Price of Power

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Price of Power

by Dr_I_Know_All

Summary

Hermione is developing into a powerful witch by 6th year Hogwarts. She practices nonverbal magic in her spare time, has become an Animagus . . . but a comment from Dumbledore sends her to research the more powerful old magics. What happens when her search leads her to a blood magic ritual found in the restricted section? Why does Voldemort suddenly want her?

Posted first on fanfiction.net, but hey, why not have it here as well?!
Chapter 1

Hermione slunk along the corridors, careful not to be spotted.

_Ha, spotted. That was a terrible pun_, Hermione berated herself. _Harry would have keeled over at that._

Her Animagus form was that of a tiny margay, with some extra spots along her face to replace her freckles. If she was vain about it, she would have been proud to be such a beautiful animal. It was the kind of creature she expected Narcissa Malfoy to turn into, if her angular features didn't seem more fixed with a bird of some kind. When her initial meditations and symbols came to mind, she thought she was a house cat like Professor McGonagall. It would have pleased her to no end to have her Professor's example to follow. However, she turned into an animal that would not ordinarily be seen in Britain, making its purpose as discreet completely negated. Still, she was proud. She was more powerful in this form, her hind legs making her more adept at tree climbing than the common house cats. Her spots made her distinctive, but being smaller than the full-grown versions of her species made her a little more unassuming. At least she wasn't huge, a lioness or a deer or something that didn't lend well to prowling around Hogwarts.

Had she told Harry and Ron? No, but she would. She had turned seventeen earlier that summer because of her time-turner use, and she just wanted to do something alone that would prove her useful. Voldemort was back and she couldn't just do nothing. She was going to do it on her own over the summer before Sixth Year and then train the boys. For now, Harry was having a hard time and she didn't want to bother him. If she was completely honest, she was enjoying her time alone with this form, prowling the dark corridors with her night vision and practicing her speed outside on the castle grounds.

It had made Hermione much more reckless, at least with regards to curfew rules. Being an unregistered Animagus was enough to make her realize all others rules she could break had far less severe consequences.

So she allowed herself to sneak out of her dorm at nights to practice her nonverbal magic alone and outside of class. She had even started on her wandless magic, summoning objects short distances daily as practice. Her magic seemed reluctant to obey, and it killed her to have a piece of magic so evasive to her.

Nothing in the old texts on wandless magic said it should be hard, only warned of overtaxing yourself. So why was it so hard for her? Why didn't everyone use it? The texts on the subjects were old, probably 12th century. Wandless magic seemed to be of little importance now, and any modern texts on it put it as a skill that was slow to respond and because of that, not useful.

But Hermione had seen Dumbledore and Voldemort fight last year. She had seen Voldemort wielding the wandless magic nearly identically to his wand magic, using his wand in his right hand and wandless in his left. It wasn't useless anymore than magic itself was. But how did he do it?

Hermione was slinking back to the common room, angry at her lack of progress. She'd become an Animagus in less time than she'd been working on wandless magic, 3 months into the school year. Hermione huffed at her own thoughts.

A pair of feet in a nearby corridor made her ears twitch. It wasn't the sure feet of Professor Snape, who was set to be on duty tonight, but an unsteady sounding scuffling. Someone was trying to sneak around.
After debating between running up to the common room or investigating, Hermione slunk closer to the noise, careful to stay tight against the wall. She wove around the feet of the suits of armor when she needed to, being careful to approach the noise.

Her cat nose smelled them before she saw them. Cologne. Definitely not a professor, unless Snape had a hot date tonight. Hermione tilted her head around the corner, trying to find the perpetrator. Her eyes fixed on the lightest feature: platinum blonde hair. It was Malfoy.

Even Hermione knew that Katie wasn't cursed by accident, and to be honest seeing Malfoy here was the opposite of reassuring. She prowled along behind him, following him across the 5th floor and up the staircase to the owlery. Keeping her distance, she watched as Malfoy grudgingly bribed a black owl down from its perch fastened a letter to the leg of the large bird. There was something additional on the bird's leg, a rune marker of some sort. It was the fastener Malfoy was using on its leg, with Perthro on it.

"Take this letter to the Dark Lord, Malfoy Manor."

Hermione's feline heart sank deep down in terror. He was contacting the incarnate of evil, and to what purpose she didn't know. The bird, at least, seemed as reticent to go as she. That was, until Malfoy stroked its head and told it, "Don't worry, the little bit of jewelry I gave you will let you through the wards."

Helpless to stop him, she simply watched as the bird flew beyond her reach with Malfoy watching his flight. When it was out of sight, the blonde monster who had always tormented her for every weakness seemed to sag. He braced himself against one of the rails of the tower, obviously putting all of his weight on it rather than his legs.

"It's almost over," she heard his pained whisper. "I'm so close. I have a plan, I can do this. She'll be fine. I'll be fine. A few months. Just a few months."

She was intruding here. She had never seen such vulnerability from this young man and it made her head spin with its implications. Could he be just as hurt from this man, supposedly his master, as Harry was? More?

Hermione didn't remain there to watch him. Giving him his privacy, she slunk back to Gryffindor house with heavy heart and too many thoughts spinning in her head.
Chapter 2

Hermione woke the next morning more tired than she had been all semester. The encounter with Malfoy was still weighing heavily on her mind. It proved a few things; one, Harry was right and Malfoy was working for Voldemort; two, Voldemort was being housed at Malfoy Manor which you could owl directly if you fastened a rune marker to an owl with perthro on it; and three, Malfoy was clearly not happy about.

She knew the feeling in her heart, and groaned. She knew she'd be haunted until she offered him her help. It had been the same with the House Elves, the same with Crookshanks . . . It was still the same whenever Ron asked for help with his homework. Her heart sang with guilt at the thought of inaction. She needed a way to contact him without his goons, just to get him alone for a moment.

It didn't seem too hard this year, she admitted. He was alone more often than she remembered him ever being, but there was no way of guaranteeing he'd accept her help.

*Should Dumbledore know?* Hermione frowned at the thought. It was impossible to know whether the Headmaster already knew about the issue, or if he'd be able to do anything with it. But if the Order knew you could bypass the wards like that . . .

Hermione shook her head at that thought. She had no way of guaranteeing that the letter would actually penetrate the wards if anyone but a Malfoy sent it. In order to see if it worked, she'd need to send a letter first.

It was too risky. She needed to speak to Professor McGonagall. She was in the Order, she would know what to do.

Quickly, Hermione scurried off the bed and changed into her robes. She hurried out of the common room, bag of books on her shoulder and hair still a frizzy mess and rushed to the rooms of Professor McGonagall. Various portraits yelled at her to slow down, but she was far too focused on her own guilt to do anything else besides run towards a possible solution.

She nearly ran into Professor McGonagall when she rounded the corner to her chambers.

"Miss Granger!" McGonagall cried. "What on earth is the rush?"

"I have important information, Professor," Hermione explained, a little out of breath. "Please, I need to speak with you."

"Come in, Miss Granger," McGonagall wave her wand and reopened her office door to let Hermione in. Hermione instantly plopped onto the chair in front of her desk. "What is this about?"

"I saw Draco Malfoy out past curfew last night," Hermione began. McGonagall looked ready to interrupt, but Hermione kept going. "I know that means I was out past curfew too, but I'm glad I was because I followed him. Professor, Malfoy was sending an owl. He fastened the letter with a rune and told the owl to deliver it to 'The Dark Lord, Malfoy Manor'."

Professor McGonagall stopped her attempts to interrupt at that, and instead motioned from Hermione to continue with a troubled look in her eye.

"I saw Draco Malfoy out past curfew last night," Hermione continued. "He kind of broke down after he sent the letter, saying he'd keep her safe. I think he's worried for someone's safety. Professor, Voldemort is at Malfoy Manor! And Malfoy is doing something he wants!"
McGonagall nodded at Hermione, her face taking on an ashen hue. She raised her hand to keep Hermione in place while she threw a pinch of floo powder in her fireplace.

"Headmaster's office."

At first, nothing but green flame greeted her. After a moment, Dumbledore's grandfatherly face appeared in the fire.

"Ah, Minerva!" Dumbledore greeted happily. "How good to see your lovely face first thing in the morning."

"Albus, we have trouble," McGonagall warned him. "Miss Granger is here, and she has some disturbing news about the young Draco Malfoy."

Dumbledore's face didn't look as shocked by the news as he should have been, in Hermione's opinion. He simply nodded knowingly.

"Of course, Minerva. I'll be right through."

McGonagall stepped back instantly, and the wise Headmaster stepped through. He was wearing absurdly light purple robes, laced with pink and blue just about everywhere. He looked like a cotton candy explosion with a pointy hat and pink pompons on his shoes.

"I'll just call Severus through," Dumbledore said apologetically. "One moment ladies."

With a pinch of dust, the flames turned green again. "Severus' quarters."

Unlike with Dumbledore, there was no delay. Snape was there immediately.

"Headmaster," Snape sneered. "What is it?"

