected him. I told him it would be strange, since we’d been so close. But when we started dating, it turned out that our friendship made everything…easier. He and I…when we touched each other, it was so much more meaningful because we had known one another for so long and there was so much love already there. So, my only real experience was those two. I guess I am naive, in some ways. But I’ve never felt intimate like that with someone. Or been made to feel so…vulnerable. I suppose I just felt comfortable with you.”

Severus exhaled. Part of him, his darkness, wanted to gloat over the influence he had had over her. What she had admitted. He and he alone owned her pleasure. He could twist it however it suited him.

Another part of him wanted to be sick.

“Have you been with many witches?,” she posed, innocently, kicking off her heels and tucking her feet underneath her on the couch, leaning over onto the armrest.

Just how much did she think she was entitled to?! He knew he should probably get up and leave the room. He didn’t know why he was staying. And he had no idea why he was even entertaining the idea of continuing this conversation. What were they, giggling gossip-buddies?

Severus leaned back and took a long, slow slug on his whiskey, before surprising himself by answering.

“No many.”
“How many? Before me?”

The gall of this witch! Severus exhaled.

“Six, if you require so precise a figure.”

Hermione inhaled. She surprised herself that a feeling of gratitude overwhelmed her. Thank God it wasn’t in the dozens! Or the hundreds, Heaven forbid! Each individual addition would only make her feel less and less.

But still…six others? Who were these six women? The knowledge of his number made her feel queasy inside. It wasn’t an objectively “large” number. But it was “a number.” And she hated that he had had a past. And whether it has been two or six or thirty, or fifty, she suddenly realised it would have had the same nauseating effect on her.

Her husband had been with women.

Other women.

Before her.

It cut her.

She felt a strong, sick, creeping jealousy invade her belly. How dare they? How could these six witches have had her husband — heard his moans, felt him inside of them, witnessed his pleasure. He was hers! Her own!

Without knowing who they were, she felt a strong, murderous anger towards them. She hated them. These anonymous nothings who had never truly appreciated him. Never understood him the way she could understand him.

A female impulse of possession, as old as time, raked its way through her nervous system. Why had no one told her about this emotion?

You are mine, she thought, unconsciously.

Shaking, Hermione rose and moved across to his chair. She bent down and picked up one of his hands and held it between her own.

I just need a sign that this is right…that we can be more someday, she prayed. It took all the courage in her soul to touch him…even to caress her hand on his skin was an act of love.

No, Hermione thought as she looked into those fathomless black eyes, he is wrong. To be naked and vulnerable like that is an act of love, or at least an act that represents a deep longing for love, and he was vulnerable, too. To pretend otherwise was a lie against one’s soul.

She realised that, for her, the notion of a “no string’s attached” one night stand was a complete and utter lie. What have we done to ourselves, she wondered, by pretending that this most intimate of physical intimacies isn’t important? Am I naive or not forward-thinking or “liberated” enough?, she questioned, or is the world just cynical and wrong?

Hermione started to see the truth — none of these six witches had given their hearts to Severus Snape. He’d never had a sexual relationship with a woman who truly loved him. She may not have gone “all the way” with Ron, but he had touched her sexually and she had touched him, and she
knew what that was like. She felt a deep pity for her husband.

Coupled with the possessiveness over his revelation seconds before, she couldn’t help but feel a need to be closer to his body.

She sat down, carefully, inch by inch, waiting for him to stop her, but Severus merely held her gaze with those obsidian pupils until she landed her weight on his right thigh, turning her upper body to the right towards him. She still held his right hand between hers and she played with it gently, the tips of her fingers caressing the blue veins and massaging well-worked tendons.

“Thank you for listening and for your honesty,” she whispered, shyly. Why was it that all of her Gryffindor courage seemed to leave her as soon as they were touching?

Severus flicked his eyes down and then back up her body, slowly. Her chest was breathing heavily beneath her tight bodice, swelling those pale orbs he had enjoyed so much. He could have her. If he wanted to. Right now. She’d let him. He could lift her and throw her onto the Persian rug at his feet and ram his cock inside of her. She’d be alarmed, but she’d allow it. If he worked her clitoris with his hand, he might even make her come before he did. He thought of her — splayed beneath him, her yellow dress about her waist, being fucked harder and deeper than she ever had in her life, screaming in pleasure the same words she had said to him on Saturday that he couldn’t get out of his brain:

“Oh please, show me. I want to. Please, make me.”

By Gods, there was so much he could show her. Make her do. He could own her body and soul.

She would worship him at his feet before he was done. He’d chain her naked to his bed and she would beg him to do it. And wouldn’t it be fun to do that to proud, swotty Hermione Granger? The pleasure of lowering her. Taking her down a peg. Dumbledore’s little favourite. Wouldn’t it feel good to have that, after all he had endured? After what the Order had put him through? To take their Golden Girl and make her his personal slut?

He pressed his teeth together, tightly. He’d stopped breathing. No, stop, he hissed at the voice inside of him. That’s not what I want. That’s not who I am.

She was looking down at his hands with her sweet attentions, petting them. He knew she wanted the same in return. She wanted to be petted and adored. All he would have to do is lie and say, “Hermione, I love you” and he could possess her for a thousand years. His.

Why fight it? She has literally placed herself in my lap. He lifted his left hand up and wrapped in gently around the back of her neck. Unaware of the danger, Hermione leaned into his touch, the corners of her mouth turning upwards. She sighed in pleasure and closed her eyes.

Does she not know the precariousness? Does she not see it?

Her neck really was so terribly small. He could kill her and then kill himself. It would prevent both of them from enduring any more. No. Stop. STOP!

She was looking at him now. Her liquid brown eyes had fluttered open and she had that same loving look in her eyes — trust and warmth — and now it was tinged with the blossoms of lust. He was impossibly hard in his pants.

The thought of controlling all of her want….

Hermione gazed into Severus’s own dark eyes. There was something in them, glinting. He was looking at her but also looking through her. Where was his mind? He’d said nothing in several
seconds. Was it okay with him, what she was doing?

Her eyes moved to his lips. His mouth hung open, slightly, and she could hear the tremouring pulses of his breaths. They moved quickly in and out, and his strong fingers were working the back of her neck in tempo. He smelled sweet — like mint, lemon balm, the apple crumble they'd had for dessert, and something a bit earthier she couldn’t place. Like his Lab, she thought, with a hint of amusement playing across her face. His muscular thigh beneath her bottom felt firm and it was only when they were close like this, did she feel how much larger his person was than her own. She liked that.

She glanced down at the row of buttons on the front of his tunic, her eyes tracing along them all the way back up to his chin. He was so contained. Perhaps it was his very restraint that made her want to push him, to demand more of him. When her eyes arrived at his lips once more, the realisation struck her.

I’m going to kiss him, she thought, only half-a-second before her lips, seemingly of their own volition, began to descend. She tilted her breasts down and saw with satisfaction that he glanced down at them, briefly, before his dark eyes flicked back up to her visage. He must want me.

Severus watched as the succulent pink mouth drew closer until it paused, only inches away from his own thin lips. She was trembling on his lap.

The tendrils from his subconscious, bringing forth the voices of the past, dug their claws even deeper into his brain until there was one voice only, a kind of Ozymandias, beckoning him in its familiar, familial, sibilant drawl.

“Sssseverussss…."

The vision of a mottled grey serpentine finger commanding him....

Severus leapt up, practically throwing Hermione to the floor. She rose, alarmed, as he took a few steps away and paused, holding his head in both hands, pressing his fingertips to his temples.

“What is it? What’s wrong? I’m sorry. I don’t know why I—”

“It is nothing.”

He took a deep breath and straightened his tunic, then wheeled about on her, stopping the music with a flick of his wrist.

“If you had some sort of design on seducing me this evening, I find this pitiable attempt most laughable.”

“I..I didn’t! I just felt...close to you.”

Snape laughed, coldly.

“Perhaps when we return to Hogwarts in a few weeks I shall have Dumbledore check the accuracy of your NEWT scores. Only a dunderhead would confuse a simple negotiation for a tête-à-tête.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, of course you don’t. So I shall put it into words you can comprehend. You enjoyed fucking me. You want to do it again. Very well. As you have “needs,” you may come to me. And I will fulfill them. Whether Saturday or otherwise.”
“No! That’s not what I was—“

“—I have zero interest in a romantic relationship with you. I do not wish to ‘get to know you better.’ We will fuck because the Ministry is making us, or because you desire it. That is all I can give you. I hope, for the millionth time, I have made myself clear.”

He turned and strode to the door, opening it before him with wandless magic. He paused in the doorframe before turning back.

“And as for kissing, I assure you if you tempted me in the slightest in that regard, I would have sampled your wares long before now. As is, I don’t have any need for your teenage slobbering, so don’t attempt to inflict it upon me again.”

With that, he was gone, slamming the door after him. Hermione listened to his boots clack across the marble foyer and clomp up the main staircase.

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Almost three hundred miles south, Lucius Malfoy sat at his desk, re-reading a letter from Bellatrix Lestrange.

Soon, she promised. Very soon.

He set the letter down and looked out the window at the waxing moon rising. He felt a strong sense of pleasure at the idea of once more being respected and feared, of having hundreds at his command. The sibilant voice never left his mind fully, either.

But he was also thinking of Hermione Granger, or Lady Hermione Snape, as she was now styled. He’d mismanaged that. And now he wasn’t sure what the next move was.

An owl tapped at his window and he opened it. He unsealed a small letter she carried and released her. He recognized the handwriting immediately. Speak of the Devil, he thought, grinning widely. He opened it.

It had been hastily dashed off, but there was no mistaking the sender.

Lucius,

This Saturday I am having a garden party. Please come. 1pm.

Hermione

Perfect, he thought.

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At the same time, Hermione sat at her vanity, brushing her hair out with the silver "E.S." hairbrush. She'd dismissed Bitsy for the night after sending her letter to Lucius. She'd also sent an owl to Miranda confirming the garden party. To hell with Snape's permission.

She looked at her blotchy red face and bloodshot eyes in the mirror on the table, setting the hairbrush down. Bitsy had found her in the parlour, and Hermione hadn't even attempted to pretend everything was fine. She had been crying so hard, the little elf had first checked her to see if she was physically hurt.
"No, I'm...I'm not hurt."

"Then why is Mistress so upset if not injured?"

"Oh, Bitsy," Hermione had cried, unashamedly flinging her arms around the sweet little elf who had become her sole friend in this place.

"He's so cruel...why is he so cruel?"

The house-elf had no answers for her, but merely apparated her upstairs immediately and deposited her into a warm bath.

Hermione sighed and rose from her vanity, moving to her bed and sliding under the covers.

It had felt like they had made such progress! He'd shown her the Owlery, the Library. She'd helped him in his Lab. They'd enjoyed the last Saturday night. Even their meals had become tolerable and their conversation had been more open; he'd really listened to her. And now...now...he'd retreated into some dark part of himself that she couldn't understand.

A part of him that enjoyed hurting her.

And she didn't understand why.

But she knew someone who did.
That Saturday afternoon, Hermione stood at the top of the marble steps leading to the grounds of Snape Hall feeling more than a little out of her depth.

She wore a blush pink embroidered gown that flowed down to her ankles with a rounded neck, three-quarter sleeves, and a beautiful panel of green and pink flower and leaf appliqués on the bodice. It was by far the most stunning dress she’d yet donned, and though she never considered herself a girly-girl, she had gasped when Bitsy had floated it out of the wardrobe and suggested it for the garden party. She felt like a Pre-Raphaelite maiden with her hair hanging in lose curls down her back and a pink ribbon tied around the crown of her head. For once, she felt like she was perfectly attired for the role of ‘Lady of the Manor.’

Madam Kemp and Lady Miranda had been absolutely invaluable, and as Hermione gazed across the lawn, she could see several dozen female guests who had already arrived looking suitably satisfied with the arrangements. Several long tables were laid out to the brim with punch, champagne, finger sandwiches, and petit fours, and Madam Kemp had known precisely what to order the kitchen elves to prepare.

Lady Miranda had helped with the decor, which included several round tables beautifully set up with white tablecloths and centerpieces of purple and white orchids. Several fashionable dressed ladies were engaged in a game of croquet on the lawn, while others strolled around the fountains in the distance, lazily moving a flotilla of small sailboats on the water with their wands.

Currently, Kemp was busy inside with the husbands — showing them the billiards room and the library. Hermione glanced back inside the house; she was sure Snape was sulking somewhere.

He’d been furious when she announced she was holding the party, but when she pointed out that it was his fault, since he had introduced her to Miranda Vaisey, he begrudgingly gave his permission. She hadn’t seen him all day, but Madam Kemp had informed her that Snape had given her instructions that everyone was to be gone by dusk and that there were to be no overnight guests. He clearly wanted the soiree over with as soon as possible.

Lady Miranda stood across from Hermione on the terrace wearing a puffy orange satin frock with billowing sleeves; she smiled at Hermione encouragingly, and together they had formed a kind of receiving line. As Madam Kemp or one of the house-elves brought each new arrival onto the terrace, Lady Miranda would introduce the witch or wizard to Hermione. She may be a busy-body, but Lord knows how I’d be managing this thing without her!

Hermione was glancing down at the lawn, lost in her thoughts, when she heard the squeaky voice of a house-elf behind her.

“Lady Narcissa Black.”

Hermione turned, and her mouth dropped open.

There in front of her stood the gorgeous, tall, and impossibly slim form of the witch Hermione had only ever known as Narcissa Malfoy. She wore a long forest-green gown that was tightly cinched at the waist with matching emerald drop-earrings in the shape of spiders. Her lustrous hair was longer than Hermione had remembered, and the brown locks on top were wound up in an elaborate updo, while the blonde hair underneath flowed freely down to her ribs. Despite the fact that she was almost forty, Narcissa’s good looks had not faded. If anything, she had grown more beautiful with her red
lips and piercing stare.

Hermione sucked in a deep breath. She could feel that left hand of hers start its tell-take tremour.

Lady Miranda smiled widely and moved to the older witch, taking her by both hands and kissing her on each cheek in greeting.

“Oh, Narcissa, darling! I didn’t know you were back in Britain! I’m so pleased you could make it! Lady Hermione, you must allow me to introduce you to my godmother Lady Narcissa Black. She knows everyone who’s anyone!”

Narcissa eyed Hermione with her cold, blue eyes, and took a step forward, then gave a small curtsey.

Hermione’s eyes widened. Narcissa Malfoy was showing her deference?! The older witch lifted her chin in the air.

“Lady Hermione and I have met, actually. She was contemporaneous with Draco at Hogwarts. It has been some time.”

“Y-yes. Some time,” Hermione stammered. “H-how is Draco?”

“He just graduated from Durmstrang. He took six NEWTs and got five Outstandings.”

Hermione lifted her eyebrows and smiled in surprise.

“That’s amazing! Good for him.”

“Sadly he got an Exceeds Expectations in Muggle Studies, but to be honest, I don’t know why they bother teaching that anymore.”

Hermione felt her face fall. She nibbled the inside of her cheek, unconsciously. Narcissa laughed, seductively.

“Oh, come come. I am simply teasing.”

Narcissa turned toward Miranda, conspiratorily.

“It’s no secret Hermione and my family were on opposing sides in the War.”

She turned back to Hermione.

“But seeing as Draco and I have broken our ties with the past, I do hope you and I can move forward? My husband and my sister’s beliefs were not my own.”

Hermione looked up at the smooth smile of Narcissa; she couldn’t discern whether she was fully earnest, but Hermione couldn’t bear to create a scene. Not when the garden party had been going so well so far. All the other witches she had met had been extremely polite and seemed impressed with the house and grounds. None of them had said anything about Hermione being Muggleborn. If she got into some sort of public spat with Narcissa, she knew she wouldn’t win in the court of public opinion. As Miranda said, Narcissa knew everyone.

What can I do? Throw her out? Scream at her about her nightmare of a sister? Who knows if she even knows where Bellatrix is?

Hermione swallowed her emotion and gave Narcissa a matching cat-like grin.
Let her see I know how the game is played.

“Of course. We cannot be blamed for our husband’s choices. Let the past remain in the past. As Lady Snape, and the Mistress of Snape Hall, I know you have had a long friendship with my husband, and you are welcome in our home.”

Narcissa pressed her lips together. She clearly did not enjoy the fact that as Lady Snape, Hermione now out-ranked her in Pureblood society. It gave Hermione a little, petty thrill.

“Excellent. Thank you for your hospitality. And I shall make sure to give your regards to Draco. He is an apprentice at the Egyptian Centre for Alchemical Studies. He’s enjoying Cairo immensely.”

“I am glad. Tell him I’m truly happy for him.”

Narcissa nodded, a flicker of genuine gratitude crossed her face.

“I shall.”

Lady Miranda, impatient with all this talk that didn’t involve gossip, looped an arm through Narcissa’s elbow.

“Please, Lady Narcissa, do let’s have some champagne and catch up. It’s been ages!”

With a final nod, Narcissa allowed Miranda to lead her down the steps, leaving Hermione alone at last. The brown-haired witch exhaled, and smoothed out the sides of her dress with her sweaty palms.

That went better than it could have. At least I didn’t slap her, she thought, though there was still time, she thought, bemusedly.

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Inside the entry hall, at that precise moment, Severus Snape descended the main staircase just as the handsome figure of Lucius Malfoy handed his chic traveling robes to a house-elf.

“Why, Severus!” Lucius greeted his former brother-in-arms with a wide grin.

Snape stopped on the bottom stair and glared at the blonde wizard. His dark, narrowed eyes revealed his sour mood.

“To what do I owe this displeasure?”

“Severus! Haven’t you learned I’m a most repentant sinner? The Ministry has me dog-collared, and your lovely wife has all but reformed me.”

Snape said absolutely nothing, but merely folded his long arms across his chest, and looked down at Lucius from the stair. After several moments of silence, Lucius laughed out loud, chuckling into the silence of the room.

“You never were much of a conversationalist. I wonder what your poor wife does to entertain herself in this dreary old house with no one but you for company.”

“At least here she is safe from you. I know what you and Bellatrix did to her, and if you weren’t so ready to sell out the last of your kin, you would be in Azkaban for your crimes.”

“I own my many mistakes, Severus. Hermione knows how much I regret my past mistreatment of
her. But I have more than made it up to her. In fact, I have saved her life.”

Snape lifted an eyebrow, skeptically.

“I am sure.”

“It is no boast.”

Lucius took a few steps towards Severus and leaned in, slightly, his voice dropping.

“The night Dolohov met his untimely end, he attacked her in Knockturn Alley, and assaulted her. If I had been only five minutes later… well, you know what he was capable of. She would have been another of those poor women neither of us were able to save. I killed him, and I don’t regret it. I was wounded and it was Hermione who healed me. She saved my life. She healed Sectumsempra and threw off Dolohov’s Imperius. She’s a very powerful witch, and you consistently underestimate her. Not only do I owe her a life debt, but I also appreciate her for the magnificent woman she has become. Can you say the same?”

Though Severus had pieced some of the story together from Hermione’s absence that evening coinciding with Dolohov’s reported death, to hear Lucius gloatingly lay it out for him caused a muscle in the side of his cheek to twitch and his hands to clench themselves into tight fists.

Lucius leaned back on his heels in satisfaction. Though Severus’s pale face was as placid as ever, he knew his words had done their insidious work.

“So you see, she and I are bound by that secret. You could tell the Aurors, but she’d never forgive you, would she? If you had me locked up for saving her life? I am one of her closest friends now, Sev. The sooner you accept my presence in her life, the easier it will be on all of us.”

Severus’s dark eyes flashed. He pressed lightly into Lucius’s mind, only just enough so the pale wizard couldn’t detect the intrusion — and only enough to sense that the blue-eyed devil was in fact telling the complete truth.

Satisfied, Lucius turned towards the back hallway and crossed the carpet, making for the large French doors that led out to the back terrace.

“Why are you here, Lucius?,” Severus asked, stopping Lucius before he slipped outside.

Lucius turned, and with a satisfied gleam in his aquamarine eyes, he chuckled his response:

“Because Lady Hermione invited me, of course.”

And with that, Lucius turned and lifting his chin, opened the French doors. Severus heard a house-elf announce him to the other guests outside, “Lord Lucius Malfoy!”

Snape reached out and grabbed the banister to steady himself. A sick feeling twisted around in his stomach. Anger, regret, jealousy. It was the same feeling he had when he was a boy and felt powerless.

He used to find a guest bedroom in the West Wing, far away from his parents, and spend hours destroying every bit of furniture in it until his rage subsided. It was a deep desire to physically expunge these painful emotions. His work for the Dark Lord had been his outlet for so long. Though his crimes had sickened him, he had to admit that the torture and punishment he doled out had been…irrefutably therapeutic. Cathartic. He’d been deeply ashamed of the pleasure he took in destruction. And he was sickened at how much in that moment he wanted violence back in his life.
He didn’t know how to let these feelings out, otherwise. He trembled with rage at the idea that Hermione had invited Lucius to his ancestral home. After all he had explained to her about the value of Pureblood society! He had literally invited her into his past and his childhood by bringing her to this place, and she flouted his vulnerability by bringing a viper into the nest. And not just any serpent, but one who had abused her repeatedly.

Is she an idiot? Does she have no long-term memory? How could she not see the danger in keeping Lucius Malfoy company? No, he knew she was no fool. It was clearly more than an intellectual decision for her to keep his company. She’d admitted that she had gone to him — almost slept with him, because she was lonely and he’d provided her with some sort of sick emotional comfort.

Is she in love with him? Does she lust after him?

How does she insist she wants a real marriage with me, and then invite him here?

Snape shook the question from his mind and removing his fierce grip on the banister, fixed his face so that it was unreadable once more. He strode down the hallway into the billiard room.

As much as he hated playing host, it wasn’t possible to ignore Carolus Vaisey and the other Lords. He needed to welcome them and at least make a show of manners. But he knew he was not going to be able to relax or breathe comfortably until Lucius Malfoy and indeed, all of these Lords and Ladies, were packed back into their carriages and well on their way home.

He would have much to say to his Lady-wife tonight when the house belonged to just the two of them once more.

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Hermione swore to herself she wasn’t hiding. She’d made a few turns around the garden and made small talk with a few ladies, and now she found herself on the other side of a hedge opposite the buffet table where no one could see her. She took a few deep breaths. Playing the perfect hostess was not as easy as it looked.

Hermione peeked through the hedge and lifted her fingers to her lips in surprise as she spied the dashing outline of Lucius Malfoy descending the marble steps. As he moved, elegantly as ever, the groups of well-dressed ladies around him whispered and tittered amongst themselves, dipping curtseys and giving him flirtatious smiles. Evidently, he was rather popular. Hermione sat on a low bench behind the hedge. No, she definitely didn’t want to admit she was hiding, but the entire garden party had been more than a little overwhelming, and she just wasn’t sure she was ready for any of it. And certainly not ready to talk to Lucius.

Lady Miranda had introduced her to at least three dozen ladies, and though they were for the most part extremely kind and courteous, she found their conversation, which largely centered around French fashion, their latest art acquisitions, which glamours were most effective to soften wrinkles, and the best way to drop a stone in two weeks without a Slimming Spell, utterly insipid. No, she needed a few moments to collect herself, and seeing Lucius arrive caused nervous butterflies in her stomach. He looked dashing in his three-piece linen suit with his hair tied back and carrying his walnut and silver cane. His clothing was perfectly tailored to showcase his broad shoulders, trim abdomen, and long, muscular legs. He always looked like he owned everything he wore. Hermione swallowed, nervously, surprised her attraction to the pale wizard was still so perversely potent.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have invited him? She desperately wanted to see if there was anything else he could tell her about Severus and his childhood. She needed to understand her husband more, and Madam Kemp and the house-elves were all so terribly elusive when she had pressed the question to
them in the past few days. What don’t they want me to know?

As Lucius circled the lawn and paid his respects to the various ladies, Hermione watched through the thick shrubbery as he came closer and closer to her hiding place. Just when she thought she might as well stand up and move around the hedge to receive him, she heard the clear, ringing voice of Narcissa Malfoy.

“Well, Lucius, I must say I did not expect to see you here.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open, slightly, as she realized that Lord Malfoy and the former Lady Malfoy had come face-to-face by the drinks buffet on the other side of the hedge, directly within her earshot. Part of her wanted to run away, but she bit her lower lip and pressed her head into the leaves. There was no way she could tear herself away now.

“Narcissa, I admit I too am surprised. Isn’t there a Bavarian ski instructor you should be fucking, or perhaps you’ve been too busy destroying my messages to Draco?”

Hermione heard the witch emit a low giggle.

“Oh, please, Lucius. If I hadn’t turned him against you, you would have turned him against me. I couldn’t let you make his heart as black as your own. He is happy now, without your poisoned name.”

“That is excellent PR, Cissa, but I’m afraid the role of battered wife doesn’t suit you. When our life was one of privilege, you were more than happy to turn a blind eye to my crimes, and to those of your sister.”

Narcissa gave a hum of disapproval.

“I don’t wish to discuss Bella. She and I haven’t spoken in some time.”

“Why are you back in Britain?”

“I want you to put half the Malfoy estate in trust for Draco.”

“You must be joking.”

“Not at all.”

“He has disavowed my name and, per your instruction, broken with me entirely. And you ask that I let him inherit half the Malfoy fortune without the title?”

“He deserves the freedom to enjoy the Malfoy wealth without its shameful title. It is the least you could do for him.”

“Until he makes up his own mind and asks me himself, the answer is no.”

“And what will you do with that money, Lucius? If it is not for Draco, then what is it for?”

“Who knows? Perhaps I’ll donate it to a Muggle orphanage.”

“That’s not remotely funny.”

“I agree. The knowledge that Draco will not be my heir is deeply painful. But it is your doing. If you want his inheritance, convince him to become a Malfoy again. Tell him the truth and admit your lies.”
Hermione heard Narcissa give a loud, seductive sigh.

“Oh, Lucius! *Such* a hard bargainer! I’ll tell you what…let’s see if we can make another arrangement…”

Hermione heard the witch take two steps towards him on the dried grass. *No, she isn’t…is she?*

“I’ve missed you, Lucius…you and I always had such…*chemistry*. Believe it or not, I’ve been lonely and I know you’ve been through hell as well. Despite our divorce, no wizard has been able to satisfy me the way you used to….I know we could find some pleasure together again.”

“For me, but is this your attempt to trade sex for money? I never took you for a common slag, but I suppose we have all betrayed our Pureblood roots to some extent.”

“You always had a wicked tongue, Lucius. I remember just how talented it is. I’m not suggesting a reconciliation, simply an enjoyable distraction. Admit it, the thought of sneaking upstairs and having me in one of Snape’s bedrooms must make you more than a little hard. Why don’t you take me inside and I’ll show you just how much I’ve missed riding your cock?”

Hermione’s eyes bulged out of her head. She would *never* have been able to imagine when she was a child how these seemingly imperious, formal Purebloods could speak with such vulgarity in private. Narcissa Malfoy— the supercilious snob who acted like she didn’t so much as use the loo much less utilise curse words. It was *unbelievable* to hear her speak so, and even more unbelievable when Hermione peeked through the shrubs to see Narcissa’s hand gently gliding over Lucius’s backside.