"Good morning to you too, Severus," the Headmaster chuckled. "I was wondering if you could join Minerva, Miss Granger, and I in a discussion about our young Malfoy?"

Dumbledore barely had time to get out of the way when Professor Snape walked through the floo connection. With a brief dusting of his robes, he straightened and sneered at Hermione.

"And what does Miss Granger have to bring to our attention?"

Hermione repeated the events of the previous night, leaving out her being an Animagus at the time. She told them about the rune, about Malfoy's words, and about his breakdown. When she was finished, the sneer hadn't dissipated but instead had hardened.

"And do you have proof?"

At this, Hermione glared furiously at Professor Snape. "I didn't come here to lie through my teeth," she snapped. "I just admitted to being out past curfew, so go ahead and take points and give me a detention. But I'm telling you, I am not making this up or mistaken. You are supposed to care that Malfoy is like this, Professor Snape. He needs help. We have to help him!"

"What brilliant ideas has your 6th year brain conjured up to help him, hmmm?" Snape inquired. "What can we possibly do? Malfoy is too firmly fixed into the Death Eater circle, and to remove just him would mean the death of at least one of his parents. Purebloods like Malfoy would never abandon family, there wouldn't be anything more humiliating and the old magics would leave them."
"Old magics?" Hermione inquired.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Irrelevant right now, Miss Granger."

"Fascinating nonetheless," Dumbledore winked at Hermione playfully. "They are the rituals and spells used in the age of Merlin, Miss Granger. Many of the individual spells require a highly developed skill with wandless magic, and some of the rituals have since been either banned or put out of mind for so long they're not even on the mind of many. Too many risks with that magic, as not all of it is good. Very few records from back then as well, you see."

"Amazing," Hermione breathed. "They used magically differently from us?"

"Enough, Albus!" Snape angrily interjected. "What are we going to do with Miss Granger?"

Hermione gripped the edge of her seat like a vice. "Do with me?!

"I'm afraid we'll have to ask you for a wand oath, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said sadly. "We trust you, of course, but we can't have the information of Draco's allegiance – or lack thereof – reaching the wrong ears."

"Are you going to help him?" Hermione demanded, not backing down.

"As much as I can, Miss Granger," Dumbledore vowed.

Hermione bit her lips anxiously, weighing the request heavily. They would probably do a memory wipe if she didn't give them her oath. For once, she was glad she hadn't told Ron and Harry. They would have refused to even discuss this with the Headmaster.

"I'm not leaving here without it, am I?" Hermione looked pleadingly at her Head of House. Luckily, Professor McGonagall looked sympathetic.

"We could always turn you into Lockhart," Snape sneered. "Sometimes memory charms are a little tricky."

"Fine."

Hermione took out her wand and held it solemnly in front of her. "I, Hermione Jean Granger, do solemnly vow on my magic to keep the information I learned about Draco Malfoy last night safe, as I am able."

The wand tip glowed and Hermione pocketed it immediately. "Satisfactory?"

"Thank you, Miss Granger," Dumbledore nodded appreciatively. "I trust that if Mister Potter or Weasley knew, they would be here with you?"

"Yes sir."

"Small mercies," Snape grumbled under his breath.

"Then you are free to go, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said the witch.

Hermione left the room bitterly unhappy. Not only was she no longer allowed to tell anyone else about Malfoy, but that also means she couldn't tell Malfoy that she knew. Normally, she would have kept to herself, but with Malfoy having doubts it made her want to reach out to him.

She sighed and forced her mind from it. Focusing on what she couldn't do wasn't helping, so she
needed something else to focus on. Luckily, Dumbledore had provided her some insight into what she needed – old magic. Maybe wandless magic had something to do with old magic, and now that she knew about it she could start to search for it. Making up her mind to skip breakfast, she headed for the library.

With her normal wave to Mme. Pince, she ducked into the shelves. It wouldn't be anywhere in the regular subjects of study, wandless magic wasn't so general, so it had to be along the back wall or in the Restricted Section. It would be next to impossible to find the information she wanted without at least taking a peek at the card catalogues. She shifted through the general books, knowing she was looking for old magics. She went for chronological order, looking for the oldest books in the library. Those would be kept under special guard by Pince, but the older the text the more information it would give.

She searched for any appropriate titles, she started pulling cards and the books zoomed towards her. *Magicks of Merlin, The Age of Sorcery,* and *3rd Century Spells* were all skimmed and sent back. Keeping on it, she pulled another 20 books which gave her nothing. None of the old books went into the magic specifically, just spells or history. Perhaps, because obviously old magic was a modern term for it, Hermione needed at least one modern book to help her find sources.

Trying to find the right book took Hermione through breakfast, until she saw the card with *Old Magic: Progress from Then to Now.* She pulled the card eagerly, watching as the newer tome came to her. She cracked open the parchment and looked towards the table of contents, then straight to 'Old Magic and its Foundations'.

Hermione was happy. She found something, finally. Taking it to Mme Pince, she shoved the tome into her bookbag and made her way to Transfiguration.

That day, Hermione hardly paid attention in her classes. She was reading the text with avid fascination. Several times it alluded to ancient rituals that it deemed 'obsolete', but also seemed to associate the newer magic with wands. Something about that was a discrepancy to Hermione. If you weren't reliant on wands, what was the harm? There were mentions of weaknesses of wandless magic, such as risks of magical draining and uncontrolled outbursts, but those seemed minor compared to the freedom of not needing a wand.

The book kept referencing different books of the same type, but the reference that Hermione caught was not in the actual text but in the sources list in the back of the research. *Ritual Casting and Coming of Age* was the only book in the sources that hadn't been mentioned in the research text. The rest had been used as proofs of the evils of old magic, or to different wandlore. After what Dumbledore said about rituals, this was the closest lead she had.

She kept clear of Mme Pince. If she'd read the same book as Hermione, she'd be biased against what she wanted to do. To the card catalogue she went once more, more determined than ever to find old magic books and learn more about the power Dumbledore seemed to be referencing.

The card she found for the book simply read RESTRICTED.
Hermione had taken a risk and had shifted into her margay shape in the library to avoid curfew. When the door closed and the keys locked the door for the night, Hermione stayed perfectly still. On the off chance that someone was waiting she was not to be caught in her form. After a few minutes where the only sound was her quiet breathing, she believed it safe enough and sprang from the couch she'd been hiding under. Her cat-like reflexes and her practice had her climbing the bookshelves carefully, and she was grateful that her Animagus form was good for tree climbing. When she got high enough she jumped over the boundary to the Restricted Section.

It took little for her to find the book she was looking for. She shifted back to Hermione and cast a few spells on the book to ensure her safety, but they weren't affecting it. Cautiously, she took the book into her hands. Nothing happened.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and opened the tome. It was exactly what she wanted. She saw images of wizards without wands casting various spells that used to be known as simply magic. Throwing magic, then. She sat on the floor, pouring over the text avidly.

They had used different magic back then, in a way. Their magic was the same as Hermione's or McGonagall's until they had either become the Lords or Ladies of their House, through marriage or death of a relative, or once the passed the threshold age of 16. After that, the village or the family would put the new adult through the 'Ritual of Unbound Magic'. Almost like a biological restraint on the child, their magic was needed to pass through cores so they could be trained before they unbound the magic. The ritual was first invented by Merlin himself! That explained so much about how magical society grew so much during his lifetime.

Her excitement was only tempered by thoughts of Dumbledore. Why on earth did no one else perform this ritual? Yes, it did make a person less in control of their magic, but it also gave them a whole lot more to work with. If the light side was filled with Dumbledores, Voldemort wouldn't stand a chance! But if either of them had used it, then why didn't they have their own wizards perform the same ritual?

Her doubts became the reason for her further search. She wanted nothing else but to do this, but she needed to make sure she knew the risks. There was sometimes a price for magic, but the there was always a price for power. What price was it?

All she found was the blood ritual itself. It would be draining to perform, and that was meant one hundred percent literally. She needed to drain a fair amount of blood in the ritual, and then incant a spell while a whole peppermint plant's paste was applied to the wound. The mark would scar, but would do so at the completion of the ritual. Many women chose to cut over their chests as a symbol of devotion to their betrothed or espoused, though Hermione snorted at that. No, she'd rather have it not visible to anyone. Inner thigh, probably, so she could trail the blood properly as it spilled down her leg.

No magic was allowed except for the spell, so no wards or anything. It couldn't be done in Hogwarts, but she still needed privacy so no one stumbled upon her accidentally. Blood magic of any kind was considered dark, and so she would need to keep it secret as much as possible.

So if Hermione was to do this ritual, wandless magic would become second-nature. She would have the edge of almost any situation, especially when on the run. Harry wouldn't need this, because clearly Voldemort had done this ritual himself and it wasn't an unknown power.
That gave her a moment's pause, because she knew that this was the ritual Dumbledore had done, but to acknowledge that the monster they were trying to beat had done this as well was a little much. It was dark magic, but Dumbledore had done it. It was common practice at one point though, so why did it seem to grant them so much strength? Why didn't anyone else do it?