Lucius took a step away from her, calmly.

“If Draco requires an increase in his allowance, I will send it. But I will not give him his inheritance as long as he forsakes me. As for you, I would sooner make love to a house-elf than ever touch your sickening form again.”

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “No need to be so dramatic. There are rumours about you, you know. That you’ve become a bit of a Mudblood-lover? Abraxas would be disgusted with you to see you fallen so low. Is Lady Snape the reason you’re here? She’s nothing but a monkey with lipstick, Lucius.”

“And *yet*, I’d rather kiss her hand than go to bed with you. What does that say about you?”

Narcissa moved to slap him, but he caught her wrist. Her nostrils flared in anger.

“Ah-ah-ah! Don’t make a scene, Cissa. Why don’t you go inside and mingle amongst the gentlemen? Perhaps you’ll find a senile old coot who will pay to stick his wrinkly todger in you? Lovely to see you, as always.”

With that Lucius turned and walked away. Hermione had to cover her mouth with her entire palm to suppress a laugh.

On the other side of the hedge, Lady Miranda approached Narcissa. Hermione leaned in, rapt.

“Narcissa, are you alright? What was all that about?”

“Oh, nothing, my sweet. Just a spat between exes.”

“If it makes you feel better, Lucius hasn’t officially courted anyone since the divorce. I don’t think he’ll ever get over you.”
“Miranda, you are a peach.”

“I’m not exaggerating! He’s been vigorously pursued. Lady Clara Auger-Beresford is completely in love with him and Lady Margoyles Price is always extending him invitations to tea. But so far he has no official maîtresse. Not that anyone could replace you, of course.”

“There’s no need to make me feel better. You forget I left him. He’s a handsome man and a terrific shag, but he’s not the only one.”

Lady Miranda giggled.

“Oh, Narcissa, you are wicked!”

At that moment, Snape exited the Hall and crossed over to the terrace balustrade, placing his palms on the ledge and staring in disapproval at all the silly ninnies preening themselves like a bunch of bloody swans in his garden.

Narcissa motioned towards Snape with her chin.

“Take Lord Snape, for example. Terribly repressed, but when one breaks through, he’s quite good at serving others, if you get my meaning.”

Lady Miranda gasped in delighted shock and grasped her friend’s bicep.

“Narcissa, you didn’t! You and Lord Snape?!”

Hermione leaned back from the shrubbery. The colour slowly began to drain from her face. On the other side of the hedge, she heard Narcissa’s voice, clear as day.

“Of course I had him. And it was extremely satisfactory,” the older witch exclaimed.

Lady Miranda dissolved in peals of laughter.

“Oh, Narcissa, you mustn’t ever tell Lady Hermione.”

“Of course not.”

“I promise not to either. She doesn’t need to know.”

Hermione moved a hand to her low belly. She felt a desperate, twisting pain it it, as if she was being prodded with a sharp needle.

Lady Miranda had been her only friend, and it was clear she was no friend at all.

But more than that, Narcissa’s words were echoing in her skull:

“Of course I had him... Of course I had him... OF COURSE I HAD HIM.”

Hermione doubled over, her palms landing in the grass. She stopped herself before she landed on her knees, not wanting to destroy the front of her pink gown.

*How?* *When was this??* *Why hadn’t he said...?* She breathed in and out, trying to catch herself.

On the other side of the hedge, she heard Miranda and Narcissa laugh again.

“Come, let’s greet Lady Caroline. Poor thing, still hasn’t lost the baby weight.”
The two women moved off, snickering together.

Hermione lifted herself up, and placed her two hands on her kidneys, leaning back to try to get more oxygen into her chest.

_Breathe, Granger, breathe!_ She felt a panic attack coming on — something she hadn’t felt in a number of weeks. Not since…not since that horrible day on the Astronomy Tower.

_Was there anything she could trust? Was there anyone worth putting her faith into?_

She tilted her head back and looked up at the sky. It was lovely. A pure, cerulean blue with fluffy cumulus, cottony clouds drifting by. How could everything above be so lovely when everything was so wrong down below?

She took two steps forwards, then paused, running her hands through her hair, and took two steps backwards in retreat. Then she made a sort of semicircle in the grass.

_What do I do? What do I do? Oh Merlin, I'm going to be sick. Severus and Narcissa Malfoy!!_ Unbidden images of the two of them, writhing in bed together, came to Hermione's mind, making the bile rise in the back of her throat.

_I have to get out of here!,_ Hermione thought, wiping away the tears that were now flowing down her cheeks. She suppressed a sob. So much for her entry into Pureblood society.

She immediately had an image of herself running inside the house, opening her trunk, throwing all of her belongings inside of it, and flooing to the Ministry. From there, she would make her way to Harry and Ginny’s flat in Bloomsbury.

_I can’t do this anymore._

_I have to run._

Decision made, Hermione peeked back through the shrubs. Miranda and Narcissa were on the far side of the lawn and Snape was no longer at the balustrade.

_I just have to make it inside_, she thought. _I can do it._ Wiping her eyes and casting a quick glamour to hide her mussed make-up, Hermione took a deep breath and commanded her feet to move. Only one thought echoed in her brain.

_Flee._
Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

Surprise! Lightning fast update! :)

Thank you again to everyone leaving kudos and comments! I love hearing what you all think of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Hermione tried to walk as quickly and calmly as possible.

Inside she wanted to break out into a panicked run, but outside she knew she had to smile and appear to be the pleasant, controlled Lady Snape, paragon of Pureblood wifely virtue and even-keeled temperament.

She avoided the terrace, which had several ladies milling about on it, and instead walked around the left-side of the house. She knew the entrance to the servant’s hall was on that side, and thought she had a better chance of avoiding guests if she took the back stairs. Just as she rounded the corner, she caught a glimpse of Lucius Malfoy exiting the entrance to the maze with a woman on his arm she didn’t recognise.

Hermione slowed. There was no way to avoid them, and they were now swiftly walking up to her. Hermione stopped and took a deep breath. Just make small-talk and then get inside, she thought.

Lucius was grinning widely as he approached, and the woman, who had beautiful bronze-coloured skin and wavy black hair, and wore a yellow dress that displayed ample bosom, was also smiling at her.

Lucius bowed deeply, and Hermione gave a smile and perfunctory curtsy.

“Lady Snape, it is too wonderful to see you again. May I introduce Lady Margoyles Price of Price Hall in Suffolk?”

“A pleasure,” the black-haired woman spoke as she curtsied. “Snape Hall is delightful, Lady Snape. Thank you for extending the invitation.”

“My pleasure,” Hermione replied. “I’m afraid I have to see about something in—“

“--Lady Margoyles, I haven’t had the chance to speak with our hostess yet. Would you mind if I took a turn with her in the maze?”

Lady Margoyles frowned slightly, but Lucius laid it on thick.

“And then I would love to meet you for a game of croquet.”

Lucius smiled seductively at Lady Margoyles, who brightened at the suggestion.
“Very well, Lucius. But I will hold you to it! Lovely to meet you, Lady Snape. Terrific garden party. I am sure I will see you again soon.”

Lady Margoyles curtsied again and then gathered her skirts in one hand and flounced away across the lawn. Lucius smiled after her, but the second the witch disappeared around the house his expression changed to one of mild annoyance. He rolled his eyes and gave Hermione a wink.

“Stunning woman, but completely devoid of intelligence. I just had to endure twenty minutes of conversation about the grooming needs of her Pomeranian, Fefu.”

Hermione shook her head and glanced over at the servant’s hall entrance.

“Sorry, I...I can’t walk with you. I have to deal with something inside. I’m... sorry.”

She turned to go.

“Wait.”

She turned back. All the amusement was gone from Lucius’s face, and his expression was now one of deep concern.

“You’re upset. What’s wrong?”

Hermione sighed. “Please, I don’t want to talk now.”

He reached his hand out.

“May I touch you?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes.”

He reached out and took her hand and then bent down and brushed his lips on the back of it. His blue eyes looked up at her, pleadingly.

“I haven’t seen you since...It’s been too long. I’m desperately worried about you. You look tired.”

Hermione looked at the ground. She shut her eyes but was unable to prevent one tear from escaping and softly rolling down her cheek.

Lucius lifted his body back up and took a step in. Hermione could faintly smell his cologne — it reminded her of pomegranates and the smell of the ocean. She opened her eyes to him when she felt the warm touch of his finger on her cheek, wiping the tear away.

“Walk with me,” he murmured softly. And without waiting for reply, he firmly placed her arm through his and guided her back to the entrance to the maze.

They entered underneath an arbor of magenta-coloured bougainvillea blossoms, and soon they were in a hallway of thick yew. Hermione remembered Madam Kemp telling her the maze was constructed of over 2,000 individual trees, but she had not explored it yet. The shrubbery was about seven feet tall on either side, not high enough to block out the light completely, and Hermione tried to take deep breaths as she felt the warmth of the sun on her face.

Lucius said nothing — he seemed to be contemplating what to say. For once, he was unsure of himself. As they came to a small clearing in the maze with a stone bench, carved angels on each side, Lucius guided her to sit and took the place next to her. He squeezed her hand, thoughtfully, encouragingly. Hermione stared down into her lap.
Finally, he spoke.

“Please, talk to me. Tell me what you are thinking.”

“I am thinking I have no one I can trust.”

“You can trust me.”

She lifted her chin and looked squarely into his handsome face and sparking blue eyes.

“Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“About him and Narcissa?”

Lucius inhaled. There was no reason to lie to her. And truthfully, when it came to this, he didn’t want to. Though he wasn’t sure how she had found out.

“Yes. How did you find out?”

“Narcissa’s been bragging...”

Hermione rose, angrily. She took a couple steps towards the hedge before rounding back on him.

“How could you not tell me? After all I have confided in you! You didn’t think I should know that our spouses had...had...been together?”

“It is painful knowledge. I was trying to spare you. Besides, if I had told you, would you have believed me?”

Hermione paused, and placed her hands on her hips, defiantly.

“Tell me what you do know.”

“When Narcissa left me, she told me that she had slept with Severus. I don’t know whether it was once or if they had a longer arrangement. To be honest, I didn’t believe it myself for some time, but when I questioned several of Narcissa’s female companions they told me it was true.”

“Oh God, does everyone know?”

Hermione put her hands to her face.

“No, but Narcissa loves to gossip. I am sure she has at least half a dozen confidantes in this.”

Hermione was horrified. How many of the women at this party, right at this very moment, knew that Narcissa had shagged her husband?

“I had once considered Severus to be one of my closest friends, though I don’t believe he ever saw me in that light. I wanted revenge. I will admit that was part of the reason I initially pursued you.”

“To get back at Severus?”

“Yes.”

Lucius rose from the bench and went to her, sliding his large, masculine hands around her small waist. He looked down at her hungrily, his eyes roving across her face.
“But not anymore, witch.”

Hermione could barely breathe. Lucius’s hands upon her body sent shudders along her spine. She wanted more.

“Lucius, please, we can’t.”

“Then why did you ask me to come?”

Hermione sighed. “You’re the only one I can talk to about Severus.”

Lucius let go of her and stepped back, his expression cloudy.

“What has he done to you? His bullying was pathetic back at Hogwarts, though I suppose somewhat understandable given the nature of your past relationship. However, you are the Mistress of his House. He owes you a level of respect! Has he hurt you?”

“No, it’s nothing like that….he has made some effort. It’s just…there’s a darkness in him. There’s a part of himself he keeps locked away and hidden from me. I don’t understand.”

Lucius nodded.

“He had a very unhappy childhood. His mother died during his first year at Hogwarts, and his father died shortly after graduation. He has no relations, and he inherited all of this quite young. He could have achieved something great with all of his privilege and wealth, but instead he shut up the house and went to teach at Hogwarts and committed himself to the Dark Lord. You know the rest.”

“You almost sound sympathetic to him.”

“I understand the emptiness and the emotional damage that led us both to the Dark Lord’s service as young men. We both expected Lord Voldemort to give us everything we ever wanted. And for awhile, he did.”

“What did Severus want?”

“That is for him to tell you. Purpose. Acceptance of a kind, I suppose. He was bullied relentlessly at Hogwarts.”

“And what did you want?”

“Love. I wanted Narcissa. And I wanted power. I wanted the name of “Malfoy” to be the envy of every Pureblood family. I wanted more than mere nobility. I wanted us to be royalty.”

“But now you’re disgraced.”

Lucius smiled.

“Purebloods have short memories. I’m a wealthy bachelor of good breeding. I expect to see many a Pureblood mother try to throw their prettiest daughters my way at the Midsummer’s Eve Ball. It’s courting season.”

Hermione’s eyes fell to the grass. She didn’t want to admit it to herself, but something about Lucius being courted by young, pretty witches bothered her. He arched an eyebrow and smirked.

“Jealous?”
“Don’t be absurd.”

Then he stepped into her, and slid an arm around her waist, firmly. Hermione gasped and stepped backward into the yew hedge. Lucius closed the distance between them until his thigh was pressed up against her and there was only inches between them.

“You have no reason to be, witch. It is you I want.”

“Lucius,” Hermione pleaded. “There’s no future here…."

Lucius leaned in and sniffed her neck — she smelt of honeysuckle. He pressed a soft kiss to her throat and then moved his lips in a trail up to her right ear. Hermione inhaled as his soft lips created a wave of tender caresses. It always amazed her that Lucius knew the precise physical response for any situation. The man knew how to pleasure as well as he knew how to torture. She felt his hot breath in her ear, and then his low, whispered words:

“Be my maîtresse, and I shall have no other. I will make another Vow to you. Be with me, and I will Vow never to re-marry. You may bind me in a Fidelity Spell. I will have you and only you in my bed, Hermione.”

Hermione could feel her knees go weak, and the ripples of pleasure between her legs. Her abdomen was tight and she could barely breathe. He was peppering her with small kisses now, all along her jaw, intentionally avoiding her lips, teasing her.

“Oh, Lucius…,” she murmured, quietly. It was heady to be back in his arms, to feel his strong, shameless desire for her. His plainspoken confidence in their chemistry…in what they could have…if only she would acquiesce.

He squeezed the small of her back, and with his other hand, slid into the hair at the back of her neck, adjusting the angle of her head so that her throat was even more exposed, her lips at the perfect angle for him.

She moaned softly, loving the way he simply took, knowing she wanted it, too.

His lips descended and he kissed her gently, softly coaxing her own to play with him. She felt her body melt forward, and her traitorous hands raised themselves from her sides and pressed into his broad chest softly.

“Mmmm…I love your touch upon me,” he murmured against her lips.

Hermione moaned in response and opened her mouth to him. He tongue slid inside and began to play with her own, gently lapping. She could feel herself falling over a precipice. Lucius was so physically reassuring. His kiss made her feel like she was the most special witch in the world. He was untrustworthy, frightening, and there was no guarantee he wouldn’t abuse her again, but she also knew he was not faking his lust. She could feel his hardness pressing into her lower abdomen — so insistently pushing between the fabric of his linen pants and the thin gossamer of her dress.

Knowing he was so close, knowing that with him she would always be desired, always be wanted, she realised for the first time that she was going to give in.

Now it was simply a matter of logistics. She would take him for a lover. He would be her…what was the official word Snape had used? Her paramour. She would have a husband and a lover. She would belong to two men...simultaneously?

The thought disturbed her, and Hermione leaned back, closing her mouth as Lucius's tongue slipped
from it, and inhaling deeply. Lucius pressed his lips together and smiled down at her, his glittering blue eyes were awash with pure lust and distinct triumph.

“When shall we tell, Severus?” he asked, panting slightly.

_Oh, God_, Hermione thought.

The idea of sitting down with Severus and Lucius and negotiating this entire thing was so mortifying and stomach-churning.

She thought of Severus’s face. Those moments of vulnerability she had seen. He had told her she could take Lucius as her lover, though he wouldn’t approve. She knew if she did that then there would be no going back. Snape would hate her. Forever. Their marriage would have no warmth whatsoever, no friendly companionship of any kind. That possibility would be permanently closed. He would probably insist they return to the soulless in-the-dark mechanical couplings of their early consummations. That would be the price of having Lucius as her official lover. She would have to endure Severus and their loveless Saturdays.

Once a week, he would pump in and out of her a few times, and then the rest of the week she would endure his dark, hateful gaze. Lucius would become the only light in her life.

And what about Harry and Ginny? _They will know. Everyone will know_. If she’d learnt anything, it was that secrets of this nature were impossible to keep.

Ginny would never speak to her again.

Harry would probably minimise contact.

And despite the way these Purebloods dressed it up with their French words, she knew the truth: she would be an adulteress.

Was _this thing_ with Lucius worth giving up all of that? Would she lose her self-respect?

Hermione stepped to the right and slipped out of Lucius’s arms.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Not yet. Please. I need time to think.”

Lucius nodded.

“May I owl you?”

“Yes.”

Without looking back at him, Hermione moved to the clearing’s exit and rushed along the yew trees. She felt more confused than ever before. The urge to flee was still strong.

_I’ll still go. I need Harry and Ginny. I can’t make a decision in this place. I’m losing my mind._

She moved faster and faster, her soft slippers lightly hitting the grass, until she burst from the yew maze and was moving at a swift run to the servant’s entrance. She flung the door open and moved quickly through the kitchens, ignoring the surprised elves and humans who were opening new bottles of champagne and placing mini-quiches on serving trays.

She took the servant’s stairs two at a time, her diaphanous pink gown billowing behind her.

She felt her cheeks flush in shame as she thought of how easily she had responded to Lucius. _Am I
some wanton?, she wondered.

Had her sexual pleasure with Severus turned her into some sort of sexually ravenous she-beast? Even now her mind was full of those sensations — his lips, his eyes, his chest, his hands. His smell and his masculine confidence. Lucius Malfoy was dangerous — he was a dark, empty well she could easily fall into. She would drown in him, happily. He’d take all of her, use her up. And perhaps even that would be better than what she had now. She was frightened by her own lust. It didn't seem to align with her sense of right-and-wrong. If I'm not a good person, she wondered, then who am I?

At last, she reached her chamber door and flung it open.

There, staring out the window, was the dark form of her husband, Severus Snape.

He turned around, slowly, and he wore an expression of barely-controlled fury. His dark eyes were glowing with a frightening intensity and in his hand he clutched several pieces of paper. On one of them, Hermione could just make out a signature, “Lucius Malfoy.”

Her eyes widened in fear.

“What…what are you doing in my room?” she accused, closing the door behind her.

Snape closed the distance between them, his face a twisted sneer. He brought a piece of paper to his eyes. He read:

“…all day I have been in agony at the thought of disappointing you.”

He lifted another:

“I worry about you, all alone at Snape Hall with your cruel husband. Do you know how much I wish you were in the room next to mine here at the Manor? Or better yet, curled up next to me in my own bed.”

Hermione tried to respond, but he lifted another, the last missive she’d received:

“Of course I will come to the garden party. Your request has lit a fire of hope within my soul. I am counting the hours.”

He balled the papers up and threw them at her feet. He sniffed the air and folded his arms in his typical, defensive posture.

“I never asked anything of you but honesty. I even told you you could have Lucius as your lover if you wanted him. But rather than own your choice, you have lied to me repeatedly. You are confined to your bedchamber and the parlour until further notice. You may floo to the Ministry, but I shall instruct the elves the rest of the Hall is off-limits to you. I see no reason to extend the privilege of hospitality when you cannot even show me the respect a Lord-husband is due.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open. She was floored.

“Are you kidding me?! You come into my room, rifle through my private papers, and then tell me I am going to be some type of prisoner here?! That’s rich!”

“This is my house! I am entitled to go where I please and make the rules as I please! And need I remind you, the Law is quite clear that my wife’s bedchamber is a place in which I am permitted, nay, encouraged to visit as often as I please!”
“Then the same is true for me! I am the Lady here in this House. I will use the Library. I will walk the grounds. And I will write to whomever the hell I wish to write to. You don’t own me, Snape! And acting like an entitled git will not make things better between us!”

Severus’s upper lip curled as he revved up for an onslaught of his characteristic cruel sarcasm.

“I am sure nothing will. For I now see to whom I am chained. You are the textbook definition of inadequacy. Your simple Muggle ways, your childishness, your duplicity. I was looking out the window of my Study just now, and do you know what I saw?”

“A bunch of stupid Purebloods, probably, just like you. And then me, trying to fit in as best I can to make you happy!”

“No. I saw my wife. My stupid child-bride, snogging Lucius Malfoy in the maze like a Knockturn Alley harlot. Imagine my surprise. I believe it was just yesterday you were pleading with me for a real marriage? You revolting hypocrite.”

Hermione reached out and grabbed the post of her bed for support. She felt herself growing dizzy. Snape took another step forward; he lifted his chin and looked down his hooked nose at her. He was enjoying cutting her down, and she felt a pit of guilt deep in her stomach.

“I’m going to be sick.

“You disgust me, Hermione. I never liked you, but I did think you had honour and principles. I gave you every opportunity to tell me you wanted him. But you were too proud to admit it. Too haughty. You thought you could stick this out — you thought you could change me, because your ego would never accept that I find you unlovable. You wanted to live up to some immature fantasy of fidelity. Pathetic. I can hardly stand the sight of you. I shall tell Madam Kemp to send our guests home. It makes me sick to see you parade about in front of them with the name Lady Snape. Bitsy shall bring your supper.”

With that, Severus moved to the small door to the adjoining sitting room, and without looking behind him, exited, and slammed it roughly after him. The walls shook, and Hermione crumpled to the floor, leaning her cheek against the side of her bed. She lifted a hand to her mouth to suppress a sob. It was all wrong. It was all going SO WRONG.

And how dare he! How DARE he?!

As shocked as she was that he had seen her kiss with Lucius, she knew that she had done her best to be honest with Severus. He made it sound like she had been secretly plotting an affair with Lucius throughout their marriage, when it was HIS cruelty that had driven her to Lucius. And in fact his own actions that had caused their marriage in the first place!

FUCK. THIS.

Hermione got up, wiped the snot from her nose and the tears from her eyes, and followed him. She entered the sitting room and crossed to Snape’s door. She pulled the knob but found it locked. She pulled out her wand from where it had been hidden in a pocket at her hip and pointed it at the door.

“Alohamora!”

The door flung open and Hermione entered Snape’s bedroom. He was sitting in a chair by the window, his head in his hands. At first, she felt a twinge of sympathy for his prostate form, rubbing his temples, but when he lifted his face to her, she could see there was no sadness there, simply the same cold fury she had just borne the brunt of.

“How dare you take no responsibility for this, Snape!” she shouted at him.
She reached down and peeled off one of her slippers, throwing it at him. It hit him in the chest and he stiffened in his seat, dark eyes ablaze at the indignity.

“You married me!” she all but screamed. “YOU married ME!”

“And I regret it!” he snarled.

“You have made that very clear! But I find it rich that you accuse me of dishonesty when YOU are the one who has fucked Narcissa freaking Malfoy!”

Severus furrowed his brow. *How does she know that?* He quickly recovered.

“Ah, yes, but you are the one saving Lucius Malfoy’s life. That is, after he saved yours. The way he tells it, he was quite the Knight in Shining Armor. Did you not think it important to inform your husband that you were almost raped by one of his former associates?”

Hermione ran her fingers through her hair, lightly tugging it in frustration. She grabbed the ribbon from it and tossed it angrily to the ground.

“Ugh! I was assaulted, you stupid, unsympathetic git! I have been traumatised. Over and over again. And I was scared of you. There was no one to trust, and I couldn’t risk you being even more cruel. I could barely handle you as it was -- you were my teacher! I wanted nothing but your approval! This is actually EXACTLY what I was afraid of. That you would call me some sort of stupid idiot, some harlot who brought it on herself. Is it any wonder I have turned to Lucius? He never upbraids me. He’s never lifted a hand to me since you and I married. He treats me with kindness and respect. He asks me, ‘how I am doing?’ It doesn’t take much! What you don’t see is that YOUR actions have caused MY actions. And yet you take no responsibility at all. I might be a liar, but you are a coward, Severus Snape!”

“How dare you, you insolent chit!” he growled, jumping up from the chair.

“You are!” she insisted, refusing to back down. “You act like I have broken all the rules of Pureblood etiquette, when you’re the one who didn’t even think it was courteous to inform your wife when she was about to host a party to which a woman he used to fuck is invited!”

“Narcissa was a mistake. And she and I…our encounter was a single, forgettable evening. Besides, our agreement was that I would get privacy and you would get physical intimacy.”

Hermione snorted.

“Well, I haven’t gotten much of that, have I? You can’t even ‘get it up’ without a Virility Potion. I saw it in your room in the Dungeons! You could have been honest about that. It would have saved me a lot of pain. I wondered if you just weren’t capable of normal sex, but I realise now that you are, just not with me!”

“Well, I am sure you will get all the sex you desire between our pathetic weekly consummations and your trysts with Lucius.”

“I’m sure I will! And, you know, at least with Lucius, I will finally get to be properly and thoroughly desired.”

Hermione took off her other slipper, throwing it at the carpet at his feet. She was furious, her hands balled into fists and her shoulder shaking with rage.

“I am wasted on you! You’re nothing but a cold fish! You couldn’t even begin to fulfill me. It’s a
good thing we’ve both realised it now.”

His eyes narrowed angrily at her, and he moved rapidly towards her, stomping forward in fury. She stepped back, alarmed, and she found herself pushed back against the wall next to the fireplace, her back pressing into the damask wall covering. He loomed over her, dark eyes flashing. He was biting his lower lip and his forehead was furrowed in concentration.

“Don’t. Push. Me,” he warned, extending a long finger in front of her face. His teeth were gritted. His entire torso seemed like it was being pulled by an unseen entity, almost to the snapping point, like an overly-tightened violin string.

“You don’t scare me! I can get what I want from Lucius! And it has nothing to do with you! You’re just inadequate, frankly. Don’t you get it? Sometimes a witch just wants to be bloody well kissed. Not that you would know the first thing about how to properly——!”

Hermione had no idea how it happened.

Before she could finish her sentence, the next thing she knew her mouth was fused to Severus Snape’s.

This was not the teasing, coaxing nibbles and licks of Lucius’s seductive kisses.

This was a searing, bruising, firm pressure of mouth on mouth.


He stole her breath away, molding his thin lips against her, and she had an insistent feeling that he was claiming her.

He was a man. And she was a woman. And he was taking her mouth for his own. Hermione suddenly felt terribly weak.

He lifted his hands up, and Hermione sensed them land gently on either side of her face, cupping her cheeks. His lips moved boldly, with sensual confidence. He didn’t use his tongue, but she didn’t miss it. The firmness of his pressure and his need was more than a little alluring.

There was an element of awkwardness, a sense of newness that made it less immediately exciting than her experience with Lucius, but it was one hell of a kiss, nonetheless. Even the awkwardness seemed to shoot little intense frissons of desire into her lower half.

They broke apart seconds later. Severus still held her face and caught his breath, staring down into her lovely brown eyes. She stared back up at him. He held her gaze with a passionate intensity. Those black, fathomless, unreadable pupils. Who is this man?, she wondered.

“Is this what you want?” he murmured.

Hermione nodded, breathless.

“Yes.”

“It’s Saturday,” he whispered.

“I know.”