Hermione would risk it.
Hermione was going through the old magic's book in the common room one night when Harry came back from a meeting with Dumbledore. He looked peaky, pale, and all-in-all like he was about to go into shock. She shared a look with Ron, and they both stood to greet him. Hermione with a hug, Ron with a handshake, both promptly avoided by the Boy-Who-Lived. It was their own system to test how Harry was feeling, and it looked like he was at his worst.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

It was unlike Harry to hesitate with things like this, but Hermione watched as he seemed to freeze at the question. Finally, after a moment, he dropped his head. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

"What did Dumbledore say to make you think we're just anyone?" Hermione pressed, annoyed. "We're your friends Harry, we're with you through the thick and thin of it. I'm sure he knows we're a package deal."

"She's right, mate," Ron interjected. "Looks like you might need us."

Harry looked between his two friends, seeming to weight what he needed and what he was told. Finally deciding, he pulled them both out of the common room and up to the Room of Requirement. They didn't say a word, not one, until they were situated safely within the room and curled up in front of the magically-conjured fire.

"Dumbledore has a task for me," Harry started off by explaining. "He showed me memories he's been collecting . . ."

Harry went on to describe the first memory, his memory of Tom Riddle in the orphanage. Hermione was analyzing it for relevant information, but at the same time . . . this boy had grown an unwanted product of a love potion and stuck in an orphanage where all they did was stoke his violent tendencies through isolation or cruelty. Almost like Draco the other night, she had humanized the enemy and she knew it. Even though she felt the pity, she kept it locked tightly away and said nothing to Harry.

There was little Harry didn't share with Hermione and Ron. Every memory, his job to perform with Slughorn, and the horcruxs. At the mention of that dark magic, Hermione felt her guilt surge in her stomach. Dark magic was exactly what she was hiding from Harry and Ron. She brushed it aside though; Voldemort's horcruxs required him to kill and split his soul, and all this ritual needed was blood. If it was so common, there couldn't be an issue with it. It didn't hurt her determination. If anything, she wondered if Voldemort's power was diminished or increased by the horcruxs.

It wasn't until Harry told them how many that Hermione interrupted, more in shock than actual contribution.

"But Harry, Dumbledore can't expect you to be able to find all of them!" Hermione protested. "We don't even know what they are!"

"I know!" Harry cried in frustration. "Dumbledore knows, though. Or he has an idea. He says he's looking for them. We don't even know how many, but Dumbledore knows it's more than two. The diary was one, we know. He's convinced Slytherins locket is another one, but we have no idea where it is."

Ron looked disturbed. "Look, mate, if Voldemort has these things, he's practically unkillable. And
he's expecting you to fight him?"

"Obviously not until they're all found," Hermione asserted quickly, looking to spare Dumbledore the dispersions. "That's why he's bringing you in, right Harry? He wants you to know not to face him before it's time."

Harry ran a hand through his ragged hair with a sigh. "I guess so. I just can't really process it yet, you know? I can't even process magic like this. Magic is supposed to have rules, it's supposed to make sense. You use your own power to do things that are within a certain range. This magic is just so powerful on its own . . . how do you fight if you don't know the rules? The limits? It doesn't feel like Voldemort has any."

Hermione's heart fluttered in guilt again, but this time it was for keeping her research from Harry.

"It's kind of like Dumbledore's magic, if you think about it," Hermione pointed out, testing the waters.

Both boys looked at her strangely. She raised her hands in defense.

"Not the dark bit, obviously," she justified quickly, "but there's got to be a reason they're both so powerful, doesn't there? They use magic so differently from us. Maybe it's not how they're using magic that's different, but the magic they are using."

"Blimey, Mione," Ron shuddered, "you aren't really setting Voldemort as just like Dumbledore, are you?"

"There's no way Dumbledore's like that," Harry interceded. "He has experience, that's all. Voldemort's power is dark magic, and Dumbledore's is simply true power."

Hermione took that as her answer. She wanted nothing more than to argue, to prove them wrong with the book she had concealed as a simple Charms book in her extended satchel. Still, they would never look at the ritual the way she did, which was a way to beat Voldemort. They might even view it as using dark magic or cheating in the battle.

She felt like going to Dumbledore, in all honesty. He was one of the only people she could think of who probably did the ritual. Well, the only one that wasn't trying to kill her. He would have a fair approach to the subject and may even offer his help. But Hermione had a sinking feeling that he would discourage her pursuit, and if he did she'd go through with the ritual anyways but with the guilt of refusing the advice of Dumbledore on her mind. Or even going against a direct command from him.

No, she couldn't do that. She couldn't go to Dumbledore.

"We'll just have to keep trying, won't we?" Hermione encouraged Harry. "Of course, it's a lot to take in, but we're here for the long haul. I'll do the research . . ."

"And I'll do the strategizing!" Ron quipped.

"And you'll do the leading," Hermione finished their recitation. It was the encouragement they'd used once upon a time to convince Harry that he was doing fine with the DA, but it had been a recurring mantra over the summer. Harry could lead, if he believed they'd follow him.

"Alright guys," Harry resigned himself easily to the friendship before him. "Just . . . we need to be careful now, ok?"
"Of course, Harry."

"Will do, mate."

They went to bed that night tormented by the prospect of facing an immortal enemy, one with blood red eyes that streaked across the sky. Hermione tossed and turned in her four poster bed, tormented by the memory of Death Eaters chasing her and across the sky while she was still Polyjuiced as Harry. Then, the flash of light and the fast-paced flow of black smoke with red eyes. A wand raised directly at her, her arms leaden and dead at her sides-

Hermione bolted awake, drenched in the sweat and fear of a sleepless night. She decided then she'd never feel helpless again. She was doing the ritual. She would be able to save herself, she decided.

She studied the incantation and pronunciation well until the next morning, determined. Hermione Granger would never be helpless again.
Chapter 5

She waited until Christmas break. The book said that any magical interference and the ritual might not work, so she'd need to be outside of the wards of Hogwarts, safe at home with her parents. If she did something wrong, they would be able to take her to a hospital and no one in the wizarding world would have to know of her use of the dark spell. If things went right . . . well, she'd have a chance to practice controlling it before she had to come back to Hogwarts.

Yet Hermione was still wary of the danger she could be putting them in. It was a dark magic ritual, and if there was any magical backlash they might be in harm's way. Rather than risk her warded home, she told her parents she was going to her cousins for the day and apparated to the secluded forest in the middle of nowhere where her parents had once brought her camping. It took her a few daylight hours to draw the ritual circle into the clearing's dirt. She needed the exactly correct ritual, the exact amount of blood, and the exact wording if this wasn't going to harm her.

The ritual was to be performed at the twilight hour so once the ritual circle was complete, Hermione began her final preparations. She made the peppermint salve for after the cut. She worried over the potion she had made which she would use to draw runes over her naked body when the time came. She double checked the area for magic and for people, hoping that even without wards, no one would interrupt her in the middle of her incantation. Finally, as the sun finished setting, Hermione knew it was time.

She disrobed without ceremony and laid the robes on the stones outside of the circle so she could put them on quickly. The winter air was freezing, but being naked was necessary for the ritual. She uncomfortable waited in the circle. When twilight began, the rune circle she'd created flashed a dull amber. She was to begin.

"Libera me magicae," Hermione began chanting, pulling out the potion she had made. Dipping her fingers into the potion, she placed the first rune on her forehead. "Liberate animum meum. Ut fiat dignus inventus erit vobis."

She painted the next rune over her heart. "Liberate me omnes inimici mei adversus spiritum, et locavit eam currere liberum cum magica mundi."

One directly over her uterus. "Magicis meis libera filios vestros ut valeas."

The first rune on the back of her right hand. "Fiat manus mea sit potestate usurpari relati."

The other hand now. "Et quod absque ea praestare velit congue consectetuer."

She threw the bottle over the ritual circle's lines and lifted the knife from the ground. Knowing a numbing charm wouldn't work, Hermione held her breath and raised the knife to her inner thigh. Then, with a bravery and speed she hadn't used before, she slid it fast and forcefully against her skin. The blood oozed from the wound and Hermione dropped the knife to the ground of the circle. Her leg was only just registering the cut after the shock, and she moved to limp along the inner circle. Finally, she sat down on the cold, damp earth. Her cut stretched and drew a gasp from her lips. Not wanting to wait any longer or lose more blood, she grabbed the bowl of salve. Heaping it over the cut, it did seal in the blood and prevent her from bleeding out further.

The runes on her body began to burn her skin. Her cut ached and throbbed against her cold slave. She dropped her wand, the step she'd forgot after finishing her recitation and tried hard to remain still in the circle. The burning intensified. Hermione stifled a whimper and shut her eyes. If she'd kept them open she would have seen in that second the runes from amber to a pure blood red.