They looked at one another, unsure what to do next.
Chapter End Notes

Someone suggested there might be an interest in some of my research photos, so here's a few that relate to this chapter. :)

*Hermione's garden party dress: https://cdn-images.farfetch-contents.com/12/58/11/70/12581170_12786141_1000.jpg

*Lady Margoyles's name is a sort of tribute to Miriam Margolyes who played Pomona Sprout. I love her. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miriam_Margolyes

*The yew maze: http://photos.wikimapia.org/p/00/03/21/37/25_full.jpg

*Snape's bedroom:
https://i.pinimg.com/originals/44/89/c9/4489c9f10512f6c233bae62f6594bcb8.jpg

*Snape Hall:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Kedleston_Hall_04.jpg
Chapter 63

Thank you so much for your patience! I know it has been over 2 weeks since my last update. I’ve had a lot going on that has made it difficult to write -- work, and also some personal stuff that has really impacted my self-confidence.

I didn't want to publish until I had finished this chapter, but I feel like something is better than nothing, and I don't think it's fair to make you wait until I feel confident again to finish it. So, hope you will forgive the abbreviated chapter.

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She tilted her head up, and this time her lips sought his, gently pressing up and into them. He allowed it, passive for a moment.

She raised her hands to his hair, and carded her fingers into his silky black locks. He slanted his mouth upon her, and then, unable to resist, he pressed violently against her once more, his lips working over her own with commanding intensity. She could feel his prominent nose press firmly into her cheek, the flutter of his soft black eyelashes on her cheekbone. His body was shaking.

After several seconds, Snape abruptly broke the kiss and hurtled himself backwards, as if he had been burned.

He stepped over towards the bed and grabbed the frame for support. He lifted a hand to his lips, as if horrified by the liberties they had taken, looking at her with a mixture of terror and disgust.

“I…I’m sorry,” he stammered. “It was wrong of me to force myself upon you. I apologise.”

Hermione stared at him, breathlessly, in disbelief. Her chest was heaving.

“You have nothing to apologise for.”

“I should never touch you in anger,” he replied, eyes downcast in a sudden wave of shame.

“I provoked you,” Hermione replied, plainly.

She didn’t forgive him. But it was true. She’d pushed him to see what would happen, perhaps unconsciously. And she had her answer now. He desired her. He hated himself for it, but he did desire her. It gave her that small glimmer of hope again — the hope that perhaps something more was possible between them, despite his denials. The way his actions contradicted his words sometimes filled her with such confusion. By comparison Lucius was straightforward. She didn’t know what else to say, so she watched Snape cautiously.

He said nothing, but slowly sat down on the edge of his bed, his expression was deeply pained, his mouth was pursed and his brow lined in worry. He raised a hand and ran it through his hair. Hermione couldn’t understand his exaggerated response. He seemed overwrought with guilt. *It’s not like he attacked me.*
“I don’t know how to give you what you want. I cannot make you happy,” he admitted, finally, dropping his hand back to his lap. He raised his eyes to her. Hermione could see he was suffering.

“When I look at you, I still see a student.”

Hermione nodded. _No wonder he pushes me away. No wonder he needs the Virility Potion._

In that moment, she realised that it was up to her to try to change how he viewed her, if she could. She knew she couldn’t ask him to _love_ her, he was right about that. She shouldn’t try.

But she could comfort him, as a wife comforts a husband. Perhaps she could alleviate him of some of his guilt. And some of her own. She _did_ care about him, despite how awfully he had treated her, and how unfair he was. She respected him and, though she knew it was probably her naive Gryffindor optimism sneaking in, she wanted to _try_. If she was going to eventually take Lucius as a lover, she wanted the reassurance she had done everything she possibly could to make things work with her husband first.

_This may be my last chance_, she thought.

“Bitsy!” she called out.

With a _crack_ the little elf appeared.

“Yes, Mistress?”

“Bitsy, tell Madam Kemp I am suddenly taken ill with a severe migraine and my husband is attending to me. We will not be available. Madam Kemp may make our apologies. See that our guests are shown to their carriages when they are ready to depart.”

“Yes, Mistress! Shall I bring you any potions for your head?”

“No, Bitsy. My Lord will look after me. We require privacy. Please ward the room as you leave and let no one disturb us until we call. That’s all.”

“Of course!”

Another _crack_ and Bitsy departed.

Snape watched all of this with an arched eyebrow. _What was she doing?_

Hermione took her wand out and pointed it at the window. “_Prope sagum!_”

The heavy blue silk curtains moved along the rod, slowly, blocking the afternoon sun until only a sliver of warm glowing light illuminated the room. The shaft of light pierced the air between them and Hermione could see the dust particles dancing in it. Suddenly, everything felt rather heavy and humid.

Hermione lifted her hand and placed her wand on the mantel. She took a deep breath in. She was quivering slightly. _What if he rejects me?_ She knew what she was about to do was possibly one of the bravest things she’d ever done, but she also knew she _had_ to do it. She couldn’t be a passive participant in her own marriage, or her own life, any longer.

He’d promised to fulfill her “needs” and she _did_ need physical intimacy. And if Severus wouldn’t give it to her, she knew she would turn to Lucius for it.

But that kiss! Surely, there _was_ the possibility for a new way of being with Severus Snape. It didn’t
She looked cautiously at Severus. He sat on the bed, stone-still, his dark eyes shining at her with a burning intensity. His expression was placid, but she felt his desire in the air between them — the tug of the possibility of something. She wet her lips as the notion that he might be reading her thoughts occurred to her.

I desire you, she thought, almost hoping he could hear. She took a step forward and slowly reached around to the back of her gown.

She found the zipper and pulled at it, awkwardly. It slid down her spine. She watched Severus carefully, never breaking eye contact. His left eyebrow arched half an inch, but otherwise he gave nothing away. She slowly slipped the diaphanous pink gown from her body and it landed in a soft heap at her ankles. Beneath, she wore a simple pink bra and matching satin panties. Nothing terribly fancy or seductive. She thought of the flaws of her body — the annoying dimple of cellulite on her right outer thigh that never seemed to go away, the purple scar across her sternum, the carvings on her arms, the freckles that only seemed to darken with age. She didn’t love her body. She should. It was strong and healthy. But she didn’t love it. Because in her eyes, it was not perfect. Yet Severus had desired it. He had touched it because he wanted to touch it. And he had said she was desirable. So she could endure the shame of standing before this cruel man in her underwear for as long as he wanted to look.

And by his expression, he very much wanted to look.

She watched as his chin lifted slightly. His nostrils flared, and it was clear his breathing had changed. His grip on the bedpost had tightened incrementally, and he had slightly straightened his spine.

Here goes nothing, Hermione thought. She suddenly felt like an actress in a movie, playing the role of seductress. She never imagined she would be in a room with a man, playing that kind of role. But she couldn’t bear not being an active participant in her own life anymore, so with a deep breath, she made her decision. I will do what I can to bridge this distance between us.

She lifted her feet and stepped outside of her gown and walked slowly over to him. His eyes tracked her, but still he said nothing, until she stood directly in front of him. She thought she noticed a tiny quiver in his upper lip, but otherwise he was a statue, firmly in control of himself. His dark eyes seemed to give the game away. They burned into her. She knew there was something there — he was aroused, at least somewhat. She wasn’t so naive she couldn’t detect that. But why did he insist on holding back to such a degree?

She leaned down, slowly, intending to kiss him, and just as she fluttered her eyes closed she felt a firm grip on her forearm. She opened her eyes and he was staring at her.

“I think we should...get the consummation over with,” she murmured, a bit lamely, trying to encourage him to let her continue. “We might as well...”

Severus exhaled. He knew she was trying to save face. To be honest, he was impressed with her initiative. Her impetuousness, much as it generally annoyed him, was more than a little arousing in this moment.

She was so desperately vulnerable. Her little form. Her pleading doe eyes. He did desire her, but he couldn’t help but feel that even in this moment, when she was the initiator, that he was a ruthless monster taking advantage. She was more than fifteen years younger. Surely that alone meant he was some kind of predator. And to slake his desire with her could only ever be a symptom of his soul’s sickness. The more he desired her, the more convinced he was of his own unworthiness to go on
living. Surely this was a symptom that the Dark Lord’s influence would never totally leave him. If he were a better man, he’d cut his own throat. She’d inherit everything and be free. He swore he would do it one day soon.

He glanced up and down her body — every aspect of her form was pulling him in, inviting him to wrap himself around her. Perhaps tomorrow he’d suffer for it. But today…tonight he would have her.

“Is that what you want?” he asked her once more, quietly.

Hermione nodded, her brown eyes full of the sweet excitement of a young woman fully embracing her own yearnings. He was still angry with her, but she had a way of cutting through his anger with her vulnerable expression. He hated that she could worm her way into his sympathy.

“I need this,” she whispered. “If you could just…touch me.”

She took his hand and lifted it up, and gently placed it at her waist. The warm skin there was the softest thing Severus had ever felt. She truly was silk. He caressed her lightly. It took everything in his power not to pull her down into his lap. He desperately wanted her straddling him so he could feel her heat against him. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. I will not hurt her, he vowed.

“May I kiss you?” she asked.

He turned his face downwards and exhaled. He couldn’t allow that kind of inroad again. It had been a mistake to kiss her.

He had so rarely kissed women. He didn’t enjoy the intimacy of it. It was too…too much. It seemed to speak of feelings and emotion that couldn’t be contained. He’d always tried to avoid it in the past. A kiss on the body, the neck, even between a woman's legs. Those were simply caresses.

But things could be gleaned from a kiss on the lips. Information could be obtained. It was not advisable. It was a tell. Any good spy knew this.

And for Hermione, he knew what kissing meant to her. It was a perfect representation of what she most wanted — romance. He refused to lie to her in that way. Bastard though he knew he was, he was steadfast. He would never allow her to believe a lie. He could never love her.

For as he well knew, to hold out hope that someone you love might love you back was the most brutal human experience.

So he said nothing. His hand at her waist had grown still, and he was staring down at the floor. Hermione sensed she was losing him. He wasn’t present with her any more. She felt her palms get a little sweaty. She needed to do something. “We don’t have to kiss,” she said, suddenly frightened he would call the entire thing off. She couldn’t bear the idea of having to put her gown back on and trudge back to her room only to what...resume the experience in the complete darkness of the night. She wanted him now. He was on the backfoot. She had to try.

His eyes found her own again, and thankfully there was reassurance there. A heat and intensity. She felt prickles all along her bare arms. He said nothing. He didn’t need to.

“Can I…touch you?”

He gave a small nod, and watched her from his beneath his dark lashes.
Trembling, she lifted her hands between them. She wanted him. All of him. No more hiding. If there was a chance to make this work, she needed him to lay as much on the table as she had. She remembered their debate over sex and emotional intimacy. It was hard to deny that there was no emotion between them now. His eyes were two black pools of aching vulnerability. It made her heart go out to him. She reached for him.

When she undid the first button at his throat, his breath hitched as he realised her intent.

Her fingers worked swiftly, undoing one button after another. The ones at his throat, then down to his collarbone. Then along the sternum, the ribcage, the waist, the hips, the front of his thighs. He watched her undress him, saying nothing, keeping his legs as relaxed as he could, despite the undeniable hardness between them.

She was plainly nervous, but there was a feeling in the air between them, like the negative ions after a violent thunderstorm, that prickled her skin and spurred her on — some feeling of time standing still. That she existed now only to please and be pleased.

He was allowing her, and she felt deeply aroused at his permission. There was a tingling in her breasts and she wanted to be rid of her bra, but she wanted him to be as naked as she was before they proceeded. She’d never undressed a man before, and the slow build up that came from the patience of button after button after button made her mouth go dry. She could feel the desire low in her belly, the flutters of anticipation between her legs. Her fingers were clumsy, but determined, and his soft circling caresses at her waist felt like encouragement.

Finally, his long tunic was completely undone, and Hermione slid the heavy garment off his shoulders. It fell down against the bed, and she slowly undid the white buttons on the dress-shirt underneath. She didn’t dare make eye contact with him — the feeling of his smoldering gaze upon her was almost too much. She bit her lip slightly in concentration and she swore she could hear him take a sharp inhale.

At last she had the last button open and she pulled the bottom of the shirt from where it was tucked into his pants. His naked torso lay before her eyes.

She looked at his flesh for the first time — the body of her husband that she had, strangely, never seen. Through the opening of his white shirt, she could see a smattering of dark hairs on his chest. He wasn’t too hairy. She hadn’t remembered feeling too much against her in their previous encounters, but there was an attractive line that joined in the middle of his chest and continued towards his belly button. She lifted her hand and traced it lightly with her middle finger. The hair was soft. She watched his chest rise as he took a deep inhale when the skin of her fingers made contact and began their delicate exploration.

His body was lean but muscular — his pectorals and abdomen were not overly built up and defined in the way that Lucius’s body was — but he was strong beneath her hands. She liked the way his stomach clenched as she moved her fingers lightly across it. His skin was warm to the touch, and softer than she had remembered from their last coupling. She loved the contrast of the soft skin stretched over firm muscle.

She glanced up at him, and saw his eyes were closed. He looked sweet, like a little boy. How was it possible this was the same wizard who had hurled such cruel insults at her only minutes before? The man who had tortured her as a child?

He was endlessly intriguing; even his unhandsomeness had changed into something enticing; she was in a haste to know and see more of him. She resisted the urge to kiss his thin lips, lightly hanging open, drawing in a ragged breath.
She pushed the white shirt off his shoulders as well, and smiled as his upper body was fully revealed to her at last.

He was beautiful in his own way. Pale yet strong. There were many, many scars. She hadn’t expected quite so many. Some were small and silvery. They looked like tiny cat scratches.

Others were proper gashes, raised red and white welts that looked like they had come from some sort of cutting implement. She placed both her trembling hands on his shoulders, at last touching this man in his purest form. She ran her hands along his shoulders, and down his upper back. His body was so different from Ron’s. He was very much a "man" and the more she saw, the more she wanted.

He leaned forward into her touch and gave a small groan. Her eyes flicked down once more, but his own remained closed. She continued to ghost her fingers over him lightly, cautious not to push for too much, yet suddenly wanting to touch and smell and taste every inch of him. She moved up and around his shoulders and felt a collection of deeper scars at his upper back. She had felt them before. Perhaps someday he would let her see those, too. But for now this was enough.

Her hands moved back up to his shoulders and she softly traced her fingertips along every scar of his front. Severus raised his left hand to her waist to join his right. His large hands almost encircled her, and his thumbs began to massage at her with more intensity. She let her hands dip lower, tracing the sensual path between his abdominal muscles down to the top of his pelvis. Her hands stopped at his belt and they both took a deep inhale.

*I can do this*, she thought. *I’m doing this!* She moved lower and felt his belt buckle under her fingers.
Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

I swear I was not fishing for compliments, but I want to say I was SO MOVED by all of the encouraging words left in the comments last chapter, I honestly got choked up! I had a long talk with myself today and decided screw it, I would take the entire evening for myself and just write, even if I was feeling insecure. As Robert Frost wrote, "the best way out is always through."

So, this chapter was written, edited, and published in just 5 hours! Thank you for reminding me not to let other people rain on my parade. I love sharing this story with all of you, and I think it is amazing anytime someone takes precious time out of his/her day to spread kindness to a complete stranger on the Internet! Much love and gratitude.
❤❤❤ -Stella

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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With a low growl, Severus suddenly stood from the bed, surprising her. His hand wrapped around her wrist and pulled her away from him. She took a step back and looked up at him questioningly. There was a measure of dominance he was not quite willing to cede to her. Allowing her to be comfortable in their Saturday requirement did not mean he would permit her sovereignty over his person.

Nice try, little Gryffindor, he thought, his upper lip slightly curling.

Hermione pressed her lips together. She was almost out of ideas. Her eyes roved over the planes of his bare chest that was now directly in front of her face — the warm afternoon light bathed his skin in a light orange glow. He held her wrist in his firm grasp, his strong calloused fingers pressing hard against her small bones.

She felt like they were almost negotiating silently. Her curiosity and his need for control pushing and pressing against one another. She needed him to capitulate. I can’t do this alone, she thought.

She raised her other hand up to his cheek, and gently placed it along his jaw. She could feel the barest hint of stubble there, though he was always fastidiously clean shaven. He didn’t close his eyes or lean in to her touch. He gave no more indication that he wanted to proceed, staring down at her with his inky coldness; she slowly ran her hand down his neck and chest, until it landed just above his heart.

She thought back to their first meal in this house, in the dining room. He’d put her hand over his breast and told her there was nothing there for her. But she could feel his heart beating now. The steady thump underneath her palm that signaled he was a mortal man, like any other wizard, not some terrifying larger-than-life figure. Not Neville’s Boggart. And men, most men, needed women.

He was real and alive.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.
She looked up at him. His eyes had widened slightly and his grip on her wrist had relaxed somewhat. Emboldened, she dropped her hand and moved it down to the top of her knickers. His lips parted as he realised what she was doing.

She slid her thumb into the waistband and moved it downward slowly, dragging the pink satin down her hipbone and slowly, cautiously down her thigh. She let it go just above her knee, and the fabric dropped to her ankle, exposing her lower half. Snape swallowed and released his grip on her other hand in surprise. His eyes flicked down to what she had exposed.

Severus could feel himself crumbling before her. Her sweet centre was before him — she had presented her most intimate self to him — her lovely rounded hips, the soft skin of her lower belly that continued down until it was joined by delicate curls that adorned her practically untouched mound. It took every ounce of control he had not to fall to his knees and begin worshipping her.

Hermione began to tremble with nerves. He had touched her everywhere, been inside her body, but he had never seen that part of her. It had always been hidden in the dark, in the shadows, covered by his own body. How can a gaze be more intimate than a touch?, she wondered. She took advantage of the fact that she had both hands back and quickly reached behind her to undo her bra clasp. She let the straps fall from her shoulders and soon that, too, was on the carpet. Her trembles had become noticeable shivers now. The room wasn’t cool; it was hot with the afternoon heat, but Hermione couldn’t stop her knees from shaking or the gooseflesh from rising up on her arms.

She was suddenly more frightened than she had ever been in her entire life. If he rejected her now, she might never come back from it. No one had ever seen her entirely naked like this before — not Ron, not her mother, not her friends. She didn’t even like seeing her naked body in the mirror when she changed. Not because she hated herself, but she just didn’t have any use for it. She had begun this “seduction” with a store of confidence, but it had been used up entirely. Her stomach was doing flip-flops, and she couldn’t bring herself to look back at Snape. She bit down on some skin inside her cheek. It did nothing to quell her trembling. Oh God, help me.

Snape had wrested his gaze from her lower half only to have it claimed by the sight of her creamy breasts again. He had been unable to forget them — they truly were exquisite. As his eyes drank in the sight of her trembling, feminine form, anxious and waiting for his touch, he felt a rush of steady arousal at how powerful she had made him in this moment. What happened next was entirely his choice. How was she able to bestow so much trust in him? It baffled him. Didn’t she know he could hurt her?

When he was a young man, he had dreamed that one day Lily would come to him and offer herself like this. Sometimes in his dreams he made love to her so sweetly that they both held each other and wept afterwards. Sometimes he took her roughly, forced her to do all kinds of degrading acts, until she screamed out that he was her Lord and Master and that James was nothing and she lived to serve him. He had hated that both dreams came in equal repetition. A good man would never have such dark dreams.

He had a choice now before him. A real choice.

Not a dream. A warm, living witch. Offering herself.

“Sssevenussss....”

He shook his head slightly, willing the past back into its place.

Everything was different now.
He had married this girl. Hermione Granger. He had married her when he didn’t have to. He had taken a vow.

“I, Severus Tobias Snape, do promise myself in matrimony to you, Hermione Jean Granger. On my honor as a wizard, I swear to uphold this marriage contract and faithfully fulfill all requirements herein for as long as we both shall live. With my blood, I consecrate.”

He ran his gaze upwards from her breasts and settled on her face. Her hair was hanging in pretty curls about her. Her eyes were downcast. Her brown eyelashes were so small and delicate. He wondered what they would feel like fluttering on the back of his knuckle. Her sweet pink lips were pursed together in a worried frown. And she shook.

Like a frightened little bird, she quivered.

He’d seen women cry and shake and tremble. Before the Dark Lord. Before their rapists. Before himself even. He’d always tortured Muggle women with his wand. Never with his hands. Never with his body. He had so wanted to be better than the others.

And here his wife was before him. His own wife. She was afraid. Not disgusted by his body, as he imagined she would likely be. His scars were plentiful. No, she was interested in them. It wasn’t his body that frightened her. It was himself.

He could feel something deep in his chest ache at the thought. He didn’t like it. She was so young. So fragile. She didn’t deserve to have to lay herself on the altar for him each Saturday. She deserved freedom. He did not want to be her Dark Lord. He did not want to mark her.

But I have…, he thought, ruefully. I have.

What he had taken from her could never be untaken.

All he could do was try to make it up to her.

He knew she had done her best. She had no experience with seduction, and yet she had employed every tool in her limited arsenal. He could usually think of a million sarcastic things to say about her ridiculous attempts, but in this moment he was…moved by it.

She was still trembling. He’d had enough. Enough of both their suffering. He did not want to be feared.

“Hermione…,” he spoke.

At last she looked up at him. He reached out and slid both his hands around her waist once more to steady her. Her brown eyes were wide and watery. Her cheeks bright pink with embarrassment.

He pulled her closer and she let out a small gasp of surprise, but maintained eye contact.

“Hermione…you must tell me how you want to proceed.”

She opened her mouth slowly, shaking. A single tear fell from the corner of one eye and slowly rolled down her cheek.

“Make love to me, Severus. Make love to me.”

Those were the last full words either spoke for some hours.

Within seconds, his mouth was upon her neck. His hands curled around her breasts. She was
whimpering and moaning against him, her tears of relief falling on his shoulder.

He lifted her, bridal-style, and turned, depositing her on the bed, before crawling over her to continue his ministrations. He kissed her breasts until she was begging him to enter her.

He had sworn never to confuse her, never to give her such intimacy, but now he was lost to her completely.

All he could think was to reassure her, to pleasure her, to calm her, to give her the sweet comfort with his body that he knew he never could with his words or actions. He’d promised she could have his body, if she wanted it. And now he held nothing back.

He focused singularly on her pleasure. In the afternoon light, he could see every movement of her lips and eyes. Each coo and pant and whimper instructed him in what especially delighted her. He catalogued it all.

This was for her.

When he finally removed the remainder of his clothing and positioned himself to enter her, she had glanced down and gasped at her first sight of his turgid arousal.

Her eyes had found his as if to ask, “No Virility Potion?”

He had leaned down to her ear and growled, “No need, witch.” And then as gently as leisurely as he could manage, he entered her, sliding past her tight opening and into the sucking wet heat of her that provided such exquisite pleasure he could no longer deny his own.

Hermione had moaned when they were fully encased in one another. Another tear slipped from her eyes. Not because there was any pain — her body knew his by now, and she was more than ready to accept him by the time they had joined. No, she was overcome by his care for her. As he began to move, it was clear he was moving as cautiously and gingerly as possible. His member slowly and gently rubbing her insides, warming her up, lighting her on fire. His pace was deliciously slow, and he refused to speed up until she begged him to.

Eventually she had been unable to bear it. He had taught her to voice her desires, and she complied. “Oh Severus, harder! Faster!” She had screamed in sheer delight when he obeyed her, clutching at him for dear life.

His lips and hands never left her as his lower body thrusted, though he avoided any attempt of hers to kiss his lips. Instead, he licked and kissed at her neck, distracting her by molding his lips to her tendons, nibbling in her sweetest spots. His hands pulled her hips into his own, shifting her about until he found the precise angle that caused her to moan the loudest. As she drew closer to finishing, he had slid his hands under her, lifting her into his chest so her breasts pressed into him, one hand cradling her neck and the other under her shoulder blade. She had wrapped her legs around his waist and kissed his own neck as much as she could, though eventually she could only lean her head back and hang on for dear life as he pumped into her. The air became full of his masculine grunts and her desperate pleas and he drove them both towards the precipice. He was addicted to her vocalisations. There was no artifice on her part — every sound she made was because of him.

He drew it out for as long as possible. Hermione broke apart beneath him and still he continued on, until she found herself built back up and exploding once more. It was more pleasure than she had ever imagined. Only then did he shudder above her and come with his own loud, guttural cry.

He lay on top of her for several minutes after. She traced her hands along the scars of his back as his
soft member remained within her. He had tried to pull away.

“I’m crushing you,” he had murmured.

“No, please stay…”

He did as she asked. Eventually they fell asleep.

When she awoke, she was asleep on her stomach. Severus lay on his back. The room was dark, but she could sense he was awake. She reached out and lay a hand on his chest. He didn’t flinch at the touch, and she ran her fingers over his chest carefully.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She heard him sigh. He didn’t like that, she knew. But she needed to say it.

They lay quietly listening to one another’s breathing for some time. Hermione spoke again.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Dolohov. It was foolish of me to go to Knockturn alone. He Imperio’d me and took me to Madame Sugar’s. I’ve never been so afraid in my entire life, but the strange thing is, I kept thinking about you. How you might blame yourself, and I couldn’t bear the thought of you doing that. I didn’t want you to think you hadn’t done your duty, hadn’t protected me…so that’s part of why I kept it from you.”

Severus inhaled. “It’s imbecilic of you to waste even a second thinking about me when faced with your own probable rape and murder.”

“Of course. I do know that. I’m just saying…I worried about you. If I died, I didn’t want you to take on the guilt.”

“Rest assured, if your idiocy caused your death, I would not blame myself.”

Hermione lifted her hand from his chest.

“Alright, I get it.”

He reached out grabbed her hand, replacing it on his chest.

“Touch if you want to touch, Hermione. I enjoy it, as do you. Do not let my words affect you so.”

She grumbled a bit, but let her hand rest back upon him. She played lightly with his chest hair.

“A kiss is a kind of touch, but you don’t enjoy that,” she pointed out.

“That kind of kissing will only lead you to misinterpret my intentions. I acquiesce you were right in some regards— we are compatible physically. But you know better by now than to push me emotionally. I am not a man who can be shaped into what you want me to be.”

Hermione sighed. That was certainly true. She hated how steadfastly closed off he was.

“Why aren’t you affectionate?”

Severus paused before responding.

“Did you not feel any affection in what we did tonight?”
Hermione shifted slightly and propped herself up on her elbow. In the very dim light she could make out the outline of her husband’s face — his proud brow and the outline of his aquiline nose. She could see nothing else in the darkness.

“It was…I was…um…”

She was grateful for the darkness, because her cheeks were flushed bright pink at the memory of her own cries of pleasure and the way she had gripped him as she’d shuddered around him.

_Twice._

She heard a low chuckle come from his direction and she swatted at him, playfully, realising he was teasing her.

“I mean…it was very…very, um… _passionate_, of course. And I enjoyed it. You know I did. I liked _being_ with you. I just find it strange that you are so…um…well, that you could be like _that_… but so closed off in your day-to-day interactions. Is it because you were a spy?”

Severus exhaled in annoyance. Ah, yes, the tedium of her peskiness. He’d almost forgotten it in the glow of pleasure from her body.

“Very well, let us agree I am not an ‘affectionate’ person. Leave it. My past is not open to discussion. I can provide you with passion, mutual pleasure, but not emotional artifice. If you want _that_, then perhaps your _enjoyment_ of Lucius Malfoy’s company is justifiable.”

“He is not a fake. He may have done terrible things, even to me, but he is remarkably honest. He tells me everything about his past. He does _want_ to be better.”

“I do not wish to discuss _Malfoy_ while we lie in my _bed_. I have no wish to _share_ you, but your choice is your own. If you make a poor one, I cannot stop you. It is for you to decide what you want.”

Hermione sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. She sighed. In the darkness, he rolled his eyes.

“Don’t pout like a little girl. My self-control is not a personal affront to you. My privacy is my means of survival. Don’t push me, Hermione, to ‘open up’ to you. You will not like the person you find. Now, I think it’s best you return to your own bed.”

Hermione clenched her jaw. He was kicking her out?! After _all_ they had shared….Her heart ached. _Merlin, but he is cold as ice._ She knew this. Why did it always hurt when he pushed her away? She needed to learn how to set parameters with him. Otherwise, she would _always_ hope for more. He knew that more than she did.

Hermione said nothing but pushed the covers from her legs and slid out of the bed. Sadly, she gathered up her dress, shoes, and undergarments from the carpet and moved to the door to the sitting room. Without a word she opened it and slipped out, crossed the sitting room, and entered her own room. She threw her clothing down in frustration and walked over to the side table by her bed.

In the moonlight streaming in from her window she could see the pink Contraceptive Potion. She opened it and doled out a vial’s worth, drinking it down.

She moved to her bathroom and washed her face and brushed her teeth. As she relieved herself on the toilet she felt some of Snape’s essence dried on her inner thighs. She carefully washed it away with a warm washcloth.
Does he not realise what he does to me?, she wondered, as she gently wiped it away. Oh, these men! These men!

She slipped back into her darkened bedroom and under her own covers. Her bed was cold, but she was suddenly profoundly grateful that she and Snape had consummated in his bed. It allowed her to have at least a small amount of separation. She hoped he was lying awake two doors away, tortured by the incongruity of what powerful synchronicity they had shared in his sheets, and how disconnected their discussion had been afterwards.

She had wanted him to make love to her, and Snape had done as she’d requested.

So why did she feel more unloved than ever before?

Perhaps I should have just gotten the hell out of here?, she wondered, as she finally drifted off to sleep.

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Hermione slept in, and awoke the next morning to a letter delivered by Bitsy sitting on her desk.

Lady Hermione,

Congratulations! The garden-party was a smashing success. I have heard everyone say nothing but how terribly charming you are and how beautiful Snape Hall is.

I hope you are feeling better — how awful to come down with such a nasty migraine at your own party! I hope it wasn’t the stress that did you in.

Please tell me you will be recovered enough to attend the Midsummer’s Eve Ball this Saturday! Official invitation is enclosed. I will be absolutely crushed if you can’t come. I’m positively dying to show off Vaisey Park.

Our theme this year is Ancient Gods and Goddesses. But don’t you dare come as Aphrodite! I’ve claimed it, naturally. Carolus wants to go as Cupid, but I think I’ve convinced him to be Apollo.

Do owl me your RSVP and your costumes.

Sincerely,

Lady Miranda

Looking at the letter, Hermione had a strong instinct to set it on fire. But she knew that she couldn’t. This was the biggest event these snotty Purebloods held each year, and if she could just make it through, then hopefully she and Snape could ride out the rest of the summer and return to Hogwarts, and some sense of normalcy, soon.

Snape Hall had been complicated — she and Snape’s relationship had both bettered and worsened. They weren’t at each other’s throats, at least. But she knew this kind of High Society nonsense just wasn’t for her.

She longed for the Fall Term at Hogwarts. Obviously, she wasn’t a student anymore, but she knew she would enjoy being back in the Dungeons in the evenings. At least at Hogwarts she didn’t have to pretend to be interested in insipid conversation. Miranda wasn’t malicious, but she didn’t hold a candle to Ginny.
And in the fall, Hermione would finish up her work at the Hall of Prophecies and finally take on a full-time position at the Department of Mysteries. She was excited to see what Mott might offer her, and she was looking forward to learning more about the various research conducted there. She was beginning to crave more intellectual stimulation. The Hall of Prophecies had been interesting, but she was eager to finish the classifications and move on.

*In the meantime, I have to keep playing along,* Hermione thought, annoyed. It bothered her that Snape hadn’t so much as thanked her for doing her best at the garden party. *He’s been too angry about Lucius. Not that he would have thanked me otherwise,* she thought. *He was too busy being jealous.*

At this, Hermione paused. The realisation struck her all at once.

*He’s jealous.*

She thought of the way Severus spoke of Lucius the previous evening in their post-coital discussion. He’d tried to play it off as if Lucius was simply someone he disapproved of, and while that was true, she’d missed that slight tone in his deep voice. Ron had been jealous from time to time — it was a tiny whine in the upper register. The timbre of male jealousy. It hadn’t even occurred to her, really. But now that she thought of it, it was unmistakable.

Severus Snape was genuinely jealous that she might have sex with Lucius Malfoy!

Hermione smiled a little bit. She knew she wasn’t flattering herself. It really was true. Her husband may not love her, but he didn’t want anyone else to have her body.

She grinned a little more widely, feeling rather smug.

She considered this a moment, then Hermione took out a piece of paper and dashed off a reply to Miranda. She and Snape would attend, and they would be going as Hades and Persephone.

As she finished the missive with an elaborate stroke of her quill, she set it down and leaned back in her chair, turning her head to stare out the window at the lovely rolling green lawn.

Hades and Persephone.

She hoped that would annoy her husband.

She was beginning to like the feeling of getting under his skin.

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Chapter End Notes

"O, these men, these men!" is from Act 4, Scene 3 of Othello.
A week later, as Lord and Lady Snape rode in an elaborate gilded carriage across the Yorkshire moorland pulled by thestrals, it was clear from his sulky expression that Severus Snape was more than a little displeased by his Hades costume.

He tugged intermittently at the bottom seam of his black and silver tunic, and Hermione, sitting across from him, tried to hide her smile as she looked out the window at the dark countryside.

She was perfectly content with her own, wearing a floor-length Grecian-style, chiffon, mint-green gown that hung delicately upon her form. Embroidered beaded straps with gold threadwork held it up at her shoulders and another embroidered band was wrapped snugly around her waist, but otherwise the silk fabric was softly draped down her sides and back, with a short train that ended at her ankles. It all felt like a soft, sexy nightgown. Beneath she wore golden sandals, and she was thrilled Madam Kemp had recommended them over heels. No doubt there would be a lot of dancing at the ball.

Bitsy, ever-dutiful, had done her make-up rather marvelously, and meticulously curled and wrapped her hair into a mint-green satin ribbon, so that it all piled on top of her head with several curled tendrils hanging down. When Hermione had caught sight of herself in her mirror after Bitsy had worked her elf-magic, she had almost giggled in delight. She’d never felt so beautiful.

The only issue was that the sleeveless gown laid bare her ‘Mudblood’ and ‘Whore’ carvings. When she and Severus had met at the base of the front stair, just prior to leaving, she had been wearing a small white fur capelet that covered the markings on her upper arms, and hadn’t mentioned them. But as they rode forward to Vaisey Park, Hermione began to feel more and more nervous at the thought of her scars being visible in public for the first time.

She didn’t want to embarrass Severus, or have to explain them, but she also hadn’t refused when Madam Kemp had suggested the sleeveless gown. No, Hermione had thought, I cannot hide them forever. And there’s nothing to be ashamed about. I was a soldier in the War, and these are my scars. It’s not like they don’t know I’m Muggleborn.

With this resolve, Hermione glanced back across at her husband. He was still shifting intermittently, uncomfortable in his seat.

Severus wore a fitted black tunic, much like his regular garb, except this extended only to his knees. His calves were on full display, and wrapped in black sandals, with leather thongs extending up from his ankles in a criss-cross pattern and wrapped up to just below his knees. His feet, Hermione noted, had been buffed and cleaned within an inch of their life, and she had been rather surprised, considering his legendary poor self-care, to see his toenails spotless and well-clipped, and his muscular calves lightly oiled and attractively displayed. Even his hair, loose about his neck, looked like it had been thoroughly shampooed and slightly curled. A delicate black and gold crown fashioned into the shape of pomegranate leaves encircled his head. Bitsy really does think of everything.

Over his tunic, a heavy piece of black leather armor fitted tightly over his chest and extended to his hips, with leather straps hanging down. The armor had various studs and buckles attached to it, and Hermione was rather impressed with the workmanship. No doubt Bitsy and the other House-Elves
had spent the majority of the week preparing it. At his collarbone, a deep red cloak was clasped to his right-shoulder with a seal in the likeness of Cerberus. The flowing red cloak over the black leather gave the perfect finishing touch to his Hades costume, at least in Hermione’s opinion. It was all rather fitting for Snape, and to be honest, he looked rather sexy.

If he hadn’t been her husband, she would have laughed to see his scowl. The entire situation was rather ridiculous. Her former oh-so-serious Potions professor in a Greek costume, bare-legged, riding with her in a carriage to a fancy-dress party! If she wasn’t so alarmed about her scars, she would have chuckled. If only Ron could see this!, she thought, wistfully. He’d have a laugh!

No matter how this evening proceeded, she knew it would rank as one of the top ten most ridiculous things she’d ever done in her entire life. Her thoughts were silenced as the carriage turned onto a gravel drive, and Vaisey Park came into view. They joined a queue of carriages and Hermione’s mouth fell open in surprise as she surveyed the house for the first time. The drive was lit by enormous torches on either side, and the house itself illuminated by even more glowing lamps. A large bonfire glowed in the front courtyard. The main house was at least three times the size of Snape Hall. The only thing Hermione could liken it to was Versailles, the court of the French Muggle King. The two symmetrical wings were in that same mirror-image style, with 17th and 18th century embellishments adorning a much older structure.

Severus’s upper lip curled as he witnessed her surprise at Vaisey Park. They had spoken minimally over the past week. He’d managed to completely avoid her in the evenings, and their brief morning interlude over breakfast in the dining room hadn’t impinged on his work in the Potions Laboratory too much. They’d had some fruitful discussions over his research and he’d enjoyed one or two of her passionate tirades on the importance of mixing dragon saliva at the precise pH balance. He felt lucky he’d managed to avoid all topics of a personal nature with her. She’d gone to her work at the Ministry, and he’d breathed a breath of fresh air each morning when the slight tremor in the wards told him she was gone for the day. He loved being alone. And the last thing he wanted from his wife was further discussion of their sex life.

He knew it was Saturday once more, as did she, no doubt, but he had considered thoughtfully the best way to proceed and determined that it was up to her to do what she wanted. He couldn’t assume because she’d asked him to touch her like that only a week before that she would welcome his mouth upon her breast again, or his hand between her legs. He had thought about it though…. He’d thought about it quite a lot. And for the first time in a long time had found himself reaching between his legs in the shower...

Enough. Time for the dog-and-pony-show.

Their carriage at last pulled up to the top of the drive, and Hermione heard their driver “Whoa!” to the thestrals. Snape exited, pushed his red cloak over one shoulder and turned, offering his hand to Hermione. She gathered her chiffon skirts and stepped down, leaving her capelet behind. Snape placed her hand on his and led her towards the main entrance. The door was open and a line of male servants dressed in Roman-style white skirts, bare-chested, stood on either side, holding out silver platters full of grapes, full wine goblets, and various hors d’oeuvres. Hermione blushed at their nakedness, and suddenly realised that perhaps she’d completely misconstrued what the Midsummer’s Eve Ball was going to be like. She’d imagined something rather formal, stodgy, full of manners, in keeping with the Victorian Pureblood cultures. She’d fully expected it to be a Jane Austen affair. But what was before her was strangely risque, a sort of Wizarding Roman romp.

But as Severus guided her into the large open foyer, Hermione realised she had been dead wrong. The foyer was decorated with white marble columns draped in golden cloth and illuminated by thousands of floating candles. Purple and gold velvet reclining couches were placed all around the
room, and some were pushed back into nooks and partially concealed with curtains. On a dais off to one side, a small crowd watched as two exotic female dancers with only fig leaves covering their modesty were giving lap dances to two men covered in golden body paint. Jugglers, fire-breathers, and acrobats mingled freely with the guests, while above their heads several women in what looked like elaborate bird costumes swung on trapezes.

Ahead, another large set of double-doors revealed an enormous ballroom with dozens of men and women dressed as all manner of Ancient Gods and Goddesses — Greek, Roman, Norse, Egyptian, Mayan, Aztec, Hindu, and more from cultures Hermione couldn’t place. The scene rather reminded Hermione of Muggle Halloween, which most Muggles took for an excuse to wear clothing that was as skimpy, tight, and sexual as possible.

This is more bacchanalia than ball!, Hermione thought, blushing a bit. She suddenly noticed she was one of the only witches wearing a floor-length gown. All her worries about the scars on her arms flew out the window. It was clear no one would be paying the least attention to them.

Severus and Hermione pushed through the throng towards the ballroom. Hermione could feel Severus tighten his grip on her slightly. She glanced up at him. His lips were drawn into a thin frown; it was clear he did not approve of this Dionysian excess. They entered the ballroom, and Hermione gasped at its size and beauty. It was oval-shaped and two-stories. An upper gallery extended entirely around the room, accessed by a beautiful marble double-staircase at the far end. To the right a stage had been constructed and a huge orchestra of musicians played something that sounded vaguely Baroque.

What a mish-mash of styles, she thought. It was excessive and a bit tasteless, in her opinion, but very “Lady Miranda.”

And at that moment, the witch herself dressed in an Aphrodite costume that was mainly composed of the tightest red-leather dress Hermione had ever seen, paired with four-inch stiletto heels, a red boa made up of what looked like fluffy hearts, and an enormous Marie Antoinette-esque pink wig, shrieked in delight and came bounding over.

She removed one red lace glove to grasp Hermione by the hand and twirl her.

“Lady Hermione! Oh, darling, you look fabulous! I love how understated your look is!”

Hermione blushed. Several other guests were looking over at her. She could feel their eyes flicking up and down her body and over her scars. Why was it she could never quite nail what these Purebloods expected of her? She was under-dressed when they were supposed to be formal, and yet at their one informal event, she’d managed to wear something that was positively demure.

She sighed in annoyance and forced a grin.

“Thank you! Vaisey Park is the largest house I have ever seen, Lady Miranda. And the ball is…well, it is clear you have put a lot into it!”

Lady Miranda glowed with pleasure.

“Thank you! Carolus is furious at how much I’ve spent, but this is the first time we’ve had the chance to host it, and I don’t want anyone to be able to top it for at least the next decade!”

The pink-bewigged witch turned to Severus and gave a small curtsy.

“Lord Snape, may I say you look rather dashing as Hades!”
Snape gave a curt, yet polite bow.

“You are too kind, Lady Vaisey.”

Suddenly a wizard dressed as Thor approached and, leaning in, whispered something into Lady Miranda’s ear. She giggled, and turned back to Hermione.

“Sorry! I’m being called. We’ll talk later! Please enjoy yourselves!”

And with that she pranced back into the crowd.

Hermione turned and looked up at Severus.

“She tries, but I honestly think I’ve had more meaningful conversations with a brick wall.”

“Remarkably, her NEWT results were even worse than Vincent Crabbe’s.”

Hermione stifled a laugh, and she felt relieved to see the hint of a smile play upon her husband’s lips. She decided to seize the moment.

“Would you like to dance?”

Instantly, she regretted it. The semi-smile vanished, and Severus’s eyes roved the room in disapproval at the loud, obnoxious throng drinking boisterously and swinging themselves about.

“I would not, though you are certainly free to indulge in this absurdity. When you’re ready to leave, come find me. I don’t wish to stay any longer than is necessary.”

Hermione nodded.

“Alright. Sorry, I forgot how much you hate dancing. Or is it just that you hate dancing with me?”

Severus rolled his eyes.

“Are you really going to pick a fight with me? I’ve worn this ridiculous get-up as you asked and agreed to escort you, but these hedonistic displays hold no interest for me. I’d rather be in my Lab or reading before the fire, as you well know.”

Hermione sighed.

“I know. But this is my first time anywhere like this, and I’d love to at least enjoy it for a few minutes before you guilt me into leaving.”

His dark eyes flashed in anger, and she twitched uncomfortably, her hands playing with the folds of her gown. She didn’t mean to say “guilt me” but it had come out.

“I’ll be upstairs if you need me,” he replied, brusquely, and gestured towards the gallery. He turned and strode away from her, leaving her alone in the crowd.

Hermione shook her head. That was not a good way to begin the evening.

She wandered around the perimeter of the room, taking in the astonishing array of costumes. A wizard wearing enormous white wings that were magicked to open and close wandered by. Another wizard dressed as Hermes had charmed the wings on his sandals so that he floated a few inches above the floor.
Hermione took a goblet of red wine from a tray and sipped it. So far no one seemed to be paying much attention to her, and she was grateful for it. As she began her second turn about the room, the crowd parted and she spotted Lucius Malfoy, or, someone who looked a lot like Lucius Malfoy, waltzing with a young blonde girl. Hermione moved to get a better vantage, and her eyes widened slightly as she took the sight in.

Lucius would not have been recognisable but for his long blonde hair falling across his shoulders. He was bare-chested with only a thin vest made of beads laced together with gold thread that was strung in a deep V; the top of the tunic met at his navel and very loosely covered his upper body. At his waist was a solid gold sash. And beneath that he wore a black and gold kilt that fell to his knees with matching golden sandals. His bare muscular arms were adorned at the wrists with burnished leather cuffs embedded with precious stones. His skin was lightly oiled and glowed in the candlelight.

As he twirled on the dancefloor, Hermione saw his eyebrows and eyes were lined with kohl, making his blue irises even more striking. Upon his head he wore a golden headband with a cobra on the front and jewel-encrusted hieroglyphics around the band. The entire look was incredibly striking. In a room of gaudy ostentation, Lucius had managed to outdo almost every other wizard.

Hermione took a sip of her wine, suddenly feeling her mouth go dry. Merlin, but he is handsome, she thought, as her eyes moved from his calves to his biceps to the imperious way he held his head high. She examined the girl he was dancing with carefully. She didn't know her. She had similar coloring to Lucius, and was dressed as some type of Nordic shieldmaiden. Freya?, Hermione wondered.

The girl's light blonde hair hung loosely down her back, with pink and white ribbons braided into various sections. Her costume consisted of a very form-fitting white toga that cut across her collarbone and hugged her body tightly until it ended mid-thigh. Below she wore white knee-high leather boots. Despite the suggestive costume, she was young. Hermione guessed she couldn’t have been more than sixteen. Gazing about the room, she spotted the girl’s mother, judging by the similar features, watching the couple excitedly.

Hermione surprised herself by feeling no jealousy. It was a ridiculous situation, that this young witch’s mother was trying to foist her barely-legal daughter upon a man with a child older than her own.

But then again, I’m married to Severus, Hermione thought. She couldn’t entirely judge.

The waltz ended and the center of the room began to thin out as the couple moved over to the side to sit and get refreshments. Hermione watched as the young witch pulled Lucius close to her, holding his arm gently, and whispered something into his ear. Lucius smiled and bent down, kissing the back of her hand. He then leaned in and whispered something back. The girl giggled and Lucius led her across the room back to her mother. His duty discharged, he turned and made eye contact with Hermione.

She inhaled sharply. Evidently, he’d been aware of her watching him. He moved towards her. Hermione steeled herself, but had no idea what she could say to him. He’d sent her several owls over the week, and she hadn’t replied.

As he moved through the throng, she could feel little tingles run up and down her spine, remembering his seductive kisses in the maze. When he reached her, he bowed low.

“May I touch you?”

“Yes.”
He always remembered the Vow, even when she did not. He knelt down and took her hand, kissing
the back of it for a few extra seconds before release.

“Well, my dear, what do you think of our shameless debauchery?”

Hermione laughed.

“It’s…definitely not what I expected!”

“You look stunning. I should have known in a sea full of over-painted witches, you would appear so
refreshingly natural and demure. It only makes you the more charming.”

“No one exactly informed me of the nature of the Ball.”

Lucius chuckled.

“It is a bit of a misnomer. It’s gotten a bit seedier as the years have gone on. Frankly, I think it’s just
an excuse for the younger generation to get their rocks off. Many a young witch and wizard have
become engaged after a rather ill-thought-through tryst in the backroom of a Ball.”

“So, are you dressed as an Egyptian God? Which one?”

“A pharaoh. The Egyptians believed their Kings were both Gods and men at once.”

“Is this your advertisement for a wife? ‘Lord Lucius Malfoy: God amongst men.’”

His blue eyes danced with pleasure at her tease.

“Perhaps I’m just peacocking for you.”

Hermione felt her cheeks redden. Never try to out-flirt a flirt.

The band struck up another song, and Lucius turned to her.

“Would you care for a dance?”

“I would, but Severus is lurking in the gallery. The last thing I want is to make him jealous.”

“Why is that the last thing you want? I thought it was his neglect that was torturing you.”

Hermione sighed.

“Can we please not discuss Severus? Who was the witch you were dancing with?”

“Lady Rosalie Trenwyth. Welsh family, positively loaded.”

“Well, she seems quite…young.”

One side of Lucius’s mouth curled in bemusement.

“Oh, these girls understand quite well how the game is played, even at a young age. They’re
groomed to catch a wealthy older husband.”

“Well, from here she looks like a Hogwarts Fifth-Year.”

Lucius leaned in slightly, and whispered.
“The last thing she said to me was an invitation to take her upstairs to, and I quote, ‘give her a thorough licking to see if I liked the taste.’”

Hermione’s eyes practically bulged out of her skull, and she covered her mouth with one hand in shock. Lucius stood back on his heels, his eyes sparkling in amusement at her startled reaction.

“So, you see, things are not as they appear.”

Hermione blushed even more furiously, and Lucius’s eyes narrowed slightly as he studied her reaction. He held out his arm and Hermione took it, and he guided her to an isolated spot along the wall.

“You seem rather shocked. Surely you know how many of these witches landed their husbands? For all their manners and appearance of tradition, they’re all going at it like rabbits.”

Hermione shook her head, but didn’t say anything.

“That is why I have been so intrigued with your fidelity to Severus. And jealous, may I add. Still, at least he’s doing that for you.”

Hermione wanted to die. She truly hoped at that moment the ballroom floor would open up and she could just sink right down. Lucius was staring at her so intently, and there was no way she could manage her facial expressions. The former Death-eater was a champion manipulator, and within fifteen seconds he read the truth in her face.

“Oh!” he replied, genuinely surprised. “Hm… I see….” he trilled.

Hermione turned her face away from the blonde wizard. The black eyeliner he wore made his piercing gaze even more insistent.

“I wish you wouldn’t humiliate me…” she whispered. She was mortified but also a little furious. It wasn’t her fault that her sexual relationship with Severus had progressed so slowly!

Lucius reached down and slipped one of his hands into hers, lacing their fingers together. With his other hand, he reached over and lifted her chin to face him.

“It is his humiliation, not your own! A wizard who takes his satisfaction without providing a witch with her own is nothing short of monstrous. It completely enrages me how little he cares for you.”

“He does care. Sort of. It’s better now. He’s trying.”

Lucius rolled his eyes.

“You sound like an abused wife, Hermione, and it doesn’t suit you at all.”

Hermione’s expression grew cold.

“I’d rather not hear your judgments on my marriage.”

Lucius sighed, a slightly guilty expression crossing his face.

“I apologise. He’s the last person I’d like to think about. But rest assured…”

Here Lucius leaned in again, breathing warmly against her neck and slowly brushing a tendril of hair off her shoulder. Hermione shuddered as he brought his lips to her earlobe, just barely grazing them against the soft skin.
“…if you were to proposition me in such a way, I’d give you such a ‘thorough licking’ you’d have to beg me to stop.”

Hermione could feel a tight clench of desire between her legs. God, what he did to her was so uncontrollable! In that moment, she thought about what that would be like — taking him to a private bedroom upstairs. Leaning back, lifting her green gown, and watching as he lowered his mouth…his sexy, kohl-lined blue eyes never breaking eye contact as he….

Hermione cleared her thoughts and shook her head, willing the fantasy away. No, you’ve made a commitment to try. You have to see it through.

Hermione took a small step back from Lucius, breaking the spell between them.

“I can’t deny that we have this…chemistry, Lucius. Or that there’s a part of me that does want you. But our kiss is the maze was a mistake. I’m sorry, but I can’t accept having you as my lover. I have to try to make it work with Severus.”

“But are you happy with him? Are you loved by him? Tell me he makes you feel loved and worshipped and I will leave you alone.”

Hermione couldn’t answer.

“Hermione, you deserve a wizard whose sole mission when he takes you to his bed is to show you with his body what is in his heart.”

Hermione blushed a little more, remembering Narcissa’s comments about Lucius’s prowess.

“I know we will see each other, socially, but don’t pursue me romantically, Lucius. I can’t love you. What there has been between us has been…screwed up, to say the least. I care about you. I admit it. I think you are trying to be a better man, and I do think you care about me. But I have to stand by my husband.”

Lucius nodded.

“It is difficult…but I respect your choice.”

His eyes roved over face in obvious admiration. He surprised himself by feeling a small sense of pride over her.

“You’re very honourable, witch. Even when I despised you and only saw you for your blood status, I would not have denied that. And now I realise that you truly have more character than any witch in this room. Severus is lucky to have you. And I promise. No more innuendo. No more kisses.”

“Thank you.”

“Please take care of yourself, Hermione. I am your ally. And friend. You can come to me if anything ever happens with Severus. If he ever scares you. Or hurts you.”

“Why would he ever hurt me?”

“Because of his parents.”

Hermione frowned.

“You don’t know?”
Lucius’s mouth fell open.

“I…I’m sorry, I assumed…”

“Know what?”

“It’s not my place, my dear.”

A stunning violin piece cut through the air and the crowd murmured in delight at the strains. Lucius lifted his chin and listened.

“A tango! Perfect! Now, if you don’t mind, I would love if you could help me show off a bit more.”

“But my…my scars…”

“Let them see! It’s the shame of all Purebloods, not your own.”

Before Hermione could respond, Lucius had pulled her towards the middle of the room and wrapped his right arm tightly to her waist, pulling her ribcage firmly against his own. With his cheek resting against her forehead, and her right hand clasped tightly with his left, Lucius began to guide her about the room. Hermione had never danced the tango before, but Lucius was clearly an accomplished lead, and she could feel him instinctively guiding her about the room. With his assured steps, she felt confident and was rather enthralled at the whispers and murmurs they elicited as they swept around the room. She knew her scars, especially the one on her right arm, were prominent to all, but Hermione realised that Lucius was showing all of society that they didn’t matter. She may have been the only Muggleborn in the room, but she deserved their respect. She was a War Hero, and she had endured more than any of them could ever know.

Hermione lifted her chin, proudly, and felt her spine stiffen with self-assurance. With her green chiffon gown swirling about her underneath the glowing candlelight, and with a man as widely desired as Lucius Malfoy choosing her so publicly as his dance partner, she felt at last like one of the “pretty girls.” She smiled, glowing with the sheer pleasure of the dance, and lost herself to the music and to Lucius’s warm, confident touch.