At that moment, Hermione felt an impact on her body, like a freight train had hit her at all angles. She was now incapable of moving her body, but her mouth opened to a vicious scream. If anyone were nearby, she would be mistaken for a dying girl in a horror film. Magic wrapped around her naked form, glowing in a multi-coloured cocoon. It ripped through her, surrounded her, suffocated her . . . Hermione didn't dare open her eyes.

Hermione didn't know how long she remained suspended in wordless pain, screaming as her being was torn apart, but soon the pressure on her body mounted. The magic was pushing against the inside of her skin, threatening to explode out of her.

Simultaneously, all her cells released the magic in a violent and volatile wave.

Hermione's body trembled in relief. Her eyes closed as her knees hit the forest floor. She fought hard to retain consciousness against the cold nipping her skin. She had no power left in her body, not even to rise to her feet. She lay there in freezing, naked fatigue.

Hermione shuddered out a breath, fighting to remain conscious. She'd die of exposure if she didn't call for help soon. She worked to move her arm over to her wand. Before she could reach it, she heard a great whooshing noise above her.

A trail of black against the sky, coming towards her. Her eyes widened in fear. Only one set of people travelled like that, and they were not the people she wanted to find her naked, helpless, and alone. She struggled to find any sort of power and grabbed at her wand. But she couldn't lift it high enough to make the Patronus movement, or even point it at the smoke coming towards her. Hermione started to panic. This was her worst nightmare, this was the reason she even did the spell; she was helpless.

Closer and closer, the black smoke was practically upon her. She closed her eyes, trying to stop the panic from taking control. If she was going to die, she was going to do it without tears or begging.

She heard a thud of contact to her left and opened her eyes to see the worst site in the wizarding world, Lord Voldemort himself.

His red eyes looked over her naked body and she never felt more vulnerable. His wand was pointed at her and she never felt more afraid for her life. Adrenaline started pumping, and she used it to lift her wand which he immediately flicked away from her and into his own hand.

"Someone has been dabbling in the dark," his slithery tongue hissed out in an amused tone. His eyes glinted in sadistic pleasure.

"Blood doesn't make it dark," Hermione bit back.

A smile overtook his white face. "Interesting, my dear. Justifying yourself already. You must be a Gryffindor."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione snapped.

"I got your message, young one. Although, I suspect you weren't aware you summoned company," he hinted with humour, ignoring her complaint.
"If that was a message, why are you the only one here?" Hermione demanded.

"The only other one who would be able to track your message is currently locked away in Hogwarts all the way across the country," Voldemort replied with a smirk. "I have you all to myself, young one."

He knelt down next to her. "Now, why would a little Gryffindor like yourself enact such an old ritual, hmm? Power, curiosity . . . ?"

"Harry," Hermione replied instantly. She was greeted with a ferocious look from the evil man's face. "I wanted to help him beat you."

"And how did that work out, exactly?" Voldemort hissed into her face. "If that's really all you wanted, you will be dead before morning."

Hermione didn't have a reply. Her face fell, and Voldemort grabbed at her chin and forced her eyes to his ones of liquid blood. "Legilimens."

None of her readings prepared her for the invasion of her mind. Without her energy she had no way of fighting against his assault and he pried deep into the past several months of her life. Her discovery of the old magics book, her spotting Draco in the owlery, her interactions with Harry, he saw them all. He saw her disappointment when Ron snogged Lavender, her helplessness in her nightmares, her Animagus adventures . . . Worse than all of that, he saw her home and her parents safe where she left them.

"Fascinating," he murmured above her. He released her head and looked around him cautiously. Spotting her bag and clothes, he picked through it until he found the tome. "Taking from the Hogwarts Library, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's eyes pricked with tears at her humiliation.

"I find myself intrigued, Miss Granger," Voldemort continued, placing the book back into her bag. "The little mudblood bookworm I hear so much about has a dark side. She hides things from authourity figures and friends, she performs blood rituals, she sneaks out and learns a rare bit of magic all on her own . . . she has a vengeful streak too, from what I've seen. And now, I have her at my mercy."

"Just kill me," Hermione croaked, tears falling fully now.

"Now, that would be a waste," Voldemort scolded her mockingly. "Surely you wish to live, Miss Granger. Perhaps you only wish your modesty returned, hmm? Let me help you with that."

Voldemort pulled his cloak from around his person and tucked it around her. Hermione flinched as his hands touched her through the black fabric.

"Don't flatter yourself, Miss Granger," Voldemort chuckled. "Besides, I'm being a gentleman, wouldn't you agree?"

Hermione fought the tears, but they only fell harder. The cloak around her made her feel less vulnerable, but it also made her feel dirtier. "What do you want?"

She hated the egotistical look he gave her. "I believe I want to save your life right now."

Hermione yelped as Voldemort pulled her up from the ground and into his arms. "No, no, let me down."
"I do not believe I gave you a choice, Miss Granger," Voldemort replied darkly. He pulled her school bag up and shrunk it into the pocket of his attire. "We'll be apparating, Miss Granger. If you vomit on my person I will not be forgiving."

Hermione barely had time to gulp a breath before Voldemort apparated with her in tow.
Hermione's parents were distraught. They had been out all night looking for her. Finally, they went back to their home, cold and upset. They knew she wouldn't have been able to be taken by anyone who didn't have magic. They fumbled around in their storage, looking for the box they had received from Professor McGonagall the first time she had contacted them about Hogwarts. From their dusty storage, they pulled the Hogwarts Medallion from its hiding spot. Both parents held onto the coin like a life support, and, per instructions, whispered "White rabbit."

The parents were pulled instantly long, flung through endless space. With a crash, they fell to the floor of Dumbledore's office.

"The Grangers?" Albus exclaimed, rubbing his eyes comically.

"Are you in charge here?" Mr Granger demanded.

"I'm Headmaster Dumbledore, good man," Dumbledore extended his hand but was flatly refused.

"Headmaster, we believe someone has taken Hermione."

Hermione had been asleep long before she knew what had happened to her, officially. She remembered apparating, but the dizziness she felt upon landing compounded with her magical depletion had her swaying until she succumbed and placed her head against the resident Dark Lord and promptly lost consciousness.

She woke surrounded in far too much fabric. She was naked again, but in a bed of down pillows and two massive quilts overtop of her. Her body felt sluggish and weak. When she opened her eyes, she initially couldn't see anything except a blurry fog. It took several hard blinks before she could evaluate the situation she'd been placed in.

Voldemort had placed her in a decadent room with rich green walls and darkwood furniture. The ceiling was intricate and beautiful, clearly renaissance in origin and lined with gold. There were three doors in the room, a full-sized fireplace with two chairs in front of it, . . . and a Dark Lord sitting in one of those chairs, reading from some ancient-looking tome.

He must have sensed her gaze, because his red eyes met Hermione’s and the book in his hand was closed with a resounding clap. "Alive still, Miss Granger?"

She groaned aloud, throwing her head back onto the pillow. Hermione vaguely heard a chuckle from the other side of the room but was too busy pinching every inch of her body, trying to wake up from the nightmare she was a part of.

"Tink!" the megalomaniac called. Hermione watched now as a house-elf popped into existence next to Voldemort. Hermione felt fear for the tiny creature, but Voldemort knelt next to the house-elf in a very respectful gesture. Confusion overtook her. "Miss Granger requires a hearty breakfast, if you please, and I need Severus immediately."

Severus? Snape! He was calling Snape! Hermione had a chance, at least, to get a message to the Order. Voldemort came over to the bed with a maniacal glint to his eye.
"Good morning, young one," Voldemort greeted, coming up next to the bed. Hermione moved to the farthest side away from him, only to warrant a raised eyebrow from the resident Master of Dark Magic. As if he were saying I could force you, why bother? "Refusing to behave will only end in your punishment, I'm afraid. Now will you lie on your back? I need to make sure you are healing properly."

She simply glared at him, eliciting an eyeroll. "So be it, Miss Granger."

With a wand wave, Hermione was yanked back into the center of the bed absolutely stuck. She whimpered in fear as she regarded her captor. Voldemort ran his wand over her, muttering a little under his breath. A pale yellow glow started at the top of Hermione's head and trailed down to her toes under his guidance. When he finished, he sent a stinging hex to her skin, making her yelp in pain.

"Your next consequence will be worse," he warned.

With that warning, Hermione was free once again to use my body and she sat up.

She was still completely naked under the covers. Hermione yelped and reached to cover herself, blushing furiously as Voldemort laughed in her face.

"It's not funny!" she yelled at him.

Voldemort chortled maliciously, hardly allowing himself a breath to reply. Finally, his gaze filled with mirth, he regarded Hermione once again. "I have to disagree, my dear. You Gryffindors are always so thoroughly entertaining, rushing to prove your points. Although, I'm sure you made two points there already."

His gesture to her chest had her blushing furiously. She gritted my teeth against the horror she was feeling. "You're sick."

Voldemort only raised his brow, but any reply was cut off by a knock at the door.