The song ended too quickly, and all around her Hermione could see many witches and wizards clapping and staring at both of them, nodding in respect to her. Several younger witches looked positively sick with jealousy. Hermione grinned.

Across the room, she could see Lady Rosalie heading over.

“I should go find Severus. Thank you for this, Lucius.”

He bowed low to her.

“It is the least I could do.”

She curtsied, then smiled warmly at him and turned, heading for the marble staircase. She glanced up at the gallery and found her husband, as she instinctively knew she would find him, watching from the balcony in thin-lipped disapproval. *Has he simply stood up there and sulked this entire time?* She wouldn’t put it past him. Despite his stated dislike of her, there were times he could be positively stalkerish.

Climbing the staircase, she wondered if he’d let her stay for the fireworks, or insist they leave immediately. She joined him at the balustrade, and looked down at the circular room, enjoying the beauty of the vantage-point here above the floating candles.
“And what did Malfoy have to say to you?”

“Oh, just the usual pitch of why I should leave you for him,” Hermione tossed off, sarcastically. Maybe they could continue some of the teasing they’d shared earlier?

Alas, it was most decidedly not to be. Severus turned to her, his face stony and his onyx eyes alight with anger. He was not remotely amused.

“Perhaps you should re-consider it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve seen anyone so blatantly jealous since Ron wasn’t chosen for the Triwizard Tournament.”

“Comparing me to a Fourth-Year? Your incisive analysis of my psychology positively staggers me.”

“Your ability to use sarcasm to avoid admitting you actually feel something akin to human emotion is impressive, but I’m not a student anymore, Severus.”

“Rather amusing to have you accuse me of deflection, when your words tell me you don’t want Malfoy in your bed, but your actions suggest otherwise. You do realise the tango is a dance that represents lust? You’ve just informed all of Pureblood society your intention to take him as your paramour.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open in surprise. She should have known better. Lucius was always working an angle. Even a dance was never just a dance. Severus continued.

“I perceive from your slack-jawed staring you were unaware.”

Hermione recovered, closing her mouth and tossing her head back, flipping a tendril from her face.

“You know, a cutting word from you just doesn’t mean as much anymore. Not when I’ve had you come inside of me.”

Severus’s eyes flashed above her in horror at her full-voiced retort. He glanced about, but no one else on the balcony was within earshot. Before Hermione could smile smugly at his embarrassment, she felt him grab her roughly by the elbow and pull her into the nearest room.

Slamming the door behind him, Severus wheeled about to face her. Hermione glanced about and took the space in. It was a small study. A desk stood in one corner amid several small bookcases. In the far corner stood a large elegant floor-length Chinese screen, and various Chinese paintings of birds and bamboo painted on silk screens lined the walls. Two armchairs with a red and blue Chinoiserie print took up the center of the room. Hermione grabbed the back of one as she moved away from her husband’s imposing form. She hated him when he was like this.

“Don’t grab me! And don’t you dare bully me! I won’t take it anymore!”

“Don’t you dare embarrass me like that ever again!” he shouted at her. “My personal life is just that. One overheard comment today becomes the topic of gossip in every sitting room tomorrow from here to Plymouth, and I. Will. Not. Have it!”

As he spoke, he stepped towards her, punctuating each word. Hermione drew back, until she was pressed against the far wall. As pissed off as she was, she couldn’t deny the fact that she had managed to wind him up gave her a thrill and initiated butterflies in her stomach. At least when he
was angry with her, she could tell he felt something.

“You need to control your temper, Severus! I apologise for the rude comment. But I just wanted to have a nice time tonight. You should have known Lucius would have asked me to dance. If you had wanted me to say no and told me that, I would have!”

Severus “humphed” in denial.

“And I told you that he has been kind to me when I’ve felt alone. It’s not exactly easy being separated from Harry and Ginny and everyone and everything that is familiar to me.”

“Haven’t I provided for you? Don’t you have all you require at Snape Hall?”

“I’m not like you, Severus! I need people! I need companionship and human touch! I’m sorry I danced with Lucius. I didn’t realise the significance of the tango, but what did you expect? You made love to me last week and then avoided me like the plague all week! It’s hard to ignore a handsome man who makes me feel desired!”

Severus straightened his spine. With his glittering crown and black leather ensemble, he really did look like Hades, God of the Underworld. In that moment, Hermione was uncertain what his response would be. She trembled, slightly, as he stepped in to her, their bodies only a few inches apart. His dark eyes bored into her chocolate brown irises. She could feel the delicate threads of his legilimency softly caressing the border of her mind.

Hermione shook her head.

“No need for that. Just ask,” she whispered.

Severus reached a hand up gently and placed it on the side of her neck. He exhaled. He could feel her pulse beating rapidly beneath his fingers, and felt her swallow, nervously. He hated that she responded to him as if he was going to hurt her, backing away from him like he was a tyrant. But sometimes, he worried he was going to hurt her. The self-hatred pooled in his stomach. He wanted to push into her mind, find out everything she thought about him and about Lucius. Hold them up side by side, and turn over her memories over and over again until every truth was revealed.

“Just ask,” she whispered again.

He sighed.

“What did you want of me this week?”

Hermione exhaled slowly.

“I…I missed you. Last Saturday was…it was very intense for me. And it was hard to sense you avoiding me all week.”

“I was not sure what you wanted.”

“I wanted…more.”

Severus arched an eyebrow.

“I mean, more time with you. Not more sex. But I mean, I wouldn’t be opposed to more…sex. I…we…as you said, we’ve found we’re compatible. And I do like it. With you.”

Hermione stopped talking. She knew she was babbling.
She could feel Severus’s fingers softly caressing her throat. She couldn’t help but remember how he had touched her the week before. With such passionate abandon.

“I told you that I would not leave you wanting should you desire…more.”

Hermione could see the craving in his dark eyes and her eyes flicked down to his mouth. She wanted to kiss him. If only kissing were allowed!

“Yes, but think about what you’re saying. I’m supposed to come to you and, what? Proposition you for mid-week sex? That’s so mortifying. I can’t tell what you want anymore, or what you consider merely your ‘duty.’ Actually, ‘repugnant duty’ is what you had called it, if I remember correctly. Our ‘loathsome consummations.’”

“I do not consider our intimate relations to be so any longer,” he replied.

“Yes, but you haven’t exactly broadcast that you actually might want me.”

Severus leaned his head down, this time his lips were becoming dangerously close to her own.

“Rest assured, witch, anytime you come to me, I will want you.”

Hermione felt a strong tug of desire in her low belly, a tightening in her nipples, and she had to bite her lower lip so as to not give away the wave of stimulation his deep voice was provoking in her body. God, I want to kiss him, the infuriating bastard!, she thought.

She closed her eyes and when she opened them again, she saw that Severus was staring at her lower lip, the one she was biting. He stared with such intensity, she knew he wanted to kiss her as well. He leaned in slightly, and Hermione closed her eyes. He’s going to! Oh Gods, yes! Do it!

But before she could feel any contact, she head the loud squeak of the doorknob turning. Her eyes flew open and she jumped to her right, ducking behind the printed floor-screen and pulling Severus with her. She hadn’t really gotten permission to wander the house, and she couldn’t bear the idea of breaking yet another unspoken rule in the Pureblood handbook.

Severus turned to her, confused, but she pushed her index finger to her lips.

The room filled with a familiar giggle, and Hermione recognised it immediately as belonging to Lady Miranda. Great, she thought.

She heard the heavy footfall of a man, and realised their hostess wasn’t alone. The door slammed shut and she heard a loud kissing noise, then Lady Miranda’s moan.

“Oh, Carolus, the other ladies are positively enraged at how I’ve outshone them tonight. And the lords are looking at you with such hatred, is it terrible that I’ve never been so happy?”

From the other side of the screen came Carolus’s deep laugh.

“No, my dear, but you’ve practically emptied my inheritance at Gringotts to pay for this little soiree.”

“Yes, but they’ll all be talking about this for years to come! Remembering how you, the greatest Lord here, hosted a Ball so costly and over-the-top no one will ever doubt your financial prowess, or stand in your path when you campaign for the Ministry. Merlin, seeing you standing amongst them. All of those lesser Lords fawning all over you, desperate to win your favour! It makes me want you so much!”
Hermione glanced over at Severus with wide eyes. Oh my God! What the hell were they bearing witness to!

Severus gave her a murderous glare as if to say, “how dare you put me in this horrifying position.” Hermione considered what to do. If they came out now, Lady Miranda and Lord Carolus would be utterly horrified, and she knew that Carolus was an old friend of Severus’s. He didn’t have many friendships. How could she stand by and ruin one? No, it was better they stayed put. Hopefully their host and hostess would leave the room and re-join the party any moment. Hermione gave a silent shrug to Severus.

From the wet, smacking noises, it was clear the couple were kissing again. Lady Miranda’s muffled moans made Hermione cringe. But she and Severus were stuck. There was no way out of the room but the one door.

They broke apart, and at last Carolus spoke.

“My darling, we should rejoin our guests.”

“Yes, of course.”

Hermione moved her head slightly and could just barely see them through a small gap in the screen. She watched in shock as Lady Miranda, rather than move to the door, slowly, oh-so-slowly, fell to her knees before her husband.

“But first I need to suck your beautiful cock.”

Hermione’s eyes grew to the size of dinner plates and she turned her head to look at her husband. Severus’s eyes were closed and he was pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

He was going to murder his wife.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration:


Vaisey Park: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/95/Cour_royale_de_Versailles.jpg

Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thirty minutes later, Hermione sat across from her husband in their carriage, neither of them making eye contact.

Hermione’s mind was roiling. She was utterly and completely embarrassed, and yet also more turned on than she had ever been in her entire life.

She and Severus had stood behind the screen, stone still, and had proceeded to listen to Lady Miranda give her husband one hell of a blow job. Hermione had tried not to look, catching only fleeting glimpses of the back of Miranda’s head and the look of bliss on Carolus’s face through the chink in the screen, but the sounds! The sounds had been...most distracting.

Lady Miranda’s wet sucking noises. Her explicit words of praise for her husband’s body. Her detailed description of how wet he made her, how she craved the taste of it, and how much she loved feeling him deep in her throat.

Lord Carolus has been quieter at first, limited to deep groaning as she did all the work, but eventually he began to whisper the filthiest things Hermione had ever heard in her life to his wife as she pleased him. They reminded Hermione of things she had read in the BDSM guide she had perused when she had first been betrothed to Lucius. The gist of it was all about what a “good girl” Miranda was and “how well she took it.” He’d called her names, too. His “beautiful whore” and his “perfect little slut.”

Hermione had blushed furiously, even more so when she realised that his words were making her terribly, impossibly aroused. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, unable to prevent (or relieve) the tiny, pleasurable clenches between her legs. She was disturbed at the degrading words and the fact that they were having such a profound effect on her. Her breath had become shallow, and she was chewing on her lip furiously.

Stealing glances at Severus, Hermione saw he had folded his arms and was looking down at the carpet, patiently waiting for the shameful interlude to be over. He didn’t seem remotely turned on by their voyeurism, and Hermione was horrified he would notice her dilated pupils, or the beads of sweat that had formed on her neck and décolletage. Hermione had never done anything like this before, though she’s considered it with Ron, and it hadn’t even occurred to her to pursue that particular act with her husband. Not until now.

Eventually Carolus had given a loud groan of pleasure and shuddered with release, and with the promise of returning the favour after their guests’ departure, he had helped Miranda straighten her dress out, and Lord and Lady of Vaisey Park slipped back outside to rejoin their guests.

Severus hadn’t said a single word to her, but merely waited several seconds to make sure they were gone, and then swiftly stepped out from behind the screen and exited the room. Hermione followed, shame-facedly.

Outside the room, on the balcony, she had turned to him and whispered, “I am so, so sorry!”

Severus had avoided eye contact. He had simply given an annoyed sigh and asked, “shall we go?”

She had nodded.
Now as they rode in the carriage, Hermione could not deny she was still desperately, horribly aroused. Outside the carriage she could see the beginning of the fireworks display over Vaisey Park, and each burst made her think about orgasms, and how much she wanted them, and how excited she was that it was Saturday and she would soon be underneath the dark wizard sitting opposite her.

As the carriage bumped along, she felt her lower body clench in anticipation with each jostle. How was it possible that what they had witnessed had had no effect whatsoever on Snape?! He sat across from her, staring out the window, looking positively bored. Whereas she felt every bit the randy teenager that she was.

Hermione felt like she was being tortured the entire ride back. Severus said nothing to her and she couldn’t think of a single thing to say to him.

As they entered Snape Hall and were helped out of their cloaks by the elves, Snape had turned to her. “I shall be with you shortly.”

He then spun around and moved up the stairs. Hermione sighed. His entire demeanor was stoic, almost distracted. His words were delivered in a cold, perfunctory manner.

_He said, “I’ll be with you.” So he is coming to my room instead? What does that mean? He hasn’t come to me since…we were in the Dungeons. God, that was the worst of it._

Hermione furrowed her brow in concern, remembering Snape holding himself high above her, trying his hardest not to touch her. She shuddered at the painful memory. _I can’t go back to that!_

She wasn’t sure what kind of Snape she’d be getting tonight, or how the sex was going to be.

But she began to fear it was not going to be the passionate, love-making of Severus. The man who had kissed her in anger — had said she could come to him, the man who made love to her so sweetly and took her gently, kissing her neck and whispering at her to take her pleasure.

Was it going to be the hard, distant “consummations” of Professor Snape again? The eye rolling, the thin lips pressed tightly together in disgust as they roved over her form? _Anything but that!_

She trudged up the stairs and Bitsy was waiting for her in her room.

“Mistress is back so early!,” the sweet elf exclaimed as she began to help Hermione out of her costume.

Hermione sank into a chair despondently as Bitsy helped remove her sandals.

“I know, Bitsy, our Lord is not one for parties.”

Bitsy frowned.

“Is Mistress still sad?”

“I…I guess I am a little, Bitsy. You’re sweet to ask.”

The elf bit her lower lip, thoughtfully.

“Was Master not pleased with Mistress’s costume?”

“Oh no, Bitsy, it has nothing to do with that! He’s just…he’s hard to reach. He’s a private man. There’s a lot we don’t know about one another. Still.”
Bitsy nodded.

“Bitsy wants Master and Mistress to be happy together! Forever!”

“I know you do. Thank you, Bitsy. I can do the rest myself. Thank you. Good evening.”

Bitsy dipped her head obediently, and with a crack she disappeared.

Hermione finished changing out of her dress and put on a simple white nightgown. She washed her face and let her hair down. Bitsy’s magic had lasted, and her hair fell in pretty ringlets down her back.

Hermione sat on her bed, re-considering Severus’s words. “I’ll be with you shortly.”

She sat and waited for him, nervously. The small clock on her bedside table ticked away. Hermione couldn’t stop her mind from going back to what she had witnessed between Carolus and Miranda. The truth sprung to her mind, and blushing, Hermione admitted it to herself: she wanted that. She wanted to do that.

She lifted a hand and ran it gently across her collarbone. The fingertips dancing along the smooth flesh. There was something about Carolus’s groans… God, she wanted to hear that from Severus! She wanted to free him like that! To know the real him. Severus made some noises when they had sex, but Hermione knew she was much louder.

He always held back. And she didn’t want him to. She wanted to know he enjoyed it. Enjoyed her.

Hermione had never thought of herself as a particularly submissive person, but the idea of being able to please Severus like that, to please him so much he would be able to be vocal with her about what his fantasies were and how she could fit into them, it made her want to slip a hand between her legs…. I want to fulfill him. I want him to trust me. She realised this must be what people call “intimacy.” That’s what her heart longed for. Why was Lucius so ready to give that to her, but Severus always held back?

Hermione stood up from the bed. She swallowed, nervously. She couldn’t just wait for Severus. It reminded her too much of the terrible night she’d lost her virginity, and this night was completely different. She was a woman now. And she felt hot and anxious and the little squeezes between her legs were making her impossibly distracted. She felt like a cat in heat, like she was going to climb the walls. She needed her husband.

I’ll go to him.

She moved over to the bedside table, and, downing a vial of the Contraceptive Potion, she turned and opened the door to the sitting room. She was halfway across the room when the opposite door opened and her husband appeared in the door frame.

He had changed as well and was wearing his black silk pajamas. He was barefoot and his hair, though devoid of crown, was still styled in its curled manner. She paused as she met his eyes. They were inscrutable. Hermione could sense neither dread nor lust in them. They were merely there.

He said nothing.

Hermione also said nothing.

The room was dark except for the light from the full moon shining in from the large double-paned windows on either side of the sitting room’s unlit fireplace.
The fingers of Hermione’s trembling left hand began to play lightly with her white satin nightgown. She could feel her palms growing sweaty. She hated these symptoms. She hated the lingering trauma in her body from the War. She hated how it made her shake in these situations.

She wanted to be ballsy. She wanted to run to her husband and leap on him, wrap her legs around his waist and kiss him passionately. She felt ashamed at the strength of her desire, knowing he wouldn’t want that. It was brutal that this tall, dark wizard had taught her the depths of her pleasure and yet denied its full expression. It left her uneasy, and she wasn’t sure how to proceed.

Still, he had said she could express her desire and that he wouldn’t turn her away. She took a deep breath. *Be brave,* she thought. *Remember what he said:*

“Rest assured, witch, anytime you come to me, I will want you.”

*Be bold, Hermione! Do it!*

Without breaking eye contact, she slowly took the six steps forward on the soft carpet that separated herself from her husband. He inhaled sharply as she drew up to him, but otherwise gave no response.

Hermione exhaled and nervously wet her lips with her tongue. She hadn’t intended it to be seductive, yet Severus’s eyes immediately flicked down to her mouth. She wiped her palms along her sides a final time and then slowly grasped the edge of her nightgown, lifting it slightly as she bent her knees as she began to quietly lower herself to the carpet.

Severus watched silently as she sank to her knees below him. He knew exactly how what they had witnessed had affected her — it was obvious from her every glance at his direction when she thought he wasn’t looking. Her heartbeat had increased, her breaths had gone puffy. She was flushed in the cheeks and chest.

He looked down at her. She was on her knees before him — her curls framing her freshly-washed face. Her white silk nightgown making her look every inch the blushing virgin. Just waiting for his corruption. She was looking shyly at the carpet. *Too frightened to even make eye contact,* he thought, with a smug smirk. He knew exactly what she was thinking. He could practically hear her thoughts, they were so plain.

He was full of contradicting emotions. He *wanted* her to. Of course he did. He’d thought about it. Her mouth wrapped around him — its warm, sucking pressure. Her sweetness and desire to please.

He’d learned enough about what excited her from their last few consummations. He could have nudged her into performing this act weeks ago. And she would have done it. She was a pleaser through and through. She had always craved reassurance — whether through her schoolwork or her relationships or her sense of right-and-wrong. She hated uncertainty. He knew he could have shaped her into the perfect sexual submissive for him. She’d do anything as long as he complimented her enough.

*Hermione Granger has quite the praise kink,* he thought with a smirk. And she had practically wept with joy when he’d made her come beneath him, urging her to “do it for me” — whispering, growling low in her ear.

She was his to command.

But any pleasure he felt at how accurately he had judged her, and his power over her, utterly dissolved when he thought about himself and his past.

The Dark Lord would have told him to take *everything* he wanted. And he’d been taught from
infancy that a Pureblood male was naturally dominant over Pureblood women. Wizards provided the financial stability. Witches were designed to breed and please. He remembered his private tutor telling him that as early as when he was ten years old, before he even knew what “breed and please” meant.

His own father — the well-respected Lord Tobias Snape — the man whom all of society believed was so refined and had such graceful public manners….in private he had once drunkenly told Severus when he was back from Hogwarts that “all women were whores.”

And it was hard to believe it wasn’t true when this little girl, this young woman who had one of the most brilliant minds of her age was kneeling before him, perfectly ready to take his cock into her mouth and do with it what he wished.

Severus felt deeply queasy. He was impossibly hard beneath his pants, and he wanted her. He wanted her.

I am not my Father. I am not the Dark Lord. I am not my Father. I am not the Dark Lord, he repeated to himself. The mantra had kept him sane through scenes much darker and more uncomfortable than this.

Hermione’s eyes had moved up from the carpet and found his, and her hands were lifting now. She looked nervous, but he could see the Gryffindor glint of determination in her beautiful doe-like eyes. She placed her hands gently on his hips and raised herself slightly.

He gave a low hiss. His mind was spinning and the room felt like it was moving back and forth slightly, rocking like a ship at sea. The voices from the past lifted forward to his conscious brain. The screams of the women. The Death-eaters grunting away atop them. Lord Voldemort laughing maniacally on his throne, overseeing it all. The sibilant voice imprinted in his psyche forever as he stood to the side. Powerless.

“This is what Mudbloods are for, Ssseverussssss!”

Hermione’s brown orbs were looking into his now — desperate, seeking permission, full of honesty. “Let me do this,” they begged.

And she was begging. Her hands were at the tie-ribbon at his hips, undoing it. She was sliding the satiny fabric off his hips…any second his shame would be exposed….

“No!” Severus shouted. He stepped back, and Hermione’s hands dropped back to her sides. In the moonlight, he could see her flush with mortification and embarrassment.

He re-fastened the tie and stepped back to the doorframe, placing one hand upon it. Gods, what is wrong with me?, he wondered. He could feel his emotions swirling beneath the surface. It was impossible to occlude. He felt like every day with Hermione his control was slipping. His mask. The one he had kept in place no matter what. Even Voldemort’s death and the end of the War couldn’t budge it. But now he felt truly dangerous. He was frightened.

Hermione said nothing. He could hear her stand up slowly behind him and take a few steps to him.

“Are you alright?”

He whipped around to her, his dark eyes uncertain.

“I am fine. You don’t need to do that.”
“I know I don’t need to,” she replied, softly.

He sighed. Hermione searched his pale face. His eyes scrunched shut. He almost looked like he was in pain. Where does he go?, she wondered.

“Are you alright?” she asked again.

“Stop asking!” he hissed.

Hermione wanted to yell back at him, but instead she bit her tongue. She had learned not to provoke him. He was vulnerable. He was…something was wrong. She could sense it. Why is he so tortured?

He sagged even more of his body weight on the doorframe. He looked like he was in pain, and Hermione was more confused than ever by his behaviour.

“I’ll…I will wait for you in my chamber,” she said. She turned around and crossed the room, opening the door to her bedroom and leaving it ajar. Inside, she picked up her wand from her nightstand and closed the curtains with a quick flick of her wrist. The darkness keeps him comfortable, she thought. Tonight was not the night to push him.

She took off her nightgown and tossed it onto the floor. Even in the dark room, its whiteness reflected off the carpet, and she knew he would see she’d undressed for him when he entered. She slid down underneath her covers and pulled them up over her breasts. Her arousal had diminished in her worry, and she cast the Lubrication Charm before laying back on the pillow and waiting for him.

It took him several minutes, but eventually he appeared. He sat on the edge of her bed, but said nothing.

She reached over and took his right hand in her own. He glanced over his right shoulder at her. She couldn’t see his dark eyes. She squeezed his hand in encouragement.

“You were very handsome in your Hades costume,” she whispered. Her tone a mixture of gentle fortification and light tease.

A deep sigh was all she heard in response.

Hermione tugged him towards her, flipping the covers open to him. As he slid under them, her hands found his warm, broad chest, and she ran them over his torso comfortingly. She went to the buttons of his pajamas, and undid them slowly. She just needed to get them skin-to-skin. She knew he would take over from there. He always did.

And, sure enough, once his shirt had been removed and she was able to press her breasts against his firm chest, and pepper his neck with kisses, he gave into the sensation. Gave into her.

She tried to focus on the pleasure of his body, and how nice it felt to feel his hard planes against her, but she was distracted. They both were. He was the attentive lover he had been before, not rushing her, kissing her neck and her breasts, but the raw passion of before was missing.

He was holding back. He held her like she was made of glass.

She was worried about what he was thinking; she was too nervous to ask.

She couldn’t come.

Severus wasn’t whispering to her. He wasn’t encouraging her or making her feel that delicious
adored feeling from before. He was clearly enjoying things, enjoying her, but compared to last week, he was practically silent.

It was like making love to a ghost.

Eventually, he had slipped a hand between them and slid his dexterous fingers along her folds as he gently thrusted inside of her. It had felt incredible, but she was far too “in her head.”

Severus seemed to sense it wasn’t going to happen and had removed his touch from her, instead focusing on getting it over with as quickly as possible. It was all too painfully familiar. With a sharp cry, he had groaned out his release, and instead of the sweaty, joyful collapse on top of her that he'd done the week before, he immediately rolled away.

Hermione slid closer to him and lay a hand on his stomach. She could feel herself become emotional to sense the loss of his body inside her own. She felt like a failure that she couldn't find her own release.

*Don’t leave,* she prayed. *Don’t run away.*

He seemed to capitulate, leaning back against his own pillow and allowing his weight to sink into her bed for the first time.

Hermione caressed his stomach, lightly, until eventually she, too, fell into a fitful sleep.

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Hermione awoke several hours later. The moon was covered by clouds, and there was no light appearing from behind the curtains of her room. All was pitch-black.

She lay there for a long time, attempting to fall back asleep. She could hear the occasional soft snore from Severus lying across from her. But no matter what she did, she couldn’t relax enough. Her mind was too anxious.

She slid quietly out of the bed, careful not to wake Severus, and picked up her nightgown from off the floor, putting it back on. She padded over to her bedroom door and opened it quietly, slipping out.

She made her way through the dark house to the kitchens. It was spooky so late at night. All the elves were asleep, the human servants gone, and the doors and windows felt like strange open eyes staring back at her. Fathomless. Like her husband's.

Hermione didn’t believe in the paranormal, except the ghosts she had met at Hogwarts, and she certainly didn’t believe in the Muggle definition, but she suddenly had the strange sensation that someone was watching her — that there was something about the house. Some sort of creepy energy she had never felt before. You’re being silly, she thought.

In the kitchen she turned on a light and went into one of the cupboards, pulling out some bread and cheese. She nibbled daintily at her midnight snack, pondering Snape’s completely bizarre behaviour. Perhaps over breakfast he could have some sort of real conversation with her about his feelings on what they had observed between Miranda and Carolus? Could he be honest about what was going through his mind when she had offered to…to….? She chewed the piece of gouda in her mouth thoughtfully. *And why do I try so hard?*, she wondered. *Do I just love a challenge? What is it about him?*

She felt miserable. *Can we continue like this forever? How can we co-exist like this?* Things had
certainly improved, but they weren’t even close to the kind of relationship she wanted. *I’m too young to settle for this.*

She replaced the food when she had finished and drank a big glass of water from the sink. Finishing, she tidied up, turned out the light, and began to work her way back to the bedroom.

As she turned from the main staircase to the hallway that led to her bedroom, she paused.

A strange glowing light was emanating from underneath a door on the far side of the hallway. It glowed a pale blue, and left blue shadows on the walls across from it.

*S Snape’s study, Hermione thought.*

*What is he doing in there?*

She approached, cautiously. The door was closed. Snape locked it, she assumed. He didn’t want her in there. He’d said as much when they first arrived.

She reached for the handle and found it warm to the touch. It turned, easily, and the door opened quietly, without so much as a creak.

The room was small, and similar to Snape’s study back in the Dungeons: leather chairs, large desk, bookshelves, etc.

She had expected to see Severus inside, perhaps working on a late-night project, unable to sleep as she had been.

But the room was empty.

Instead, the glowing blue light was emanating from a large Pensieve, standing on its own table off to the far-right side of the room. Runes and precious stones were carved into its sides. It was a beautiful magical piece — the largest and most unique Hermione had ever seen. It reminded her of a baptismal font. It was clearly a powerful object. The glowing, flickering light seemed to be coming from its very centre.

She knew immediately what it was for.

And knew she was making a mistake.

Knew it was a terrible idea.

But she couldn’t stop herself from moving towards it. As she drew up to it, the dark blue flecks of light swirling above the water that filled the bowl, she noticed a large cabinet right above the Pensieve.

She opened it, slowly. Her mouth fell open in shock.

Inside was row after row of tiny vials. And inside each vial, a swirling, whitish, opaque mist.

Dozens and dozens of them. Memories.

Snape’s memories. Memories he extracted from his own mind to keep here instead.

“*Don’t do it, Hermione. Don’t do it! Don’t you dare!*” The voice inside her brain gave her good counsel, rearing up almost in self-defense.
But she knew she would.

She couldn’t help herself.

She remembered the exchange she’d had with Lucius at the ball:

“You can come to me if anything ever happens with Severus. If he ever scares you. Or hurts you.”

“What would he ever hurt me?”

“Because of his parents.”

She had to know.

She had to.

No more secrets.

She reached for the first vial and uncorked it, watching as the memory slithered down into the basin.

She took a deep breath and gazed into it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience! I've already started the next chapter, so hopefully you won't have too long to wait for the next update!

Also, I started a tumblr! I don't know much about tumblr (never had one before), but hopefully it can be something fun I can develop: https://missstellastark.tumblr.com/. I added some photo inspiration for this chapter, and a little bit of backstory on why I began this story.

What else should I do with it? What blogs should I follow? Also, there's an "Ask Me Anything" button if you have any burning questions. :) THANK YOU to the original commenter who suggested I make this (I'm sorry, I forgot who it was!!).

This is such a fun community. xoxo.
Hermione knew it was a mistake as soon as the first memory began.

There was a man.

Brown-eyed, with straight chin-length brown hair, not unlike her own colour, though a bit darker. He had full lips, too, but his tall, graceful form, aquiline nose, proud brow, and pale visage indicated he could only be the biological father of Severus Snape.

He was entering the foyer of Snape Hall. He wore an all-black suit with a silver vest and carried a cane.

A woman, with long, beautiful, wavy jet-black hair down to her waist stood at the base of the staircase. She, too, was tall and slim, and wore a stunning purple satin gown with a high ruffled collar. She was lovely and had a pale face with thin lips, and dark, intelligent eyes.

Hermione watched as a boy, so clearly a four or five-year-old Severus, gripped the posts of the staircase from the mezzanine, his wide dark eyes the perfect spitting image of his mother’s. He was quietly observing. Hermione and the boy both watched the scene unfold.

“Tobias! Where have you been? I was worried sick!”

The dark-haired woman went to her husband, flinging her arms about him. Rather than comfort her, he pushed her away from him, roughly.

“I do not see why I should report every moment of my every day to you, Eileen!”

Eileen, Hermione thought, remembering the engraving on her hairbrush.

E.S.

Eileen Snape. His mother.

The woman’s face turned ashen at his rebuttal. She leaned in, nonetheless, to kiss Tobias’s cheek.

“I am glad you’re home.”

Without notice, he shoved her, violently, away from him and took a stumble back. He tried to right himself, but swayed on his feet, dropping his cane, and Hermione realised he was stone drunk.

“Don’t hang on me, witch!,” he sputtered.

Eileen took another step forward to him.
“Darling, please, I simply wanted to—”

But her husband interrupted her with the shocking crack of the back of his right hand striking her full across the face.

Hermione gasped at the same time as young Severus did.

Eileen went crashing to the floor, her hand rising to cup her abused cheek.

Hermione knew well what such a blow felt like.

She remembered how Lucius had hit her with similar force at Malfoy Manor the day she had gone to him upon first receiving the contract for their marriage.

She had been equally shocked — never understanding before then that there were men who could hurt women in such a way. She’d never realised how much stronger than herself a grown wizard could be.

In the memory, Tobias stormed into the parlour, slamming the door behind him, leaving Eileen prostrate on the floor. Rather than dissolve into tears, the brave, elegant witch slowly rose, and, realising her son was on the upper level, smiled widely at him, as if what had just occurred was merely some type of fun little game.

“Sev, my darling, what are you doing up so late? Off you go to bed! I shall be there with a story in a few minutes! How about the one with St. George and the Dragon?”

She so clearly was trying to spare her son from the ugliness of what he had just witnessed.

Hermione pulled back from the memory.

She knew Severus had not had a happy childhood, but she’d not spent much time considering what his parents were really like.

She’d never imagined this.

But, like a drug addict, once she’d had a taste…once her curiosity had been engaged, Hermione Jean Granger Snape was not to be thwarted.

The next vial…

Tobias, Eileen, and a four-year-old Severus at the dining room table.

Eileen and Tobias arguing over something inconsequential.

It ended with Tobias smashing plates against the wall, Eileen pleading with him to stop, and Severus hiding under the table.

The next vial…

A five-year-old Severus wandering past a door partially open. His mother bent over her bed. Her purple skirts up around her hips and cascading over the comforter. His father thrusting away behind her.

“Isn’t this how I make it up you, my lady?”

Severus not understanding what he was seeing, and running away down the hallway.
The next vial…

Tobias grabbing a six-year-old Severus by the throat in the garden.

“Where is your bitch of a mother, boy?”

“I don’t know, Sir.”

Tobias throwing the boy down, a loud, shocking crack as Severus’s elbow connected with a stone. Severus weeping.

“I think it’s broken, Sir!”

Tobias rolling his disdainful, brown eyes in annoyance. An all-too-familiar sneer appearing on his full lips.

“Don’t be weak! Never be weak! When you have decided to be a man about it, you may come inside to be healed.”

Tobias leaving his son outside, clutching his mangled arm.

Severus crying in agony, lying on the gravel path.

The next vial…

A seven-year-old Severus listening at the door to the library.

The voices of Tobias and Eileen inside.

“But, please, Tobias, I love you. I’ve given you everything. How can you do this to me?”

A woman’s sobs.

Then, the gruff voice of Lord Tobias.

“I owe you nothing. I raised you up from nothing! I, Tobias Archibald Snape, heir of Snape Hall, am one of the sacred twenty-eight. I could have married anyone! But I chose you! And you! God’s bells, what were you?! The daughter of a bloody minor Lord and a Mudblood bitch. Your blood is dirty and your magic is weak, yet I made you Lady of Snape Hall! And this is how you repay me? Constant nagging and whinging?! Do you not respect me?”

“Tobias, of course I do. I respect you and I love you, and I am grateful, but you owe me at least an explanation! Why have you taken a maîtresse? I would do anything to please you! Why Lady Juelia Bulstode? She’s one of my closest friends! I don’t understand! Why? How could you?”

“Perhaps I just wanted to copulate, for once, with someone of my own station, you insufferable termagant! Perhaps you just don’t interest me anymore! I owe you no explanation! I will do what I want, you prying bitch! I am the Lord here!”

Hermione pulled back when she heard a loud slapping noise.

The next vial…

An eight-year-old Severus trying to defend his mother in the Snape Hall ballroom.

His father, angry, with balled fists, surveying the elaborate decorations for a party. Servants in the
background scattering.

“This is absurd! How dare you show off in such a manner!”

Eileen moving Severus behind her, instinctually.

“I want people to see the glory of the Manor, Tobias, the glory of Snape Hall and you! It’s not showing off. Everyone has such high esteem for you — they want to celebrate your ancestral home!”

“Yes, Father!,” a young Snape piped up. “Mother is right! We should be proud of our home!”

“Pride goeth before the fall! Don’t let the foolish whims of women dictate your life, Severus,” Tobias sneered, before turning and sweeping out of the room.

Before he left, he turned and with a lift of his wand and a swift “Incendio!” he lit the streamers on fire.

Eileen began to sob as her delicate work went up in flames. Severus hugged her fiercely.

“It’s alright, Mother.”

_The next vial…_

Hermione couldn’t fully understand the context, but there was blood.

A lot of blood.

She saw a nine-year-old Severus in a bathroom that looked very much like her own, cradling his mother. She was a mess — torn lip, torn nightgown. Bleeding from a cut on her temple and scratches on her neck and chest. Her head was in his lap. She seemed delirious.

“It’s alright, Sev,” she was whispering. “He doesn’t mean it.”

She was quietly weeping.

Severus was crying, too.

_The next vial…_

The dead of night.

Severus and Eileen were finishing packing up a suitcase each in his bedroom. He went to ask a question but she pressed an index finger to her lips.

"Now is our chance..."

Hermione watched as they took the servant’s staircase to a waiting carriage, loading their slim luggage and silently pulling away.

_The next vial…_

“This is Cokeworth. My mother grew up here,” Eileen said, grasping her young son’s hand and kissing the back of it.

“We can start anew.”

Nine-year-old Snape looked out the carriage at the dirty, dismal industrial town. Hermione could see
the disappointment on his face.

So different from what he was used to, Hermione thought.

As the carriage rolled by, Hermione saw the young Severus catch a glimpse of a few Muggle children playing with a football in the streets. The thestral-pulled carriage was invisible to their eyes, but Severus noticed one girl immediately — a red-head with kind eyes, laughing with her friends.

She alone sensed them. She turned her head in their direction as they pulled by.

She had striking green eyes.

Lily.

She looked so much like Harry did the first time Hermione had met him. The same age.

The same sparkling intelligence and vulnerability.

The next vial…

“Mother, I don’t want to leave you!”

“You must go to Hogwarts, Sev. It will be the making of you.”

“I can’t. What will happen to you? I’m not leaving you in this crummy mill town.”

“I…I’ve decided to return to Snape Hall.”

“But why? He’s a monster! I don’t understand!”

“Your father has written to me. He’s respected my wishes for us to be alone this past year, but we’ve been owling regularly for the past three months. He wants to start fresh, and I want to as well. With you at Hogwarts, I know you’ll be safe and happy. And I can try to make things work with him.”

Ten-year-old Severus sprung up from an armchair in their Spinner’s End drawing room, flinging his arms around his mother.

“No. Don’t! He’ll never change! You can’t want that!”

She sighed and clutched her son to her breast, kissing the top of his head.

“Oh, darling, I’m sorry, but I do. Sometimes I wish I didn’t. But I do want to be with him. He’s flawed, but I cannot help but love him, Severus. Please try to understand. I think we can be happy again. We truly loved each other once…”

“You can’t trust him. It’s a mistake.”

Eileen sat in a large tatty armchair and took Severus’s cheeks in both hands, smiling at him with deep affection.

“Oh, Sev, please don’t fret about your ridiculous mum. You’re going to have a wonderful time at Hogwarts! I always wanted to go, but I never had the connections. Or the talent, frankly. You’re such a powerful young wizard. You inherited all of your father’s best qualities. Besides, you’ll have at least one friend there! Mrs. Evans confided in me that Lily received her letter, too, though I am hardly surprised. Make me proud, my sweet boy."
“I will.”

“Your education will be the key to your future, my darling. Don't give a moment's thought to me. If you succeed at school, it is all I could ever hope for. I wish I had had such an education!”

Hermione watched Eileen hug her son tightly to her. Hermione felt a lump in her throat. She had never imagined how powerful and pure the love of a mother for her son could be.

It reminded her of Lily and Harry.

She could feel a deep empathy in her heart for this woman she had never met — Eileen Marie Prince Snape.

She had clearly loved her son profoundly, and Severus had deeply loved her in return. It was remarkable to see him express such unfettered affection.

She suddenly understood why he had the lithograph of Cokeworth on his wall in his study in the Dungeons. This had been a refuge — a place, albeit temporarily, where he and his mother had been safe.

He may have only lived there for a year, but it had been one of the happiest times of his life — he’d been with his mother, he’d met Lily, and he’d been out of reach of his cruel father.

Hermione couldn’t stop now.

The next vial...

Severus was in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. It was the Leaving Feast. He was sitting at the Slytherin Table. Around him, the Hall was decorated in Slytherin green. Evidently, they had won the House Cup in Severus’s First-Year.

But Severus was the only one at the table frowning. He was staring at a scroll he’d just received. A pretty Slytherin girl poked his arm.

“What’s wrong, Sev?”

"Nothing, Wendla."

He immediately got up from the table and walked away. He looked ashen. Hermione tried to follow, but the memory faded.

The next vial...

Severus was in the Dungeons, in the Boys’ Dormitory. He had cast “Incendio!” and was burning the scroll now.

Hermione leaned in and could only catch bits of the words before the flames licked them and dissolved them into ash.

“....sorry to have to write these awful words...your angel mother...terrible accident...fell from the ramparts...the East Wing...didn’t suffer...my poor boy...Signed, Madam Kemp...”

Hermione watched as eleven-year-old Severus went to the window and stared out of it. She couldn’t see his face, but his shoulders shook, wracked with emotion.

Hermione pulled back, unable to watch more.
Once more back in the Study and out of the Pensieve, Hermione took a huge gulp of air.

*Did his father kill his mother? Did Tobias kill Eileen?*

_The next vial…_

A twelve-year-old Snape sat at the dining room table in Snape Hall. Tobias Snape sat at the far end. He was lecturing Snape on the importance of always gaining the upper hand in every business transaction. Tobias Snape drank greedily from his goblet of wine as he rambled on, evidently thinking what he was saying was devastatingly important. He had gotten corpulent in the past two years.

Hermione watched as Severus smiled and nodded.

“*Yes, Father!*” “Of course, *Father!*”

If she didn’t know Severus Snape as well as she did, one would think he was a dutiful son, enthusiastically soaking up his beloved father’s knowledge.

But Hermione caught a glimpse of something dark in his eyes and expression. *Already occluding,* she thought. *Already playing the game.*

She pulled out of the memory.

_Was that a creak in the hall?* She paused and listened again.

But there was nothing.

_Oh, God, Hermione, you have to stop! You have to get out of this. How are you even going to begin to tell Severus about this tomorrow?* She knew she would have to sit him down and explain her violation. It was going to be awful.

_Maybe I can sit him down in the parlour after dinner. Perhaps over a glass of fire-whiskey?*_

She replaced the last vial, guiltily, and moved to close the cabinet. Just as she was about to close it, she noticed one vial that was set off to the right, slightly on its own, separated by a few inches from the other vials….

She bit her lip, but she was already reaching for it. She unstoppered it, and let the memory slide down into the bowl.

_Just one more…_

Hermione gasped as the memory opened with a nineteen-year-old Severus Snape kneeling in an empty hall before a dark-hooded figure.

She knew immediately who it was.

Though she couldn’t see his face, she recognised the voice immediately. It wasn’t the snake-like, sibilant accent he would later evolve into. His voice sounded much more human.

*Tom Marvolo Riddle,* Hermione thought. She knew she was watching something from the First Wizarding War.

“*Severus, they tell me you are the last to take the Mark? What is your hesitation, my son? You know you have only to ask and I shall give you everything you desire. Have I not laid waste to your*
enemies, and cleared the path so that those like you — gifted, yet stifled — can have a voice?”

“My Lord, there is one final thing I wish. Grant it to me and I shall take the Mark tonight.”

“Anything, Severus. You are worthy.”

Hermione watched as Severus Snape, nineteen-year-old Severus Snape, the same age as the witch watching him now, lifted his dark head to stare into the cloaked visage of Lord Voldemort.

His dark eyes blazed with excitement.

“I wish my father to die by your hand.”

“Granted.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open, but before she could see what happened next, she felt herself falling backwards. A hand on her shoulder violently yanked her out of the memory. The skin of her face stung from the rapidity of the disengagement.

She gasped for air as she emerged from the cloudy memory, the cool air of the study flooding back into her lungs.

Her hands grasped at air as she tilted backwards, and she felt her bottom connect with something hard.

She came to flat on her back on the carpet of the Study, still breathing heavily, trying to ascertain what had just happened.

She froze.

Above her loomed the fierce, raging face of her husband.

He wore his black pajama bottoms, but was naked from the waist up. His teeth were clenched in a rictus grin and his fists were curled tightly in on themselves. The muscles in his neck and abdomen were held so tightly, Hermione could practically make out every vein in his body.

She crawled backwards, by instinct, but she was so shocked by his sudden appearance and disoriented from the Pensieve, she couldn’t bring herself to form words.

His dark eyes glared at her with a murderous rage she had not yet seen. He had been angry with her many times, manhandled her, yelled into her face, but she had never felt before that she was in actual physical danger.

Yet the way he looked at her now…she could feel every hair on her body stand on end.

“Run!,” a voice in her psyche whispered. “Run! Run!”

Hermione tried to get her feet under her, but they were rubbery. She felt woozy. Evidently, spending so much time in the Pensieve had turned her equilibrium to mush. The room was spinning.

Snape had turned to the cabinet and was glancing over the vials, taking quick stock of which ones she had moved. What she knew. What knowledge she’d stolen.

He turned back to her, and seemed to know at once the entire truth. He narrowed his black eyes at her.
“I have told you I have nothing to give you, but you want everything. You remind me a great deal of Dumbledore, you know. Cold. Manipulative. Willing to walk all over the desires of others to get what you want—”

He took a step towards her, menacingly, and Hermione managed to crab-walk all the way to the wall. She pressed herself into it, shutting her eyes in panic, drawing her knees into her stomach.

*This isn’t happening!*

“—I’m so sorry! I am so sorry! Oh God, Severus, what have I done?”

“At least Dumbledore wasn’t hedonistic and faithless. Every time I see good in you, you remind me how wrong I am to believe in anything anymore.”

Hermione could feel herself start to shake.

“No! No!,” she protested. She forced herself to open her eyes.

Severus was stalking towards her, his dark eyes looking at her up and down with utter disgust. He looked like a giant, standing high above her, while she did her best to shrink back into the wall and become invisible.

She was terrified of him. For the first time, truly frightened.

*His father killed his mother! He killed his father!*

She could feel the tears begin to fall from her eyes. She didn’t know what to say. She was frozen.

“I didn’t mean to…I’m so sorry!”

“No, you never ‘mean to,’ and yet you do. You will always do whatever it is to get what you want. I suppose I should admire that. It’s rather ‘Slytherin’ and yet I hate you for it, because you drape your selfishness in moral superiority. So, do tell me, Lady Snape, how invading my Study, the one room I asked you to respect, and watching my private memories is somehow for the ‘greater good’?!”

“They’re not! It’s not!,” Hermione sobbed. She began to crawl forward. She didn’t know how to reach him.

“I’m so sorry!”

“No, you’re not! You’re pleased to have the knowledge. You know, I could *Obliviate* you right now! Shall I? Or shall I just use *Legilimency* to take an equal pound of flesh from you?”

Severus grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her up.

Hermione began to shake harder. Memories of the abuse she had suffered from Lucius came flooding back. Severus had been her safe space, and now she didn’t know where to turn.

*I’m alone in this house. Just like Eileen was. Alone with her husband. What if I have an ‘accident’ too?*

Through her tears, Hermione could sense Severus’s pressing gaze penetrate her own irises. His *Legilimency* was roughly prodding at the edges of her mind. She knew he could do what he wished.

She reached forward and placed her palms on his chest.
“Please, don’t!”

“Oh, I see!” he snarled, "Your mind is sacred, and yet mine is to be raped at your inclination?"

Hermione flinched at his use of that terrible, disgusting word.

She hung her head in shame.

“Your disrespect was intermittently amusing when you were a mere brat, but I’m afraid as an adult it’s the cornerstone of defective character.”

“I’m so sorry, Severus! Please forgive me!”

She screamed as she felt him fling her down, violently, into the carpet.

“Don’t you dare use my name! As if there is anything between us! I can never trust you!”

“You can!”

“Never!”

Hermione crawled herself to her knees and looked up at the wizard.

He turned toward his desk and, grasping a heavy plaster bust of Aristotle, he flung it across the other side of the room. It landed against the wall with a loud bang and shattered into tiny pieces; Hermione cried out in alarm.

The room reverberated from the noise, and Severus turned back to the desk, and, with a violent growl, swept the papers and ink-pots upon it to the floor. Hermione’s eyes widened in horror at his unleashed rampage.

Who was this man? Was he just Tobias Snape, after all? She knew what she had done was terribly wrong, but she’d never seen her husband’s stormy temper manifest in such a dangerous display.

Get out! Get out! Get out!

She scrambled to her feet and ran to the door, grasping the handle and flinging it open. She stepped into the hallway and heard the wrathful shout from behind her:

“Don’t you dare run from me!”

Hermione made it halfway down the hall before she heard the “Incarcerous!” behind her. She fell forward as thick cords appeared around her ankles, binding her. She used her palms to break her fall, and then rotated her body to the left, rolling onto her back.

Severus was barreling towards her, his bare feet stomping into the carpet. Hermione briefly considered yelling for the servants, for Bitsy, but what could they do? What could anyone do?

She was in a Hell of her own making.

She sobbed again.

“Please, listen!”

“I am done with your talk!”
“I know what I did was wrong! I don’t know why I did it! I couldn’t stop myself! I care about you, and I… I couldn’t not understand… I… I love you! I love you, Severus! I had to understand!”

Severus stopped in his tracks.

For a moment, Hermione thought her declaration might soften him, might end their nightmare, but the cold, cruel mask slipped across his face once more, and his lips thinned out.

“Love?,” he spat the word out with such disdain, as if it were poison.

“— Haven’t you just learned the hell that goes on behind closed doors? In this world, in this House, there is no love. There is only survival.”

Hermione struggled against her bound feet, but she couldn’t budge the cords. Severus had reached her now and was smiling down in cruel bemusement at her entrapment.

“But… but what about the Vaiseys? They love each other!”

“He married her because her family is filthy rich, and she pretends to love him in order to earn expensive dresses. She is a whore. And he fucks half his friend’s wives!”

Hermione’s eyes widened at his coarse language, but she felt her own temper rise — as if he were any better!

“As you did Narcissa!”

His dark eyes bored into hers, and he clicked his tongue against his teeth. She bit her tongue as he leaned down and scooped her up in his powerful arms.

He began to march them to her bedroom door. Hermione’s hands and arms were free, but rather than try to push against him, she merely wrapped them around her shaking, bare shoulders.

He clutched her tightly, and she could see the tiny muscles in his cheek quiver in rage as he spoke, though his words were delivered with trademark passive, measured cruelty.

“Exactly. I do not claim to be better. But I have kept myself in check all this time, you ungrateful termagant. For you! I have tried to show you respect. You make it impossible. You want honesty from me? Merlin, if I were honest about half the crimes I committed, you would flee this house in terror, little girl.”

Hermione’s eyes widened and she looked at him imploringly.

“You’re decent, Severus. In your heart. I know you—”

“— I murdered my own father—!”

“— I know you. I am not ashamed to be married to you, and I don’t care about your family’s past. I still want a real marriage with you.”

As they arrived at her closed bedroom door, Severus eyed it, and with the force of his wandless magic, it blew violently open, rattling on its hinges. He carried her roughly across the threshold.

“I am not a ‘decent’ man, you short-sighted malapert! I was not born of decent stock. I was born sick. I told you not to push me! Do you really want to know what I am?”

He threw her on to the bed, and she landed with a soft bounce. Her white nightgown fell down off
one shoulder, and she struggled to replace the strap. He pushed her back on the bed, and suddenly a primal fear, even greater than the panic she was already experiencing shot through her.

*Did he intend…?*

“Please, Severus! Listen to me—“

But he crawled over her, and began to roughly slide her nightgown up over her thighs.

“Shall I just *use* you like all the other Pureblood husbands?”

Hermione looked up at him wide-eyed. His emotionless black eyes shone down on her, reflecting in the moonlight peeking in from around the curtains.

“*Lumos!*” she called out. The room lit up, and Hermione felt a little bit relieved. He hated the light — surely he would come to his senses. She shook her head vigorously as he pulled her nightgown up to her waist. She hadn’t bothered putting her underwear back on earlier, and she suddenly realised that she was fully exposed to him in the brightness of the room.

“No!”

He ignored her protestation, and reached down and cupped her right breast through the silky sheer nightgown with a firm grasp, kneading it none-too-gently.

Hermione, terrified as she was, could sense her body responding to him. She had learnt to keen at his touch, at the promise of pleasure that only he had ever provided. She had to struggle to prevent herself from dropping her head back.

Her body seemed to have already memorised his firm palm and nimble, tapered fingers, and she fought against her natural response.

It was all wrong. *This isn’t right.*

Not the right time. *We need to talk. I have to stop this.* The implication of what he was doing terrified her.

“No…you wouldn’t…”

“Are you so sure? I am a *selfish* man, Hermione. I could take you every hour on the hour if I so desired. I *own* you. I am your Lord and Master, and your Pureblood husband. You are my *possession.* You admitted as much. You signed the contract and spoke the vows. Your body is mine, and legally, I can have it whenever I wish.”

Suddenly he reached down and, pulling her legs up by the back of her thighs, he bent them until her knees were in line with his shoulders and she was folded back on herself. He edged himself closer to her, looming down until his lips were close to her ear. One of his hands reached down to fumble at the front of his pajama pants.

“Know this of me for once and for all. I am a monster. I have *tortured* people to death. I have bathed in blood, and I *reveled* in it. I gave my soul to the Dark Lord in exchange for the death of my enemies, and there is a part of me…there is a *part* of me, dear little innocent Hermione, that *misses* it.”

“No, no,” she whimpered. “It’s not true.”
She took a deep breath.

*He’s only trying to scare you.*

His deep voice puffed an exhalation of contempt above her. His voicebox had somehow gotten even deeper.

It took on a hissing characteristic that remimed Hermione of a voice she hadn’t heard in a long time.

The hairs on her arms stood up and she could feel her left hand was shaking again.

*Why does it never stop?*

Severus loomed above her, all dark fury and twisted, cruel lips. He gave a cruel laugh at her helplessness. Hermione shut her eyes, but she couldn’t prevent his cold, cutting baritone from filling her ears.

“Oh, but it’s true. *I loved* the power I felt serving the Dark Lord. *I delighted* in it. I don’t know who you *think* I am, but if you try to love me, I will destroy you.”

She opened her eyes and looked directly at him. He was shaking with rage, but his eyes had a pleading look in them, as if a part of him was desperate to find a way out of the situation.

Hermione was trembling in fear, as she had been for several minutes, and her cheeks were wet now with her tears. But she would not be cowed.

She had been honest with him. He was her husband, and she knew him. Knew him now better than she ever had before. She would not allow him to destroy himself with self-loathing.

“I don’t believe you.”

He froze, before twisting his lips into another more repulsive sneer. Hermione had never seen him look uglier.