"Enter!" Voldemort barked, a stern countenance now gracing his features. Hermione pulled the covers closer to her chest in mortification, knowing exactly who was coming through that door. Just to prove her, in walked her Potions professor decked in full black as he always was. He only stopped in his entrance when he locked eyes with a desperate Hermione, covering her chest forcefully and looking to any who would see her then as if she was in the last place she wanted to be. Hermione begged him with her eyes, the familiar sight of him nearly bringing her to tears.

"Miss Granger?" Snape cocked an eyebrow at her.

"I didn't mean to, Professor," Hermione pleaded. "I didn't know what I was doing."

"Silence, little one," Voldemort sneered at her before turning to his servant. "I found her in the woods along the southern coast. She practically summoned me to her, with the amount of power she emitted. I couldn't help myself but to go investigate. Tell me, Severus, did you know your student was so studying old magic rituals?"

Hermione saw the knowledge click in his head as he put together their shared interaction with Dumbledore and her appearance before his other master. She whimpered as she saw his eyes darken in anger.

"What did you do, Miss Granger?" Snape growled at her.
She trembled under his fierce gaze. "I just wanted to help, I swear. Please, if they ask, I didn't think it was dark magic. I didn't know he would come."

Snape groaned, almost pained by her words. "Dumbledore, the fool."

"Ah, so that's where she learned of it," Voldemort said with glee. "Show me, Severus."

She watched as the two men engaged in a long stare, a one-sided war where the only victor was Voldemort himself. It was over fairly quickly, but Voldemort clapped his hands together eagerly.

"A curious young girl, Severus, isn't she?" Voldemort practically crowed. "Well, I do need your help, dear friend. She seems to be in need of some potions to restore her."

This gave Snape a start. "Restore her?"

"Specifically, I believe you'll find her in need of a Vitamix potion and several rounds of restoration draught for the next few days," Voldemort continued. "She had depleted herself extensively."

"And what use is she alive, milord?" Snape asked with a raised brow. Hermione whimpered at his glacial tone.

"She is quite valuable, my dear servant," Voldemort said as casually as discussing the weather. He looked to her now, his face quite eager. "Will you tell dear Severus what you've done, little one? Perhaps it will ease your guilty conscience to tell your professor? Perhaps I shall grant him a detention with you if he feels you deserve it."

Tears pricked her eyes. Hermione opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. Hermione willed out the words. "I completed the Ritual of Unbound Magic," she whispered.

Snape's eyes buried into Hermione's own. Hermione wished she herself could read minds, but all she could do was plead with her own. Snape's gaze was unforgiving and volatile, looking to her as if he held against her every judgement she had ever had of herself.

"I see," he drawled. "What a miracle someone of your blood status survived."

Her eyes focused instantly upon him and his master. "Survived?"

"Your little book was never meant to be the source of the ritual, Miss Granger," Voldemort admonished her. "You took the first source you had and ran with it. There's a particular reason so few brave the old traditions, and mortality is certainly one of them."

Hermione deflated. She felt hollow. She hadn't known it might kill her, besides her foolish exposure to the elements the previous night.

"I will prepare her, my lord," Snape drawled.

"No, Severus," the Dark Lord stopped him. "I will do this. You will collect the necessary supplies and potions from your stores, and then you will return to tell the old man exactly what has become of his little Gryffindor Golden Girl because of his loose lips."

Snape bowed. "Of course, my lord."

Snape was leaving! Hermione scrambled to think of anything else that she could give away, anything at all. Anything she could say.

"He read my mind, Professor!" she screamed. "He knows everything! Tell Harry he knows!"
Professor Snape stopped in the doorway and looked to his Lord, not at Hermione herself. Voldemort seemed to be beaming.

"Oh, do as she wishes," Voldemort allowed with a laugh. "Let them know that all her secrets are now mine, even those she has not shared with them. Tell them how you found her, and let Dumbledore see the memory of her naked in the Dark Lord's bed, begging for you to understand her. Keep nothing from them about this situation, Severus." His tone turned hard, and he looked towards her with fury in his eyes. "I want them to suffer knowing she is in my power and they cannot save her."

With a curt nod and the billow of his cloaks, Snape was gone.

Hermione was again alone with the Dark Lord.

She desperately wanted a distraction, something to focus on besides her situation, and was saved by the appearance of food in a tray on her lap. She avoided the gaze of the dark lord before her and focused on consuming the breakfast she had been provided. Her stomach growled with the first bite, and once she realized she was actually hungry she devoured the plate with vigor. Voldemort said nothing while she ate; he merely watched her and waited. Hermione couldn't tell if he was waiting for Snape to return with the potions or waiting for her to finish her food, but either way she longed for a way to prolong this time.

When Snape returned, he hardly spared a glance in her direction. He deposited the vials on the table by his Master, and with a wave as a dismissal, he left again. This time she was sure he would go to the Order and let them know everything.

Her tray disappeared when she finished, and it was then that Voldemort interacted with her.

With two bottles in hand he approached.

"Drink."

She did. She made foul faces to both potions, much to Voldemort's displeasure, but she gulped them down quickly. Only when both potions were consumed did he speak again.

"I have no plans to harm you, little one," Voldemort informed her. She guessed it was his version of comfort, because he sat himself on the bed next to her. She fought for composure. "However, as no one else in the castle knows of your little misadventure, they may make the mistake of taking that liberty with you. I require you to remain in this room until I am prepared to make use of you. You will have everything provided for you, including clothing, and you will enjoy the hospitality. However, as your recovery may take a few days, I will not have you waste that time.

"So you have a choice, Miss Granger," Voldemort told her, his red eyes flitting over her face. "The first is that you receive books of my choosing for your entertainment during your recovery, should you agree to treat them with respect. Choose this option and I will not return except to administer your potions. You will not have anyone visit with you, and you shall be left alone until I deem you fit for my purposes. The second is that I remain in the room with you, and I will allow you to ask any questions regarding either your predicament or old magics. I will answer honestly if you choose this, but do not presume I will reveal anything beyond your predicament. The third, and least pleasant option, is that you attempt to run and I chain you up in the dungeons for the remainder of your recovery." His eyes flickered dangerously. "Choose carefully, little one. You will bear the consequences."
An Order meeting was already underway when Snape came to 12 Grimmauld Place. Harry had been brought to the meeting by Dumbledore, and Ron was sitting with him with a cross look on his face. Snape, for a moment, observed two who he had not seen before; a pair of inconsolable muggles were sitting in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. When he entered, everyone looked to him in hope except the Headmaster. Dumbledore looked to Severus with a sad eye that let him know they already knew what he was about to tell them.

"Professor," Harry addressed him first, his voice trembling with emotion, "please tell me you were with HIM?"

"Yes, Potter," Snape sneered defensively at the boy. "I was indeed at the call of the Dark Lord."

"Sir," Potter begged, "do you know where Hermione is?"

The polite tone Snape had always seen absent from Potter was not helping him. This was the hardest part of his job, Snape thought. He didn't want to tell Potter and Weasley anything. Desperate for news he had, but not wanting to hear the truth. He kept his cool exterior and gave his report.

"The Dark Lord has indeed taken Miss Granger," Snape sighed. Cries of anguish came from the muggles, her parents. "I was unable to help her in any regard, however I do not believe he intends to kill her. He has shown a personal interest in the girl that I have not seen him do for any person, treating her like a prized Dark Magic Text. He is healing her as we speak."

"Any clues as to why, Severus?" Albus asked.

"Someone must have given her an idea to research old magic," he accused. Snape glared at him. "Apparently, she successfully unbound her magic without it costing her her life."

There were a few gasps, but most people just looked at Dumbledore and Snape in absolute confusion. Albus Dumbledore sighed and dropped himself into his chair.

"I'm guessing he felt her magical release?" Dumbledore inquired tiredly. "Found her while she was depleted?"

"Good guess," Snape sneered. "The Dark Lord wanted me to personally inform you that she is now under his power, and to tell you how I found her."

"You saw her?" Harry cried out, now standing. He clearly had no idea was was going on, but was grasping for the parts he needed to know. "Is she alright?"

"If you consider being naked in the Dark Lord's personal chambers as alright, Potter," Snape bit out, watching the horror unfold on everyone's faces. "She begged me, Potter, begged me to tell you all she had no idea that she was doing dark magic. To inform you that she never intending for the Dark Lord to find her.

"There's one more thing she wanted me to tell you," Snape informed him. "Potter, Miss Granger's mind was not occluded to the Dark Lord. Her every thought is exposed to him. Her exact words were, 'he knows everything'. What is everything, Potter?"

Harry looked at Dumbledore with the most profound guilt upon his face. "Professor Dumbledore-"

"I'm aware of your choice to inform Miss Granger, Harry," Dumbledore waved him off calmly.
"I'm sure Tom knows of our lessons."

There was a deepening silence in the room. Nobody quite knew what to say to the new revelation.

"Potter," Snape huffed out finally, his voice tense with anger, "it gives me no pleasure, but I have to ask you and Mr. Weasley if you can tell me, with absolute certainty, whether Miss Granger was a virgin prior to her capture."

Both boys turned green. "Why would you need to know that?"