His visage reminded her suddenly so strongly of the pale stony face of Tobias Snape, and she struggled to get away from him one final time, pushing her hands against his chest, trying to move her legs back down.

It was no use now. He was a immovable statue, and she knew she was going to be punished. He leaned forward and grabbed her wrists, pinning them into the mattress on either side of her. He pushed his face towards hers, looking over her form, flicking those dark eyes up and down, with complete revulsion. The look she had wished against all wishes never to have seen on his face again.

“The more fool you,” he spat.

And with a strong thrust, she felt him violently push himself into her.

She cried out, more in surprise than pain, but had no time to adjust as he began a brutal pace.

*Ooh! Ouch!*

“It’s too much! Oh, Severus, *please*! Stop!”

He was so deep inside and somehow felt larger than any other time before. And she wasn’t ready.
She wasn’t aroused. There was no Lubrication Charm. He didn’t care for her readiness or comfort. He was hurting her now. On purpose.

She lowered her legs slightly to relieve some of the tightness of their fit, but Severus growled and pushed her thighs back towards her ribcage.

“Hold yourself.”

Hermione looked up at him, confused.

He paused and, vanishing her nightgown completely and the cords around her ankles, he freed her hands and set them on her own thighs.

“You will do what I say! After all, this is what you wanted! A Lord-husband. A real Pureblood marriage. A Death-eater to fuck you properly? Well, then take all of me,” he hissed down at her, tiny bits of saliva hitting her face.

Hermione’s body shook with the trauma of it. Tears streamed down her face.

He’d never been cruel to her like this. Not in this way.

She knew that it was a violation.

That it was something they could never come back from.

She’d violated him in one way, and he was violating her in another.

She had trusted him, and he was breaking that trust.

On purpose.

Frightened, she obeyed him, pulling her shaking thighs wider with her own hands, pressing her lower back into the mattress.

“That’s it, girl.”

He thrust again and Hermione gasped as a strong ripple of pleasure rolled through her. She arched her back. Oh, God, what was he doing? She felt a wave of panicked confusion roll through her. He was frightening her and yet…it was…good, too? He’d never been like this before. She was confused as to how the pain could feel pleasurable.

He’d always been gentle. So gentle. Never like this.

She heard him grunt in satisfaction as he pistonned forward again into the same spot, and Hermione moaned quietly.

Satisfied, he began to pound into her. His hands wrapped around her upper thighs for leverage and she found herself bouncing against the bed as he thrust his hips hard and fast. His hip bones pushed into the back of her thighs. The slap of flesh on flesh.

She was frightened at how quickly there was pleasure, sparks building from such a desperate act. Why was there this building inside of her?

She was afraid of displeasing him, and scared that she didn’t know what he wanted. But within thirty seconds she couldn’t think anymore. She could only completely give in. She could feel her core start to melt for him, feel herself start to heat up. The slide of arousal as her body responded against her
He was so hot and hard inside of her and he was rubbing her inner walls — and oh, it almost hurt how much pleasure there was! The coaxing, deep massaging of himself inside of her — stroking her insides to deeper and deeper pleasure. She couldn’t think.

She could only shut her eyes and take what he was giving her, and follow the sensation where it took her. She couldn't understand how his forcefulness made her wet between her legs.

One of the memories she had watched hit her, and she was ashamed at how it, too, increased her pleasure.

“Isn’t this how I make it up you, my lady?”

She came so suddenly it hit her as if she had been shocked by electricity; her legs shook around Severus’ biceps, before her feet slid towards the mattress, her thighs splayed open in spent exhaustion.

As she came back to herself, she could still feel him thrusting. She was overwhelmed by his raw insistence, his brutal stamina, and she felt the tears continue to fall out of the corner of her eyes.

Why is he….? Why is he doing this?

She gasped, trying to catch her breath. She felt so full and sensitive between her legs. His thrusts were too aggressive, the plunging forward too insistent. She knew he was bruising her delicate tissue — his strength was too overbearing, and even outside her body, his hipbones were jamming into her upper thighs, his fingers digging into her flesh. There would be bruises. Many bruises. She whimpered.

“Please…Severus…it’s too much…you’re hurting me…You’re hurting me!”

He removed himself from her suddenly, as if she had, once more, burned him, and she breathed a sigh of relief to feel him gone from her, before she felt his strong hands wrap around her arms and pull her up and over on her side, flipping her.

She landed on her forearms, and she felt his hands on her hips again, yanking them up and into place. She could feel him nudging again at her entrance. He ran himself along her folds, slowly back and forth, teasing her. She let out an involuntary moan. She didn't want him, but she could only respond in the affirmative to his needs. What does this mean?

Before she could ponder further, he leaned forward and suckled on her neck, then bit down on it, hard. She moaned at the painful nip, then found herself purring as he nuzzled his chin into her right cheek.

“Tell me you hate me,” he whispered.

Hermione shook her head.

“No…I could never…”

“Don’t you understand?” he growled.

He leaned down even more closely towards her ear, and gave a threatening, low, almost voiceless whisper:
“I will take you like a bitch in heat and not feel a single regret.”

Hermione turned to look back at him, glancing over her shoulder, stubborn and trembling. She still felt so incredibly raw and open, and she was terrified at what he would do next, but she couldn’t let him win.

She would meet him in this uncertain place — she would sacrifice herself if need be.

“If you want to, then do it.”

Severus’s expression changed again.

His brow softened in surprise for just a moment, before the angry hard sneer returned and he lifted himself back up onto his knees.

Hermione felt his hand at her back, between her shoulder blades, press her down, until she landed with her left-cheek to the mattress, her forearms flattened next to her, her bottom high in the air.

She knew he was in charge now. She would have to take whatever he dictated. The idea both thrilled her and terrified her.

No time to think.

His strong arms were on her hips again, positioning her, and seconds later she felt another deep thrust as he pushed himself back into her body.

She gave a loud whimper.

He began to thrust into her again at an even more brutal pace, grunting. His movements were deeply primal and his noises grew in intensity until he was practically snarling above her.

He’d never expressed himself so fully, never been so loud. Tender as she was, she couldn’t deny that his loss of control inflamed her, causing even more moisture between her legs, giving him the incentive to continue.

Hermione bit her lip and grasped the coverlet with her hands. She was determined not to make a single sound, even though the insidious pleasure was building up again.

So soon? She couldn’t understand.

She felt like she was going mad, and that she had lost all control of her body. She was terrified that he would stop, but she was frightened how his violence seemed to stoke her desires. Oh God, what is wrong with me? She bit her lip even harder to suppress another moan.

Hermione didn’t realise that he was displeased at her quiet until she felt the strong, stinging slap of a hand on her bottom. Before she understood what was happening, another stinging slap landed.

“Ow!” she cried out. Evidently pleased, he continued to smack her cheeks. Each place of contact stung, but seconds later bloomed into a warmth that began to increase her pleasure even more. The sensations of pain and pleasure mixed together was not something Hermione had ever felt before.

All her resolve to stay quiet fell away, and within seconds she was lost to his pleasure again.

She began to babble little “oh’s” and “ooh’s” and shriek with joy at each soft smack. Her knees had slid open in a wider stance, and Severus grabbed them and pushed them together, making their fit even tighter. Hermione screamed out as he adjusted his hips and began pumping her harder than
ever, pushing her further down into the mattress, crumpling her body as it spasmed around him.

She came again, harder than the first time, shouting his name so loudly it reverberated off the walls.

She fell onto her left side, curling into her body as wave after wave of delicious contractions pulsed between her legs.

She lay boneless in a heap, until she was at last able to flutter her eyes open and look up at Severus.

Hermione’s eyes fell down his body to his hardness. She watched as he reached his hand down and pumped it over his shaft. Once. Twice. Three times, and then finally he came with a groan, his seed spurting onto her chest and stomach.

He collapsed back onto his haunches and she curled herself more fully into fetal position, both of them panting and recovering from the intensity of the experience.

It was a full minute before Hermione felt like her brain was back inside her body.

She was still shaking.

She could feel the tears continue to stream from her eyes.

How could she ever forgive him for this?

She felt dirty, degraded.

She wiped her chest and stomach with the bedding and reached for her robe on the floor near the bed, moving over to sit at the edge of the bed with her back towards him. She tightened the belt back around her waist and sat back, scared of what to say. She was covered in sweat and she felt a sharp pain between her legs.

He'd overpowered her. Purposefully overpowered her. And treated her like an object.

Worst of all, she was afraid he wasn’t done.

Cautiously she twisted her body to look at him, glancing over her shoulder, gun-shy.

He’d moved to the foot of the bed, and fixed his pajama trousers back over his hips.

Her roving eyes stopped as she saw the Dark Mark on his forearm. She shuddered slightly at the sight of that menacing skull. She’d never seen it in the light of a bright room before.

His eyes caught hers.

“Yes. Look. This is who I am.”

Severus strode around the bed until he stood in front of her. She moved to stand but he shoved her back down and pushed his forearm towards her face. The horrible Mark was only inches from her eyes.

“This is who you want to be intimate with, what you want to love. The Mark always burns, girl. It will never go away.”

Hermione pulled her arms in towards her body, covering her breasts and torso defensively. Snape leaned down and folded his arms in front of him. His eyes glinted with danger once again.
Please, no more!, she thought, wiping a tear off her chin. She knew her face was a mess.

“I am my father’s son. I am a servant of the Dark. Don’t you dare forget what I am. Now get the fuck out! I’m sick of your sniveling! Leave!”

Hermione didn’t move.

“Go!” he shouted, furiously. “GO!”

She jumped up, and made for the door. He called after her as she stumbled in her hurry:

“That’s right, run, you pathetic… weak… little Mudblood whore, before I corrupt you completely!”

Hermione froze.

Severus froze.

She had never heard him utter that in her presence.

To call her that….

She reached her bedroom door, but she couldn’t lift her arm to the handle.

She shook, as a deep pain shot from the very pit of her stomach up into her heart.

It couldn’t be that he thought of her like that. Not after all they had gone through together.

She turned, slowly.

He stood by her bed, his eyes blazing at her in fury.

His chin lifted in repugnant superiority.

Of all the things he could have used against her, of all the things…

…she never thought he would have gone there.

She stared at him, dumbstruck, for several seconds.

He simply glowered at her, his face a white mask of nothingness.

No regret.

No empathy.

Just dark eyes that gleamed in the assured pleasure at the confirmed hurt he’d inflicted.

She turned and fled, not allowing the sobs to wrack her chest until the door closed behind her and she was halfway down the hall, her feet at the top of the staircase.

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Chapter End Notes
If you don't hate me, there's pictures, music, etc. that relate to this chapter at: https://missstellastark.tumblr.com.
Chapter 68

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for self-harm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He watched her disappear behind the door, and inhaled sharply as it slammed after her. He could hear her sobs grow distant as the soft thud of her bare feet moving rapidly towards the front staircase faded into the distance.

She's gone.

The moment he realised he’d won, his knees gave out from under him.

Tamping the emotion down, he rose up from Hermione’s bedroom carpet and made for the door to the adjoining sitting room, banging it open before him with an angry wave of his hand.

He couldn’t bear to be in this room anymore. Her room.

Her.

His wife.

Hermione.

Oh, God.

He burst into his own chamber and quickly took up his wand from his dressing table. Outside, a thunderclap boomed and he could see lightning illuminate the garden.

He didn’t know when it had started to rain. He didn’t care.

He turned and lifted his wand to his family crest above the mantel, the ancient Snape family escutcheon that read “tutum ac firmam.”

The one she had so recently admired.

Never has a family been so misstyled.

He twisted his lips into a sneer and lifted his wand half-an-inch higher.

“Incendio!”

Within minutes, his bedroom was in shambles, every piece of furniture save his bed cracked, upended, splintered, charred, or shattered. It looked as if the storm had burst in through the windows, though they had rather miraculously managed to remain intact throughout his episode of destruction.

Chest-heaving and brow-sweating in the midst of the disarray, Severus turned and stormed into his bathroom.
It used to make him feel good to destroy things.

But nothing would ever be good again. He’d made sure of that. There was no future, now.

*It’s what you wanted.*

He stood in front of the gilded mirror above the sink and stared into his pale, drawn face.

He had always hated his face.

It would be a relief not to have one anymore.

Slowly…ever so slowly…he lifted his wand and pointed the tip under his chin.

He’d never heard of anyone who had used *Avada Kedavra* on themselves. He knew you had to *mean* an Unforgivable with all your heart and soul for it to be effective.

The tip of his wand burned hot against his flesh.

He meant it.

He could do it.

Anything for this torment to end. For those black eyes in the mirror to close. For the voices in his head to quiet. For the past to be buried.

For him to not have to think about…about…about…her face.

Her lovely face all screwed up with tears. The betrayal on it. The look she gave him when he said those words…those awful, *verboten* words.

And her cries that reverberated in his ears:

“*No!*” “*You’re hurting me!*” “*Severus, please, stop!*”

He turned and leaned over the toilet bowl, retching. There was nothing in his stomach except water, yet it came up, until the stomach acids burned in his mouth.

His entire body was shaking now, as if his nervous system were hooked up to a low-level electrical current. He bit down on his own tongue and tasted blood.

*I’ve destroyed her. As I destroy everything. There is no reason to go on.*

Somewhere in his memory, his mind called forth Voldemort’s terrible laugh. That disgusting, amused encouragement Severus always received when he’d exhibited utmost cruelty.

“*Y-y-y-essssss, my servant! You have learnt so well!*”

And he’d now taken all the cruelty he’d learnt at his Master’s knee and smashed it down upon Hermione’s tender personage.

He retched again, but soon righted himself with the strength of a man determined to complete his task.

*End this.*

He lifted his hand again and jabbed the pointed wand-end even harder into the smooth flesh of his
neck.

It dug in, piercing the skin. A small rivulet of blood dripped down his wand and onto his fingers.

His eyes flickered with dark inspiration at the red liquid shining in the mirror.

*Avada is too good for you.*

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All Hermione could do was run. She took the stairs two at a time, flying down them.

She saw the first flash of lightning when she reached the front door, but it didn’t stop her from flinging it open.

She wasn’t afraid of the rain. She’d been in the elements before.

*But it wasn’t like this….*

She grabbed a warm brown cloak from the hall closet and a pair of gardening slippers and ran onto the front portico.

It was pouring.

Where could she go? She had no idea where the nearest Apparition Point was. It was miles to York.

She glanced to her left. Across the lawn the large brick outbuildings that made up the stableyard were lit up against the light from the moon. She had limited experience riding thestrals, and she liked it only mildly more than her experience with broomsticks, but it looked to be her only way out of this terrible place.

She wrapped the dark cloak tightly around her white robe and ran down the steps, wiping the tears from her face and willing the sobs to subside.

*Now is not the time to fall apart. I have to get out of here!*

If she could get one of the thestrals to take her to Malfoy Manor, she knew Lucius would happily take her in.

*He’d delight in it,* she thought, apprehensively.

As she ran across the lawn, her garden shoes sticking into the wet grass, she struggled to keep the rain and wind out of her eyes. Her brain spun with a flood of emotions…fear, anger, confusion.

*How could Severus….? He would never…he swore to me…the bastard! He swore never to raise a hand to me in anger…never to be violent…never to be like Lucius…yet he did it on purpose…he wanted to scare me…he wants me to run….He wants me to hate him.*

She was halfway to the stables when another blast of lightning lit up the sky behind her. She paused for a moment and looked back at the house.

She had a strange feeling curling up her spine. A sensation of being watched.

As the lightning faded, she swore for a brief moment there was the outline of a woman standing on the roof of Snape Hall. A woman in a long purple dress with a soft blue light surrounding her.
Hermione squinted but a loud clap of thunder shook her focus, and when she looked back again at the roof the figure of the woman was gone.

She pulled the cloak around her more tightly.

*You're imagining things. Get a grip.*

She turned back to the stables and only made it six more steps before stopping again.

She looked back at the house — its white marble columns shone in the moonlight. There was no woman’s figure on the gabled roof that she could see. But she couldn’t shake the feeling she was being watched.

Hermione let out a small cry of frustration. Somehow instinctually she knew what it all meant.

*He’s in danger.*

She knew something was very wrong. And she knew that she was being called back to the house, though if she admitted to herself by whom she would never be able to take herself seriously as an academic and a researcher ever again.

Hermione stomped her foot into the wet grass and put her hands on her waist. She could feel her ribs expand and contract with her panicky breaths.

“Why does it always have to be up to me?” she asked aloud, to no one in particular. She tilted her head back and stared up at the dark night sky. The stormclouds obscured the stars, so above her there was only a dark fathomless nothingness. *Like his eyes.*

She let out another frustrated groan.

“Why do I always have to *choose*?”

She’d always been deeply suspicious of psychics, soothsayers, and prophetics, and yet perhaps spending the last few weeks working daily amid their magic in the Hall of Prophecies had caused something to rub off on her, because suddenly Hermione saw quite clearly that if she left on the back of a thestral, after this evening there would be no more Severus Snape.

In her anger and trauma, part of her wanted it to be so. She thought of his terrible expressions, his coldness, his cruel words. *Why should he exist at all?*

But then she felt a strong pull back towards the house. A sense that she was being pleaded with by an unseen force. A woman’s soft voice. “Please…please…”

Hermione stood in the grass, agonizing over her decision. She looked down at the silver band on her left hand. If Severus died, would it disappear? Would she finally be free?

****

Severus sat on the floor of his bathroom.

The bathroom that had belonged to Tobias Snape before him. And Romulus Snape before him. And Leopold Snape before him. And Saturnus Snape before him.

Except the current Lord Snape looked nothing like his proud, illustrious forebears. His head was drooped down, a cloud of black hair half-covered his visage. His body language was one of a man utterly defeated. He leaned against the edge of his claw-footed bathtub in the middle of the white and
gold bathroom. There was a steady path of bloody drips on the tile from where he’d crawled here from the sink.

His wrists had been cut open, vertically, with *Sectum Parvus*. He knew the best way. And his lifeblood oozed from the cuts and were staining his black pajamas an even deeper black, the garish red also dripping onto the white tile that surrounded him. His wand lay on the tile next to him within reach.

It was strange to know that he could seize up the little piece of yew that he’d gotten from Ollivander’s so long ago and in a moment, cast a healing spell, and reverse the entire endeavor in mere seconds.

He knew he wouldn’t. He looked on Death now as the freedom that he so longed for — perhaps he had to do what he had done to Hermione to give himself the courage to commit this act?

*Disgusting*, he thought, as he pondered the idea. *Enough.*

He closed his eyes. He was nothing if not a patient man. It wouldn’t be long now.

It was a relief to feel his strength ebbing from his body. It was a better penance than a quick *Avada*. He hoped all of the ghosts of those he had wronged were watching him. He hoped that by choosing a slow death there was a small amount of amends that could be made.

Voldemort’s voice had left him now. As if by choosing self-immolation, the Dark Lord had finally released his hold on his subconscious.

*Tom never could abide weakness*….

So consumed with his thoughts, Severus Snape, for all his skills as a spy, barely heard a noise until the slim, proud form of Hermione Granger appeared in the open doorway to his bedchamber.

Her face was a mess, red-nosed, cheeks ruddy from the elements, her bushy hair disheveled, and she wore her simple white nightgown with its matching satin robe tied around her waist. She’d discarded the brown cloak. Her eyes were fierce and determined, and there was a knowing wisdom, a calmness there he had never seen before. He was scared.

She glanced down at him, taking everything in. His act didn’t seem to shock or surprise her.

Severus grabbed his wand and, sweating from the effort, lifted it slightly towards her, even as his wrist continued to drip. He tried to avoid eye contact, focusing instead at her pale, bare feet.

“No…,” he croaked out. “You should be gone.”

She glanced down at his wand pointed at her, and then back up at him. Her face showed no fear, only a strange, eerie energy that made Severus panicky when he glanced at them.

“You’ve cut yourself,” she said, simply, after a few seconds.

Her brown eyes gave nothing away. He knew his own were awash with panic and emotion. He could hide absolutely nothing now. There was no way to occlude. He looked down, dropping his arm. He couldn’t even support the weight of his own wand.

"Are you going to tell me not to die?” he whispered, attempting to inject some trademark sarcasm into the interrogatory, but failing miserably.
"No."

She took a couple steps inside the bathroom and watched him, curiously. She pressed her lower back against the opposite wall and slowly slid down it, eyeing him with suspicion and a forthright, wary caution.

"Maybe I came back to kill you myself."

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

*If only she would.*

He looked down at his arms, the blood slowly dripping from the cuts. If he'd gone deeper with the *Sectum Parvus*, it would be over by now. Yet another thing he couldn't do right.

*Perhaps it will be fitting, for her to watch me die.*

He looked at the puddle of his blood and how it was incrementally growing on the white tile.

Hermione watched him. His body panted slightly, as if sensing the imminent danger. *A body always wants to live,* she thought.

Severus’s head leaned back further against the bath. His neck felt weak. Hermione’s eyes flicked over him, gauging, assessing, judging.

This was not the time for judgment, though. It was about *truth.*

"You're talented at reading people. You knew the precise thing to do, the *precise* things to say. You know me so well. But then, you have known me most of my life. And it almost worked."

His eyes refused hers.

Hermione looked at him. He seemed to slump forward a little more. She could sense his shame. But it was his choice now whether to live or die.

*The self-pitying bastard.* She hated him, and yet watching his lifeblood eke its way outside his body filled her with the most profound dread and panic, as if it was her own life now ebbing away. As if somehow their circulatory systems had fused, and the blood that moved through him moved through her, back and forth between their hearts in a closed system. An invisible string attaching them.

She'd once read the human body could lose up to four pints of blood and still survive. She looked down at the ghastly splash of red all around him. He was soaked in it. *How much is that?*

“Do you remember in the Room of Requirement? I said that you hated me, that it was *bred* into you to hate me. On the day you married me to save me from Lucius and Bellatrix. I was right.”

“It wasn’t…I never planned…to hurt you…”

“Of course not, but you couldn’t let yourself be *known.* So you used my love for you against me in the cruelest way you knew how. The way you were taught.”

“I…I…”

“Severus, how many women have you witnessed being raped?”

Severus shut his eyes with a painful groan.
“Too many….”

“What were they like afterwards?”

“Broken…they ran…the Dark Lord let them go…to spread fear…”

“Did they ever return?”

“No.”

“Well, I am not broken, Severus Snape. You can never break me.”

“I didn’t want…I didn’t…Please leave me. Let me die. I deserve to die. I didn’t think….”

“No, of course not. You didn’t think. You were acting out of fear and rage. You are a trapped animal. I frighten you, so you needed to frighten me more.”

Severus bit down on his bottom lip. Her intelligence could sometimes be more than a little frightening in and of itself.

It was as if there were an entire field of study she knew everything about and he knew nothing about.

Hermione took a deep breath and continued. Now was the time to say all of the hard things.

“You know that I tried to end my life once. To erase myself and be a mindless Squib with no memory of magic or Hogwarts or myself. Self-immolation. I thought it would be better to do that than live with pain. You convinced me not to. You married me to save me from that. You taught me how to live with pain, and that it was selfish to choose the easy way out. Because life is pain.”

“Please go…I don’t deserve—”

“—Oh, this has nothing to do with what you deserve. Frankly, I should just watch you bleed out. But there is one more thing I owe you. A repayment, of sorts. You saved me once. So I am going to give you the chance to save yourself.”

“Please, just leave. Just run from me. Never come back. I beg of you. Forget me. Forget all of this.”

Hermione ignored his entreaties.

“I suppose what I can’t wrap my head around is, is it really more important to try to break me than to be with me?”

"I...I can't..."

Hermione shook her head.

"You didn't have to do that," she replied, both of them immediately understanding what she meant.

She closed her eyes. The emotion welled up within her. It was too much, too recent.

She couldn’t pretend he hadn’t hurt her spirit. Large tears dripped from each eye and began to slowly roll down each cheek. She shook her head, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I said, 'No.' ...I said, 'No,' Severus.”

Her plain words hit him squarely in the chest, and he felt something pry itself open. The weight of it.
His crime. What he had done.

That crack.

The one in his heart that she'd found a footing in so many weeks ago, the one he’d felt when he'd caressed her scalp, his fingers carding through her hair.

The kinship.

He'd done everything to stitch it up, to close it, to tamp it down.

To destroy it. And then, when he couldn’t, to destroy her.

He had heard the expression “broken heart,” but it had been so long since he’d been reminded that he even had a heart, the sudden pain caught him by surprise.

It was a deep, physical ache that began in the middle of his chest and radiated outwards.

An anguished wail rose up—a primal, despairing howl of torment and anguish.

Hermione watched… as he broke.

The man who had saved them all.

The man who had been so strong.

The man who had endured and endured and endured, and did everything he could to run from his pain.

She watched as he slumped over onto the tile, his face almost touching the cold, smooth stone, and began to rock to and fro, his bloody wrists leaking onto his neck as he ran his hands over his face, tugging at his black hair.

He looked like he belonged in the Janus Thickey Ward, covered in blood, wailing like a lunatic.

A spark of schadenfreude moved through her to see him hurting so. After what he'd done.

Good.

But her brief pleasure at his suffering evaporated almost as soon as she became aware of it, and suddenly she wanted more than anything to move to him and comfort him, but she had learnt her lesson well.

She was not his Saviour. She was not his Redeemer. If he was going to live, only he could burn his old self away.

"Please kill me," he begged, hunched inwards. "Please kill me. You shouldn’t let me do it to myself. You should do it."

"Do you believe what you have done is unforgivable?"

"Yes."

“Good. It is unforgivable.”

He sobbed again. His eyes moved up to hers and, connecting meaningfully with her brown eyes for
the first time, and she saw his were a flood of tears, his face contorted in deep-seated shame and pain.

He quickly looked down at the red-speckled tile again, as if he were not even worthy of her eye contact.

"I can't live with it. Any of it. Not anymore,” he whimpered.

“'I know,” Hermione nodded solemnly.

“There is no future in the person you've been living as, Severus. That person is going to die. Today.”

She crawled a few feet over to him and leaned down, not touching him, but placing her head closer to his own so she could look squarely into his face. She wiped the tears from her own cheeks and set her jaw firmly.

"But you can decide to begin again. And if you do, you will have my help. Be brave enough to begin again."

"I am not worthy."

"No. Perhaps not. But I believe it is what your mother would have wanted for you. The boy she raised deserved a better end than this. Try. For Eileen."

"I tried to protect you. From myself."

"I know you did. But you were wrong."

"I am worse than my father."

"No, you aren’t. He may have taught you to behave like him, but you are not like him on the inside. You did much good during the War."

Severus lifted himself up and leaned back against the side of the bathtub again. His face was streaked with blood, snot, and tears. Hemione’s eyes flicked back down to his wrists. The blood was still flowing out of them. She could sense he was growing weaker. He gave a defeated sigh.

“I committed many crimes…so many…I stood and watched…I allowed…and you…what I did….”

He fluttered his eyes closed. Hermione could feel a lump in her throat as she realised he was weakening, approaching the misty beyond.

She sat next to him, side by side with their backs to the bathtub. He rolled his head to the left to face her, his eyes still closed. His breath was growing shallower.

“Severus!”

“Mmm?”

“Look at me!”