"She may be in worse danger if she is," Dumbledore told the boys in a quiet voice. "There are many old, dark, pureblood marriage rituals where a woman's virgin blood binds her to the household or the service of the person who takes it. It's the reason virginity was so prized in the old days, and still is in pureblood families. Normally, we wouldn't need to worry because it requires the intermingling of a person's magic with another. But since both Tom and Miss Granger have both embraced the old magic . . ."

No one finished that sentence. Mr. Granger was holding Mrs. Granger as she sobbed into her husband, and Harry and Ron looked at each other, absolutely sick.

"She never told me, sir," Potter whispered to the Potions Master.

"Me neither," Ron supplied.

"Mr. Krum?" Snape asked, pushing them. "Is there any chance . . ?"

Potter frowned. "She wasn't really attached to him. I don't think she did."

Snape looked at the muggles in the corner. "Mrs. Granger, did your daughter confide anything to you regarding her sexual relations?"

Mrs. Granger shook desperately, and Mr. Granger held her firmly. He answered for her, "She never had any major boyfriends that we knew of. Always so studious, our little girl."

Snape leaned against the table and shook violently. The chance of her not being used in that way was becoming even more remote. "There's still a chance," Snape tried to convince himself. "She is a muggleborn, the most well-known of them. And he didn't ask me for any healing draughts, or a contraceptive. There is a chance that isn't what he is planning for her."

"I'm afraid I disagree, Severus," Dumbledore replied quietly. "Tom is addicted to power. If he believes it will help him, give him more, he will do whatever is necessary. Tell me about his healing her."

Snape looked to the grain in the wood table. "He requested a Vitamix potion and enough Restorative Draught to last for several doses over the course of two days."

"He is returning her to full strength," Dumbledore mused carefully. "She will receive full access to her new powers within the next day or so, with that treatment. He wants her strong enough to use it, that's for certain. It could very well be for such a ritual. Severus, I hate to ask this of you."

"You want me to find out for certain."

Dumbledore merely nodded.

Snape snorted. "Asking the Dark Lord whether he plans to rape my student is not how I wanted to
die, Albus."

"Oi!" Ron stood up violently. "That's Hermione!"

"Being evasive about the issue helps no one," Snape sneered. "If this is his plan, he will rape her. He may even do it in front of everyone at a revel if he wishes. He will rape her, then proceed to use her as a servant to himself. And make no mistake of it, Mr. Weasley, if I interfere I will be forfeiting my life. Feel fortunate that once the ritual is performed, he cannot force her to kill you herself."

"You know where she is though!" Harry protested, bringing Snape back from his brief, melancholy tangent. "You must be able to help her escape. Slip her a potion, give her a key, a wand, anything! She's our Hermione, we can't just leave her there!"

"Your 'Hermione' was performing an illegal ritual that called the Dark Lord directly to her!" Snape snapped. "If she had come to any of us, we would have discouraged her! Forbidden it! If I could do anything to spare a woman that fate, Potter, I assure you I would. I take no joy in the sadistic fantasies of some of the other Death Eaters. But she isn't being kept in the dungeons, where I might be able to assist, she is directly under the Dark Lord's lack-of-a-nose! In his personal care! I could no sooner bring you his snake familiar than I could Miss Granger. She is not escaping, no matter what aid I provide. He will watch her, his familiar will watch her, the house-elves will even watch her, and then there are the five or so death eaters he has constantly guarding his hideaway. Miss Granger has made her bed, and now must lie in it. We can only hope it is not literally."
Chapter 7

Hermione really didn't fancy spending alone time with Voldemort.

However, the very fact that he offered that option told her more about him and his plans than she liked. He was keeping her around, for whatever reason, and it was clear she would be personally interacting with him for the length of her usefulness. It was also clear he knew what curiosity did to her. If she had wanted to just have some Dark Arts book, she would have picked that. But the ability to pick at his brains that were nearly 50 years older than hers was irresistible. She had no idea about her powers, or about his plans for her, and he knew that even if it meant losing a chance to run, she wanted those answers.

So, she agreed to having him stay.

"Good choice, little one," Voldemort praised at her approval. "The best one. For that, I will allow you to dress in private; I know how you value your modesty."

He turned and strode over to the wardrobe on the side of the room. From it he fetched a set of clothes from the dresser and placed them at the end of her bed. He gave her a terrifying grin as he did so that made my tuck my entire torso under the blankets.

"I have business to attend to for the moment," Voldemort told her. "I will give you 5 minutes to put on your apparel, then I will send a friend of mine to watch over you while I'm away. I would encourage you to be on your best behavior, as she's, well, she's a little temperamental. When I return, we can discuss whatever you wish."

She bit her lip indecisively, but right before the Dark Lord left the room she called, "And will you tell me what you want? With me?"

His red eyes flashed to hers in silent excitement. "Why, Miss Granger," Voldemort purred, "I don't believe you truly want to know."

And he was gone.

Hermione stood up quickly, jumping towards the clothing. She didn't care about anything besides becoming not naked for whoever was about to come through that door. She had had nightmares since the Quidditch World Cup about the Death Eaters who walked in formation, burning everything in their path and killing indiscriminately. The last thing in the world she wanted was to present them with the temptation to take advantage of her. She threw on the undergarments without thinking, or at least trying hard not to think about how he had her size on hand for her, then moved on to the robes.

She had barely managed to put on bottoms before a resounding CRACK! hit her. She looked around, trying to find the enemy before they found her. She jumped as she felt a shifting by her feet and looked down to see a massive snake coiling around her feet.

Of course this was the friend he sent to watch her. She eyed it carefully, trying not to let the terror overcome her.

"Hello," she whispered, practically whimpered, at the snake. Its head tilted to look up at her as if it understood. "Are you v-venomous?"

She could nearly see the smile on the snake as it nodded and hissed in warning, revealing its
dagger-like fangs. There was no chance she would be running from this thing having seen those fangs. She audibly gulped.

"I, er-I want to go look at the books," she stuttered at the serpent. "May I?"

The serpent tilted its head as if thinking, then slithered from around her feet over to the bookshelves around the fire. She didn't dare refuse to follow the serpent, but she stayed by its tail-end. When the snake pointed to a specific book, Hermione moved forward carefully to take the book from its shelf. It simply read Traditions of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. She looked down at the snake head and gave it a brief glare.

"You know exactly what he wants from me, don't you?" She demanded. The snake nodded its head and hissed a little. She wished Harry could come speak to the thing. "And he wants me to read this?" Another nod from the serpent. She sighed. "Fine."

Hermione went to sit in the opposite armchair from the one Voldemort had used earlier and curled up with her knees to her stomach. She had a feeling if she left her feet on the ground the giant snake would curl around her legs, and the thought made her shiver. She didn't need to worry though; the snake decided that no matter where or how she sat, it would follow.

When it first began to slither onto her curled legs, Hermione looked at the snake sharply. "Do you have to?"

The single hiss was enough of an answer. Hermione tried to ignore the female serpent as it slithered onto the chair and wrapped itself around her body before putting its head on her shoulder. It was almost as if it was reading with her. It took her a long time to get comfortable, but the snake was warm around her and she found she could read well enough with the distraction.

Then, quite absentmindedly, Hermione began stroking the coil that went around her midsection. She was smooth, and her scales felt good. It actually soothed her. Before long, she had relaxed into a companionable cuddle with the bizarrely large serpent. It occasionally bumped her to remind her to turn the page, but other than that the head rested easily on her shoulder and sucked body heat from Hermione. She was strangely grateful; the fire was practically sweltering, and if the snake wasn't there Hermione would be sweating in a very unfeminine way.

She had nearly finished half of the text, and was finally understanding Draco Malfoy just a bit more, when Voldemort rolled back into the room. She heard the door open and close at his entrance. She froze, her eyes not really reading but staying fixed on the page. She expected the serpent to slither up to its master, but it simply remained with its head on her shoulder as its master moved to directly behind her.

"Is the book to your liking?" Voldemort asked, coming to the side of her vision.

She wanted to shrug but jostling the snake didn't seem wise. Instead, she just nodded. "It's informative."

"Good."

Voldemort moved over to the other armchair and sat into his seat. The book he had on the sidetable from earlier found itself once again open and in his hand. Hermione's focus was officially gone. Why wasn't he talking? What did he want? Old magics, her life, her situation, they all needed answers and he was ignoring her!

She looked towards the snake on her shoulder. It had closed its eyes as if asleep and content. At
least it wasn't trying to move. Still, she didn't want to wake it.

"You left a snake with me," Hermione whispered at him.

Voldemort smirked at his text. "I'd say she performed admirably. You weren't brave enough to try to escape, and she behaved herself and didn't bite you. Actually, Nagini seems to enjoy your scent."

"Nagini?"

"It is her name."

"It's pretty."

Nagini seemed to like her response. She butted her snake head against Hermione's cheek happily before resting on her shoulder again. Hermione still didn't like the look of the red eyes of her master glaring at her, but she could appreciate Nagini's enjoyment of cuddling.

She looked at the Dark Lord over to her side, observing him as he read. She had been more afraid of what he would do to her while she was naked, and now that she was covered she couldn't feel as afraid of him. She wished she had been there at Harry's side when he had been reborn, just so she could feel the same repulsion she knew Harry had for him after the event. For some reason it had always felt distant to her, the horror of this being. She hadn't grown up with fearful parents who had survived the war, she hadn't yet even seen the man in person until last night, and with him sat in the chair next to her own and providing her some level of interaction, he seemed almost... human. She hated that she didn't fear him or hate him like everyone else did.

At least she could channel that hatred.

"You promised to answer my questions," Hermione said casually from her place.

"I did."

Hermione guessed that was the affirmation she was likely to get from him.

"You told me I didn't want to know what you had planned for me."

Voldemort turned the page of his text, his gaze never leaving the page. Probably his way of presenting himself as unapproachable as possible. "You shouldn't use these few days you have to yourself to worry about the unavoidable, Miss Granger. Death does not await you, fear not."

"But if I were to know-"

"Knowing about it will not deter it. Knowing will not stop me. Knowing will in no way aid you or prepare you. You will not be able to persuade me away from my decision. You would be, effectively, helplessly waiting like a fly for the spider to prey upon you. I do believe the fly would be better at waiting in the silken webs if it didn't know of the spider's approach, don't you?"

He turned a page, and after a moment of silence, added, "So no, you do not wish to know."

Hermione bit her cheek, deciding whether to ask him.

"How did you find out about old magic?" Hermione asked finally, for now choosing a different course of inquiry.

That finally caused him to look up from his text. He grinned, showing his approval of her line of questioning. That made it feel wrong.
"Why, Miss Granger, are you still curious about the newfound power you've unlocked in yourself?" Voldemort jeered her.

Hermione frowned. "You promised to answer the question, and that, unfortunately, does not qualify."

Voldemort smirked at her and closed his book. Leaning towards her, he inquired in a subdued tone, "Did you not think that I, much like you, was a student at that school? That I was just as curious about the power of wandless spells? Seeing Dumbledore accomplish something I could not, every single day in his Transfiguration classroom did nothing but infuriate me."

He leaned back, still smirking. "But, unlike you, I had powerful friends with entire libraries of specifically pureblood-related texts," he remembered. "Abraxas Malfoy was particularly useful, I recall. I believe his library provided me with the necessary text to understand the ritual itself. However, unlike you, I knew the benefits and the costs prior to performing it."

His smirk was driving her mental. It was like every Slytherin smirk she'd seen at Hogwarts, every time besmirching her for her heritage and her lack of appreciation for their traditions. It was enough to make her grind her teeth.

"OK, so I went ahead without knowing," Hermione allowed with a scowl. "However, luckily, I have someone who knows everything here to enlighten me. So, Voldemort, what exactly could have happened if I performed the ritual incorrectly."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "The correct address is my lord, Miss Granger," he corrected with a hint of menace in his voice. "My chosen name is not something I let just any person use."

"No matter how many times in the last day you've addressed me that way in your mind," he amended with a sneer.

"Answer the question." She wouldn't stoop so low.

Voldemort took out his wand in a flash, pointing it at her readily. She flinched, bracing for pain, but Nagini hissed loudly, pausing its master in his tracks. Nagini turned the snake head towards its master and hissed strongly at him. Voldemort hissed back, lowering his wand to look at her. They both hissed at each other for a moment, until Voldemort sighed.

"My pet has a pet," Voldemort grumbled, just loud enough for her to hear.

Hermione looked at the large serpent's left eye, silently thanking her. What did she say?

"Nagini can smell how your anxiety spiked," Voldemort told her, making her jump. He was clearly in her head. With a resigned look, he sheathed his wand and sat down once more in the armchair. "Surprisingly, she likes you enough to fight me on your behalf. So go on, ask your questions."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "She means that much to you?"

Nagini hissed at her and Voldemort imitated the eyebrow raise I had done. "I believe you've offended her. Please, keep doing that. She may stop defending you."

"I was just surprised you care about anything," Hermione corrected.

"I believe I rescued you, Miss Granger," Voldemort reminded her. "You were in no position to return to your home or even cast a warming charm. Surely that constitutes to you some degree of humanity."
He was taunting her.

"A rescue doesn't include imprisonment," Hermione retorted. "You kidnapped me."

"It's no less than what Dumbledore would have done once you returned to the school, emitting magic like one of the founders," he said, amused by her little tantrum. "He would have immobilized you and stowed you away somewhere without so much as a 'by your leave'."

"No," she responded strongly. "Not everyone treats this the way you do."

"Oh, of course, if one of your friends knew they would have tried to save you," Voldemort sneered. "Not that you would tell them, of course, but if you did they would have tried to get dear old Dumbledore to see reason. But once it was explained that you, as you are, would attract the undue attention of any pureblood you happened across and word would get to me of your prodigious abilities, he would successfully convince them that you needed to remain in hiding for your own safety. After all, I do covet power and you, Miss Granger, have inadvertently shown most of the purebloods across Britain that you have it."

Hermione glared. "We're not in the hypothetical realm anymore."

His eyes flashed in a sinister fashion. "Yes, little witch, very shrewd. The magic you emitted last night was quite powerful and very, very shocking. I'm sure that every pureblooded or halfblooded male who had ever had old magic in his family could feel that shockwave you emitted, calling us to you. Of course, so long as it wasn't negated by more powerful old magic wards."

"Then where were they?" she demanded. "Why only you?"

"Because I'm the only one who could feel the magic enough to follow it," he told her with a wave of his finger. "Old magic is not the same as the stuff these children use, Miss Granger. They wouldn't be able to find the epicenter even if they used Point Me. The old muggle expression, 'Takes one to know one' I believe applies here."

Hermione sighed, and leaned back, careful not to squish Nagini's midsection. "OK, I'll bite; why only the males?" she asked, afraid of the answer.

Voldemort's smile grew to elephantine proportions. "You are delving very close to the reason I brought you here, did you know? I must ask if you are sure you want an answer to this question."

His red eyes bore into hers as she uncomfortably decided how to win this encounter. He had the power of her fear, so the answer was to deny him that. However, she really didn't want to spend time worrying about her impending doom and more than was necessary.

"I suppose I shall have to teach myself a bit of patience," she said with carefully measured words. "However, all of this does not mean that you can justify kidnapping."

"Oh, I can justify it quite well," he hissed, suddenly very excited. "You see, a young witch who makes herself vulnerable in the woods is certain to meet some unpleasant fate. As her savior and the one person who would teach her to use her power, I believe I'm within my rights to expect some sort of obedience from her. And, of course, some loyalty."

"Never," Hermione pronounced. "It isn't a life debt, so I owe you nothing. And nothing is exactly what could convince me to betray Harry."

"I know, of course, you won't be willing," Voldemort reassured her with wicked gleam. "But I will take your loyalty none the less."
Hermione tried her hardest to not let his taunts affect her, but her stomach was now in leaden pipes and quite heavy. The thought of being under some sort of Imperius curse was not the most pleasant of thoughts. Upon seeing her anxiety, the gleam in Voldemort's eyes grew, but his body language turned calm as he reclined back into his seat.

"Once again, you are getting dangerously close to the answers you don't want," Voldemort pointed out. "I suggest you focus on old magic and cease inquiry regarding your situation, Miss Granger, or I may let you sit in horrible anticipation of what I'm going to do to you."

Hermione took a shaky breath and nodded. "OK. How about you tell me how soon I can expect to feel this prodigious magic you were talking about? I feel nothing right now."

Voldemort responded well to her new line of questioning. He told her she'd begin by doing some accidental magic probably a few days along, and after that she'd feel more connected to it and could get it to respond to her at will. He went over some basic healing spells and rituals now available to her through the new magic, and went over a couple of cool new powers she had acquired. For example, she could feel a person's magic. She could erect wards beyond the standard Fidelius charm. Good wards, like those around Pureblood homes and Hogwarts. She could still force specific responses from it with spells, but it granted freedom and elemental magic as well. He briefly touched on the old books he had found with advanced potions and runes work she could now do as well.

She could tell, throughout his explanation, where the gaps were. She could see the small flicker of amusement that entered his gaze as he redirected his thought somewhere. She could hear the laughing tone at some of her questions before he cannily answered everything but them. By the end of the conversation, she knew that whatever he had planned for her made her not only subservient, but dependent. It was something to do with warding, too, based on the moment they had were he went off talking about links. She knew that when pureblood families put up wards for their properties they also linked them together, in a way. It kept them all close, easy to apparate between, and under a singular power that the books never specified. When she asked, she saw his glint and smirk and quickly retracted her question.

Hermione was left with an uneasy feeling about everything. Like his amusement at her was hiding the secret, and his pleasantness was a clue as to why. Every kind word was a subtle bit of power exchange where she didn't know the consequences, and each beratement held hidden subtext she couldn't read.