Hermione reached over and lightly slapped his face. Weakly, he fluttered his dark eyes open to gaze into the shining brown eyes of his wife.

She looked him squarely in the face, shifting her body so she could face him directly. She held his head in both hands so he wouldn’t avert his gaze again.
“You’ve lost a lot of blood, Severus. I could take your wand from you. I could heal your wounds against your will if I wanted to. Despite what you’ve done, I want you to live, you miserable bastard, because somehow in this hell of a marriage I have found my devotion to you grow. The night you first made love to me… I didn’t know it could even be like that. I knew you wanted to be cared for. And, fool that I am for lost causes, I began to have feelings for you.”

“Don’t…you should hate me…,” he murmured.

“I do hate you, Severus, for your cruelty to me, but only because I love you so bloody much. So, you need to decide whether you will let me love you. If you can’t, then I will let you bleed out, right here on this floor. Because I cannot exist in this marriage anymore without loving you. If you ask me to leave now, I will let you to die. I won’t heal you when you fall unconscious, because I will not break your trust anymore. I promise never to wrong you like that again. But I want you to live, Severus. Please, choose to stay with me!”

Severus broke eye contact as two more tears rolled from his sad, black eyes. His chest felt broken, as if his sternum had somehow been split, and he couldn’t feel the pain in his arms anymore. Everything was beginning to go numb.

He knew it wouldn’t be long. His vision was starting to tunnel. He glanced back up at her.

Hermione was crying, too. He reached one hand up, and gently ran his fingers through her chestnut hair.

It was so pretty. That wild, bushy mane.

He’d never even noticed before how much he liked it. He liked that it wasn’t perfect. He liked that she was intelligent and willful and pretty and difficult. If only he had the ability to make her happy.

*She looks so sad…*

Severus thought of all this girl had endured. Ron’s death. Bellatrix’s torture. Lucius’s manipulations. His…his…rape of her.

And now, he realised, his suicide would add another pain to her pile of anguish.

He couldn’t believe it was true that she loved him. For who could truly love him? Only his mother had. But if Hermione believed she loved him, and lost him….Severus knew the pain of that.

An image suddenly came to his mind…Hermione clutching his dead form to her. Hermione alone in this house. Hermione as the widowed Lady Snape. Hermione isolated again. What would she do? Marry Lucius? He remembered the image he’d seen of her up on the Astronomy Tower. He glanced back up at her.

“Why…why didn’t you?” he croaked, at barely a whisper.

Hermione furrowed her brow for a moment, then understood what he meant. He dropped her hands to his lap, gently squeezing his thigh.

“I…I heard Ron’s voice. I knew he was there with me. And he didn’t want me to.”

Severus nodded.

“I need you to decide, Severus. I won’t watch you die. I can’t go through that again. Please tell me what you want. If you tell me to go, I will go.”
Hermione bent down and kissed the back of one of his hands.

“And I will obey you in that.”

Severus’s face scrunched up in pain at this, and more tears fell from his eyes. She was either the most Slytherin person he’d ever met, or she was some type of angel.

He suddenly realised the selfishness of what he was doing. She needed him to live. He couldn’t fathom why, but she needed it.

“How…can…I…?”

“Yes?”

“How can I go on?”

“Tomorrow we will leave this house.”

“But… it’s my…home.”

“No. It’s a place you were once unhappy in.”

He nodded at her.

Hermione exhaled in relief.

She knew she had him. She squeezed his thigh.


Severus nodded at her again.

“Not ever.”

****

An hour later, Hermione had closed his wounds, cleaned the blood from his person and his bathroom, and given him plenty of Blood-Replenishing Potion.

The irony was not lost on her that she had done almost the exact same thing for Lucius Malfoy only a few weeks prior.

But she wanted Severus to live, and she believed that this was somehow pre-destined. It was what Eileen wanted.

She tucked Severus into his bed, surrounded by the detritus of his room, and gave him a Calming draught. As he drifted off, he begged her.

“Stay with me…stay….”

Hermione had pushed the hair back from his eyes, but shook her head.

“No, Severus. I will stay in my own room.”

He nodded, sadly, before sleep overtook him.

Hermione, exhausted as she was, managed to shower back in her own suite, change her bedding,
and finally collapsed onto her mattress just as dawn was breaking over the gardens outside her window.

There would be much to discuss with Severus tomorrow, but, for now, she had earned the right to sleep on her own.

And to make her own decisions for the future.

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Chapter End Notes

For those still reading, thank you! Your kind and insightful comments are the reason I continue. I originally intended this chapter to be longer, but I couldn’t bear to make you wait until I had time to finish it. It has been a month since I updated, which is by far the longest wait. I’m sorry, and thank you for being so patient!
Late on Sunday afternoon, Hermione sat at the head of the dining room table, a spread of lunch before her that had been laid out by the elves. She had only picked at it.

She nervously tapped one end of a scroll between her thumb and forefinger.

Bitsy had informed her that Snape was awake, and she had told the elf to let her master know that she would like to see him in the dining room when he was ready.

She was slightly worried he would make another attempt, but at this point, Hermione knew the decision was his.

Remarkably, she had slept fairly soundly. Her body had been utterly exhausted, and blissfully, her sleep had been dreamless, even without the aid of that moste potente potion.

She’d expected he would take longer, so she was surprised to see her husband’s dark form appear in the doorway only twenty minutes later.

He had showered, and had changed from his pajamas into black pants and a pressed white Oxford, but he didn’t wear his long black tunic over it, and the top buttons of the white starched shirt were hanging open. He wore neither boots nor socks, just simple black slippers, and his hair hadn’t been well combed. And though his clothing was clean, he had dark circles under his eyes and a truly haunted expression on his face. He looked like a man come back from the dead. The lines on his forehead had become deeper overnight.

Hermione felt emotion well up in her. To see this man — this dominating, fastidious figure from her childhood — look so broken and lost was painful to witness. But she also felt enraged at the sight of him. She wanted to hit him in his mopey face over and over again. She was still sore between her legs when she shifted in his chair. As if his penitent expression could ever make up for the wrongs he had done her.

He shuffled into the room quietly, and then stopped before the table, his eyes downcast. His body language begged for permission.

Hermione inhaled. She was nervous, but she was determined to express herself clearly, and so she willed away her nerves and her anger and cleared her throat, gesturing with her chin to the chair on her right.

It was time to get down to business.

“Come. Sit, Severus.”

He shuffled forward and took the seat, slowly pulling it back and moving around one arm, then sinking into it. That particular seat had been hers. She hadn’t really thought about why, but she had naturally taken the Head Chair of the table — the seat he had occupied at every meal since they had come to Snape Hall.

Somehow, it was clear to her that that was her seat now.

Severus merely stared down into his lap, searching for words.

*What could I possibly say…?*
He had thought nothing could be worse than pretending to serve a Dark Lord who had killed his beloved Lily. But no.

Awakening this fine summer morning to the unendurable truth that he has raped a former student, and not just any student, but one who had been fully trusting of him, caring towards him, one who had even admitted to loving him, was a burden he was still unsure he would be able to carry.

God, she wasn’t even in that “student” box he had tried for so long to put her in! Nor was she in that “Pureblood” box. She defied category. She was simply…his young wife. Wanted or not. It was her office. His wife.


He thought of Hermione’s brown eyes. Her sweetness. Her trust in him. The soft sounds she made in the throes of her pleasure. She had given him all. And in return he had tried to break her. His cheeks burned with the agonising shame.

I thought I would be better. Mother would be so ashamed of me. As would Lily.

He hung his head even lower, until his chin almost pressed into his sternum. The weight of what he had done, what he had betrayed, felt like a magnet forever implanted in his chest. There was a persistent pain there, a ponderous ache. He worried he was being dragged under. Work had always saved him from depression and suicidal thoughts in the past. Yet it had taken him five full minutes to summon the strength to move his feet from underneath his bedsheets to his carpeted floor.

How can I ever face her? How do I continue? What work am I good for, now?

He felt like he had surfaced from being underwater a long, long time, and now he saw through all of the lies of this hated Pureblood regulation— the very inherent wrongness of what he had inherited from Tobias Snape. He had never particularly admired Pureblood culture, but he had possessed the hubris to believe himself better than the Carolus Vaiseys and Lucius Malfoys of the world; so many things had been so deeply ingrained in him, he’d never even bothered to question the demands he had placed upon Hermione in regard to their marriage.

Hermione had permanently ruptured his sense of what was true and not true. He had wanted to die, but he was still alive. Ideas that only weeks earlier he had sworn by seemed to him so clearly shameful.

He was confused. Things he had said to her, shouted at her….it was now…like watching a movie in which he was a character. Had he really once believed all of that? Said all of that?

He was afraid of what came next.

All he knew anymore was that he owned this huge house. He had a title. And it had a history, and somehow, a large chunk of it, had been inescapable for him. And the only right thing in all of this — the only thing he could claim as right moving forward — were those small, yet mighty pangs of love that still knocked around in his chest.

His pure love for Lily. His mother Eileen’s love for him. And…if it were true, Hermione’s love.

No, not love, really. Well, not on his part. Just a certain regard. A respect. He finally respected her. For she possessed something he had never had for himself: faith.
Her faith in him was the only motivating factor for him in rising from his broken bed, washing his face, brushing his teeth, and dressing.

Because she expected him to present himself in the dining room. And she did not wish his death. And he didn’t want to cause her pain again.

So here he was.

He felt terribly shaky. His legs under the table were actually quaking, slightly. His body knew it was under threat. His first thought when his eyes had fluttered open was to run to his bathroom and finish what he had started.

But she doesn’t want that. And he owed her all. So now he would simply do whatever she wanted. It would be easier this way. If he could serve her in even the most nanoscopic way, he surely would find the courage to live for that.

Hermione cleared her throat and he turned his attention back to her.

She shifted in her chair and spoke first, pushing one sleeve of her Muggle jumper up her forearm to reveal a deep, black bruise. It was rounded and long. The shape of his thumb and index finger.

“I want you to look at this, Severus.”

The bruise bored into his pupils. It was a deep, dark colour, and he knew it was fresh. There was no doubt who had caused it.

He quickly glanced back down into his lap, his shoulders hunching even more. He remembered how he had so callously dismissed the bruises that Lucius had given her when she had first burst into his classroom and begged him to marry her.

That felt like a world away.

How shameful it was, the way he had dismissed her that day! The way he had implied she was to blame for her own physical suffering! As if she had somehow deserved it, because her personality was bold, confrontational, or didn’t fit into their Wizarding World, or their Pureblood customs. She wasn’t of their world! How could she have been expected...?

Severus opened his mouth to speak. He struggled.

“I…I can never apologise… enough…,” he tried to begin.

He bit down hard on his lower lip to keep his feelings at bay. It was strange how prevalent these powerful emotions were, rising up from within him. He was rubbed completely raw, and everything felt like it was only just below the surface. She knew everything.

This remarkable, perspicacious young witch somehow knew him better than anyone ever had.

Would he ever be able to occlude again? How could a person live so raw? So found out?

Hermione ignored him and continued. Her tone took on a colder, more authoritative air.

“I am not showing you this because I expect a specific response. But you need to understand. Lucius was the first man who ever hurt me, who ever bruised my body. It shocked me. And I sought you out as a place of refuge. I trusted you. I didn’t understand your background at the time. But I have always trusted you. Last night, you lashed out at me physically. I know why you did it, but how you
did it… I can never excuse or forgive. I won’t show you my other bruises. But I am bruised. Know that. You hurt me.”

Severus winced. He felt the bile at the back of his throat again. He dug his nails into his palms. He would give anything for her to command him to climb to the ramparts and throw himself off. He had a faint hope that would be coming.

*Command me to die.*

Instead, she continued. Of course there would be no easy way out.

“You hurt me, Severus. My arms. My neck. My breasts. My legs. Between my legs. I am tender. I am sore. You did this to me. And I know you are a man who never wanted to hurt a woman. But you did. So you need to explore why. You need to spend a lot of time dealing with your past, and who you want to become. You’re still young, but you….well, all of us…have seen so much. It cannot be ignored.”

Severus felt about four inches tall. He would have cried if he had anything left to give, but instead he just raised his elbows to the table and pressed his palms into his forehead.

*It would be so much easier if she just asked me to go back upstairs and cut my wrists….*

“The Marriage Law cannot be undone, but you and I can set our own terms beyond those dictated by the Ministry. As we did before. I want a completely new addendum, but I think we need to look at this again. Go ahead and read it.”

She nudged a small scroll over to him.

Severus took the scroll up and unfurled it. Each shameful word reminded him of how terrible the demands were he had placed upon her. He proceeded to read aloud, just as she had asked:

“The following addendums to the above contract have henceforth been agreed to by Hermione Jean Granger and Severus Tobias Snape:

Item: Lord Snape and Lady Snape will refer to one another by their formal titles in public, and as “Hermione” and “Severus” in private.

Item: Lady Snape may access Lord Snape’s Study and the books therein, but may not access the Potions Laboratory.

Item: Lord and Lady Snape’s daily interaction will be limited to a 15-minute exchange.

Item: Lord Snape will not interfere with Lady Snape’s choice or pursuit of career and Lady Snape agrees to live with Lord Snape at Hogwarts for nine months and at Snape Hall for three months of the year.

Item: Lady Snape agrees to the Pureblood customs and agrees to obey Lord Snape to the best of her ability, and accepts that she is Lord Snape’s property.”

Severus finished and set the scroll down, allowing it to fall from his fingers back onto the table.

“What will you let me change?” Hermione asked.

“All of it,” he whispered.
“What do you mean?”

He finally looked at her for the first time, squarely. His broken black eyes were watery and marked with guilt.

“I will agree to any terms.”

“I don’t want to trap you the way you trapped me…”

“It is no trap. I cannot see a reason for my existence other than you wish it. You see some value in my continuing on, so I trust you to set the terms. I cannot annul the marriage. And you won’t allow me to kill myself, which would also set you free. So I will agree to whatever requirements you set within this marriage. I accept any terms. Unconditionally.”

He placed his forehead back into his palms, rubbing his brow. Hermione inhaled, sharply.

“Well, as for the last item, I am not, nor have I ever been, your property. To hell with the entire bloody idea of a Pureblood marriage! If we are going to remain married, we will be married as equals. No more ‘Lord-husband’ and ‘Lady-wife’. I am not your property.”

“No, you are not.”

“We are not a Pureblood couple, and this is not a traditional, Pureblood marriage.”

“No, it’s not.”

“I don’t want that. I don’t even want to try. Or pretend to try. Not anymore. Do you?”

“No.”

"Really?"

"Yes. It was a mistake."

Severus shook his head, resigned.

“I’m ashamed of it now. All of it. I tried to…I don’t know…I should have never brought you here. But it’s what the men in my family have always done.”

“You were taught to be proud of the wrong things by your father. But your mother taught you to be proud of the right things — your intelligence, your academic achievements, your talent at magic, your devotion to your friends, to Lily. You were given a heavy burden.”

“I made terrible choices.”

“Yes. But you have always been willing to atone for them.”

Hermione reached out and held onto his hand, giving it a firm squeeze.

“And are you willing?”

He nodded again. Her belief in him touched him deeply.

“My life is yours to command. If your life is better with me in it, foolish though I think the notion might be, then I will be in it until you no longer wish it.”
“Where we go from here is up to us. We’ll meet their requirements to keep our magic strong, but no more of these arcaic rules. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“No more formal titles, no more restrictions on access, no more dictates on how and where we live.”

“Agreed.”

“You may say anything to me. And I will say anything to you. We will...we will be friends, Severus.”

"Friends?"

"Friends. First and foremost. When was the last time you had one?"

He didn't answer. He moved his hand from hers and fiddled with a folded up cloth napkin.

Hermione sighed in relief at his easy acquiescence. It was remarkable to be in this position, after weeks of being bullied by him. She truly could set any terms — do whatever she wished with him. It was heady to have such power, but deeply unsettling. She didn’t want this broken, sad-sack man. Part of her did want him to feel guilt and suffer, but to see him brought so low bothered her.

She would be generous. She straightened her shoulders.

“As for the new terms, I want you to agree to counseling. You can visit Mathilda Merrybrook if you wish, or anyone at St. Mungo’s you feel is discreet and makes you comfortable, but I want you to go to counseling at least twice a week. I will be going, too. Separately.”

He glanced back over at her, a worried look on his face. She arched an eyebrow.

“Yes. Twice a week. Minimum. Those are my terms.”

He lowered his head and nodded.

Hermione sighed.

“Severus, I am aware I am demanding this of you, nay, even blackmailing, but, you may speak if you have a real objection.”

The dark-eyed wizard flicked his eyes up to her and then quickly moved them back to the place-setting in front of him. His left hand still fiddled with its napkin.

“I...I have no objection. There is nothing I can say. I shall do it.”

“I’m glad. You need that space — to speak of anything — Eileen, Tobias, Lily, Voldemort, me. I know you have so much to give the world, and I think for too long you have just gone along with what was expected. Let yourself be helped by a professional. Talk about your feelings. I’m not going to push you in that regard, anymore. I realise now that it was a mistake to push you. You were right. I was egotistical. I did think I could fix you and change you. I realise that was naive. I thought I would love you and change you, like some fairytale heroine. You’ll have to chalk it up to my youth. I...I wanted something to live for, too, after Ron. I thought you could be it. I had always respected you.”

“What else do you want in the new addendum?”
Severus changed the subject. He couldn't bear to hear that she bore him any respect. She shook her wild brown locks.

“Nothing. A marriage isn’t something that should involve terms like some sort of treaty after a War. We should be free within it, as much as we can be given the Ministry’s requirements. So we will fulfill them, but between you and I…there will be no contraints beyond the therapy I demand.”

“Very well.”

“There is one final thing I need to know. I want to understand where your mind is. I know you are in a state of turmoil. I know you are trying to find a reason to live. But I need to know if you…if you are my husband? I know you don’t love me. But do you feel like you’re my husband? Do you feel a connection between us? Or are you a man who is simply chained to me as you’ve always said? I only ask because I don’t want to ask for more than you can give. Are you my husband, even an unwilling one, or do I hold you in bondage?”

Severus hung his head in shame.

“I cannot love you the way you want a husband to love you. I cannot even touch you appropriately! You shouldn't even think to offer me such a position!”

“This is not about romantic love. I will never wrest your heart from its devotion to Lily. It was wrong of me to even think I could. They were the romantic dreams of a girl. But I am not your mother, and you are not your father. I'm a grown woman now. I won’t accept abuse simply because I am fond of you, or intimidated by you. And you shouldn’t heap it upon me to drive me away. If our terms are clear, then there will be no conflict.”

Severus nodded. Her logic was sound, but his mind was muddled and he wasn't sure to respond. She continued to drive the discussion.

“So…I guess my question is, if I don’t ask you to love me, and you don’t love me, do you still see yourself as my husband, or do you still…I guess what I am asking is…do you look at me and see a loathsome, repugnant duty? Tell me truly. I told you I have a need to give affection. Can you receive it, even if you cannot return it? Or is my care for you truly unwanted?”

“I…”

Hermione leaned in.

“I do not see you as only a duty,” Severus replied, quietly.

Hermione bit her lower lip as she took this in. It was a powerful admission — she had gotten under his skin in the same way he had gotten under hers. His heart may be too damaged to experience love, but she was relieved to know he held a regard for her.

Hermione gestured to the small scroll between them.

“Why don’t you burn it?”

He immediately complied.

“Incendio!”

They both watched it turn to ash.
It was satisfying.

The death of the old.

Hermione sat up in the high-backed chair. She reached across the table and placed one hand on top of Snape’s once more, giving it a squeeze. He flinched, but allowed it. She found his eyes with her own. This next part she truly needed to say.

“I apologise for violating your Study. For looking at your memories. It was wrong. Even if what came after was unjustified. I need to make it clear that your past is yours. I was foolish to believe I was entitled to it. I was curious about you, because you fascinated me. I had become so drawn to you. I had developed feelings for you, as I said. They made me feel as if my actions were acceptable. And they were not. I’m truly sorry. I will never, ever do such a thing again. You have no reason to trust me, but on my honour as a witch, I promise never to watch your private memories again without your express permission. It was deeply wrong.”

Hermione paused. Snape was shaking his head.

“Don’t apologise. Don’t ever apologise to me….”

“But I will when I have wronged you. Our crimes are not the same, but I will own mine. I didn't do that before. But I have learned that when I make a mistake, I must own it. And I made a terrible decision. I violated your trust. You had told me your Study was your own private space. And this was separate from what came after. What came after is not excused or excusable. It was not the same —”

“—Of course not…,” Severus whispered.

“But I have my own amends to make.”

They sat in silence for a few seconds, until Hermione realised neither of them had even touched the food.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really,” he replied.

She took an egg sandwich from a plate before them and put it in front of him.

“You should eat something.”

She put one on her own plate.

They nibbled in silence.

Severus felt there was so much he wanted to tell her, but he had no idea how to begin. There was a relief in the idea that because she had already seen the worst of his history, he didn’t have to dance around it. He tried to think of a way to begin.

Finally, he swallowed a bite and attempted a sentence, an explanation of sorts:

“My secrets… were how I survived.”

Hermione paused, mid-nibble, and nodded at him, encouragingly. He needed to talk, she sensed.

After a few seconds of quiet, he continued.
“I couldn’t trust anyone at Hogwarts. I was bullied almost from the moment I boarded the train. Lily was my only real friend. I never shared those memories with anyone, not even her. Someone might use them against me. I was so angry by the time I graduated. Tom saw that. He developed it in me. His discovered everything about my parents in my mind. He shared with me about his own upbringing. I don’t say this to excuse…just to…clarify….”

“Did you feel…sorry for Voldemort?

Severus shook his head.

“I…I am not asking you to understand. Or sympathise with him. But Tom, back then he was just 'Tom.' He embraced me. He was the father and brother he knew I had always wanted. He loved me, in his dark, twisted way. I needed love and sympathy, and someone who knew what I had gone through. Someone to be on my side. Tom’s childhood had been even worse.”

“What happened to your father? The memory stopped before….”

“I…I don’t know exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I destroyed that memory. Permanently.”

Hermione gasped.

“Permanently?”

“Yes. There’s a scroll in the cabinet where that vial should be. I wrote it to myself some time after Lily’s death, I wrote that I felt I was losing my mind. Dumbledore couldn’t help me. He only wanted what he needed — a good spy. My mental state be damned. I was afraid I couldn’t go on, that I would never be able to hold on until Potter’s maturation. In the scroll I described how I accompanied the Dark Lord back here, and watched as he tortured my father for hours. I wrote that my father finally broke completely and begged me for mercy. And that I showed him none. Not because I didn’t feel anything, but because I didn’t want to displease Tom by showing kindness. I was ashamed of my sentiment. That memory made me feel I would never escape the Dark Lord’s grasp, because I had known what I was doing to my father was wrong, but I did it anyway. So I explained to myself in the scroll that I was permanently destroying that memory.”

Hermione nodded, taking all this in.

“I think your instincts were right. Did you destroy any others?”

“No. I couldn’t bear to have them in my mind, so I ordered the Pensieve constructed. But I would view the memories often. Watching my mother, even the painful memories, always brought me comfort. I would never have destroyed either a single memory of her. Despite the pain, I keep every moment of both of her and Lily. I treasure them. They are the only ones who ever thought me worth loving.”

“Before me,” Hermione said, a twinge of bitterness in her voice. She reached for a water glass and took a sip.

"The girl who believes in lost causes."

“I don’t deserve your kindness.”
“No, but if we all got only what we deserved, it would be a pretty terrible world, wouldn’t it?”

Hermione half-smiled.

“You have demons, Severus, and you have made terrible choices. But today is a new day. How long until you can be ready to leave for Hogwarts?”

Her husband lifted his dark eyes to her.

“I will have to discuss things with Madam Kemp. I shall tell her we were called back to do some early preparations for the fall term."

“Good idea.”

“She’ll want to know if we plan to return next summer.”

Hermione cocked her head, slightly, suddenly worried.

“What do you want to do?”

Severus sighed. He leaned back in the ornate chair and surveyed the room — it’s wood paneling and elegant paintings. All of this wealth he possessed. What did any of it matter?

“I think…you are right. We should say goodbye to this place. I will never ask you to return here.”

Hermione bobbed her head in agreement. She exhaled through her nostrils in relief.

“Thank you.”

“The elves will need some notice, too, and I have some active experiments in the Lab that I will need to put into stasis for the journey.”

“Then let’s leave first thing tomorrow morning, and we can spend today making our arrangements.”

“Very well.”

“I will owl Mott and let him know I will be in late tomorrow. Do you need my assistance in the Lab?”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“I know, I know, you proud thing, but would it help you to have an extra wand?”

Severus nodded.

“Excellent. I will meet you there in an hour. I just want to take a walk in the garden and clear my head.”

Hermione rose. Severus pushed back his chair and rose with her. As she moved past him, he reached out and took her hand in his, almost instinctually.

She flinched, and a deep painful look crossed his face.

He immediately dropped it.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I...t hank you…,” he whispered. “Thank you for saving my life.”
Hermione didn’t know what to say.

His obsidian eyes roved over her pale face. They had that vulnerable, boyish quality that hadn’t really left them since she’d tucked him into bed the night before.

She was caught off guard by the sweet earnestness. It was as if he had undergone a complete personality change.

*Who are you and what have you done with Severus Snape?*, she wondered. But now was not the time for jokes. She reached out and gave the fingers of his right hand an encouraging squeeze and dipped her head in acknowledgment.

Then she straightened her spine and with a clack of heel on wood, briskly found her way out the door of the room and made a beeline for the garden.

Despite the inherent romance of the gesture, Hermione knew better by now than to read hope into it.

He had been *so* clear with her. He couldn’t love her. He was too damaged. So she would not misinterpret his gratitude as romantic affection.

Still, as she found herself in front of the Owlery, her thoughts drifted back to her husband — could he ever get to a place of healing? Could they ever have trust between them again? And how on Earth would they proceed with their Saturdays from now on?

The thought of intimacy with him after the violence and trauma of the evening before scared her. She wrapped her arms around her upper body. She wasn’t sure she was ready for that. How could she *ever* be vulnerable like that for him again?

There were no easy answers.

Unbeknownst to Hermione, her dark-eyed husband watched her from the door to one of his large greenhouses.

He found it remarkable that such a tiny person could contain such a large heart.

He thought back on how he had treated her — how he had taken his terrible anger out on her. But she’d never crumbled. She’d always stood up to him. He’d been worse than Tobias at times.

*What she said last night is true. She is never broken. I can never break her.*

Harry Potter was destined for greatness. But Hermione Granger? She was just a Muggleborn. There was no *reason* for her to be extraordinary. Other than her own brave, questioning spirit. He found himself in awe of her. *So young, yet extraordinary. Exceptional, really.*

He wasn’t sure *why* she had saved him, but if it was within his power to ease her life’s burdens, he would do so, and a sudden idea crossed his febrile brain.

He hadn’t contemplated it before.

He’d assumed it couldn’t be done. But when lightning struck, especially where Potions were concerned, Severus knew to take action.

He turned and went back inside the greenhouse and, taking up a pair of gardening shears, began to collect ingredients.

*If this works… if this works…it may be the one thing I can do for her.*
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