At some point during the conversation, Nagini had uncoiled herself from Hermione and slithered away to her master. With a touch of the wand and hardly a moment's pause in his explanation of wards, the snake was gone. Hermione didn't dare ask where she had been sent. She suddenly felt her security against him was gone, and from the gleam in his eyes he agreed.

"You know what?" she said nervously. "There's only so much time you can spend with a Dark Lord, so I better take the potion Professor Snape left and try to sleep."

Voldemort chuckled low in his throat, another moment that caused her pause. "Why are you laughing like that?"

"Because you assume I shall leave," he laughed. "Miss Granger, as much as Nagini is enamored with you, I release her each night to hunt on the grounds. As such, I am your guard for the night."

Hermione started slightly, but nodded. "I, er, I guess that's reasonable," she agreed.

Voldemort's amusement seemed to rise, as he did out of the seat. "And do you not think I too need
to sleep?"

Suddenly, his comments and amusement made sense. I flinched away from him, trying to maintain a composed expression. "Of course. I assumed I would be on the floor, or in a transfigured armchair, or-

"Oh no, little witch," he grabbed at her arm as she tried to retreat. "You are still recovering your magic. From my studies, it seems it will recover and manifest much quicker if someone else of old magic is close by. I believe that healing quickly is what we want for you, yes?"

"I can offer a second opinion," she offered in a tight voice, pulling against his grip. "Where did you find this research?"

"There's no need for another opinion, Miss Granger. I believe it is worth a trial run," he purred, his grip painful on her right forearm. His crimson eyes bore into hers. "Unless, of course, you feel your magic returned?"

"You know I don't," she snapped, resisting the urge to use her free hand to punch him.

"Then I believe I shall stay very close, my little witch," Voldemort replied, pulling her towards the wardrobe. A short little nightdress was given to her with his annoyingly aware expression. "Go prepare for your sleep, and I shall be waiting. I do not suggest trying to avoid this."

"So, you're making me into a mistress?" she threw the absurd guess at him. His amusement glinted, like Hermione had nearly gotten it right. It made her flinch. "I don't want an answer to that, forget it. I'll be back."

Hermione was getting steadily more freaked out. She was definitely sure it wasn't normal for Voldemort to just sit down and talk or read with anyone, yet he had. She was equally sure that this man would never let anyone sleep in his bed, exposed, and yet she was about to do just that. This wasn't about information, because he could simply take it from her mind, and she was certain that the supposed kindness he was showing her was not simply to bed her. He was Voldemort! She was sure if he ordered all his female Death Eaters up here he could have an orgy, if he wished.

This was about the magic. It wasn't enough for her that he was trying to help her recover; it felt much more like the in-joke he'd been playing on her for their entire conversation, the one that made him smirk at inappropriate moments and make cryptic comments about her loyalty. How was he so sure she wouldn't try to kill him during the night? Why did he even want to be in the bed with her?

Her vision blurred and she wiped away the tears before they had the chance to fall. No, she wouldn't allow him to disconcert her. She wouldn't think about why, she would simply lift up her chin, walk back into the room, and steadfastly ignore him. If he tried anything, she would break his . . . er, well, she couldn't break his nose. His fingers? No, that was a mafia move. Oh, his teeth! She'd punch him hard enough to break his teeth.

So, after relieving herself and brushing her teeth, ignoring how exposed she was in the nightgown, she did just that. She lifted her chin defiantly and went back into the room to meet the man who was keeping her prisoner.

What she didn't expect was him, perched on the edge of the bed and staring at her, in only silken pajama bottoms.

She wavered.
"Why don't you come take your draught, little witch?" Voldemort purred at her, patting the bed amicably. Hermione didn't know how to respond. "I simply want you well."

"Why?" was all she could manage.

Voldemort gave her the in-joke grin she hated. "Are you truly asking, pet? Have you decided you wish to know?"

She glared. "You know what? I am. I want to know what you have planned for me. You're treating me like some honoured guest and its disconcerting! Just tell me what you want!"

She hated that her defiance made him laugh. This time, it was a deep belly laugh that made her even more uncomfortable than she already was. He pretended to wipe a tear away and smiled his sinister smile at her.

"Gryffindors," he chuckled. "Miss Granger, you are highly entertaining. I don't believe I've had anyone yell at me unless they have a family member at the end of my wand. It's disrespectful, yes, but woefully entertaining."

She gritted her teeth in anger. "Just. Tell. Me."

He was up like a shot, striding to meet her. Hermione refused to be intimidated, firming her stance before he arrived and grabbed her face between his spindly fingers.

"Now that was not amusing," he told her, his face finally showing the danger she knew he had hidden underneath. "Perhaps you do not fear me enough, Miss Granger, with all the courtesy I've provided you, but I assure you that if you disrespect me I will not take it kindly."

"There's nothing to respect," she hissed, wishing that it wasn't a lie.

He glared at her face between his hands. "Very well," he hissed. "I see my reticence to punish you because of your condition has left you complacent. A demonstration is in order."

Hermione didn't have time to think before he apparated her away, making her mind and stomach lurch uncomfortably. She gasped for breath as they appeared in a dark, stone corridor. Voldemort waved his hand and robes were suddenly covering him in his standard, regal way.

"Follow, Miss Granger," Voldemort ordered, his eyes now menacing. "Do not test me now."

She felt exposed in the cold air of the dungeons. Pulling down the selected nightgown, she padded softly after Voldemort, getting more anxious as she started passing small cells on her right and left. People whimpered away from him, stared blankly, screamed and thrashed . . . At least they weren't anyone she knew, but she was still in his dungeons. Still here, seeing people chained to the walls.

"Now, you haven't run yet," Voldemort said with mild praise, made much more vindictive as he hissed it out. "As such, I will not be leaving you here. However, my kindness has been disrespected, and I find myself in need of someone to punish. You are not fit to fill that role, so . . . Ah! Here we are."

They turned to a cell and Hermione's breath caught. "Megan?"

The petite Hufflepuff lifted her head, looking at Hermione through pain-filled eyes. Her clothes were distinctly muggle, but were dirty with blood and dust, as was her face. It was difficult to see this as the small girl who had come to her in the library, asking for help with her Transfiguration last year. She was in hers and Harry's year, but her eyes showed Hermione the same torment that
Harry had shown her after the TriWizard Cup incident, and it made her look at least five years her senior.

"Good evening, Miss Jones," Voldemort greeted the girl. Hermione flinched at the whimper Megan let out. "Miss Granger here didn't even know you were down here. As a very important guest, I thought she might want to see one of her old school mates."

"Why is she here?" Hermione asked him, dreading.

"Oh, her father married some muggle woman," Voldemort said off-handedly. "Having her here is a good way to control her aunt, however."

"Jones . . ." Hermione tried to think of anyone of that name. "I don't know her aunt."

"She works in the Ministry at the moment," he informed her. "Although, from her results, she is heavily favoring Dumbledore. So long as she does her part to keep me hidden from Fudge, she will keep her niece alive."

He turned his attention back to her classmate. "I do apologize, Miss Jones, but my little witch here has been exceptionally disrespectful this evening. She is recovering so I cannot discipline her effectively, and I wondered . . . Would you be a dear and accept Miss Granger's punishment for her?"

"No!" Hermione exclaimed, moving to get between Voldemort and the Hufflepuff. He simply waved his hand and she was frozen, her eyes unable to close but able to move and look at him and Megan in quick succession. The girl was whimpering more audibly now, pushing herself up the wall and away from Voldemort's raising wand.

"Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!"

Hermione watched helplessly as the young girl was struck again and again with the torture curse. She screamed and writhed in her chains, begging for death or mercy or both, bringing unbidden tears to Hermione's eyes. If she could move, she would be shaking.

"You care about the most insignificant of people, Miss Granger," Voldemort hissed, rounding on her. His eyes were dark and deep with his pleasure. "Disrespect me again, and I will kill. Do you understand? You may be valuable to me; others are not. If I must go to some random muggle village and bring a muggle child for you to watch die, I will do it. I will bring you along to watch me flatten a house, a town, even a county. Depending on how angry you make me, Miss Granger, I could be more and more merciless. Each time you intentionally insult me after I have warned you, the punishment will escalate. I would not spurn me lightly in the future."

He released her then, and she dropped to her knees in breathless guilt. The quivering Hufflepuff in the cell had her unable to look away. Tears were now freely dropping from her eyes. "Meg-gan, I'm-m so sorry. S-so sorry. So v-very sorry."

"As touching as that apology is," Voldemort sneered, his eyes dark, "I believe after an offence it is customary to offer one to the person who was offended."

She turned to glare at him, her lips firmly sealed. With a raised eyebrow, he pointed his wand to the young Hufflepuff once again.

"No! Wait!" Hermione shouted. After taking a quick breath, she bowed her head. Partially a sign of respect, but also not wanting to look at him. "I apologize, my Lord."
"For?"

Hermione swallowed the bile rising in her throat. "My disrespectful attitude and behavior."

"And how will you avoid this in the future, Miss Granger?"

Her humiliation was complete. Tears streamed. "By remembering today."

"No, no, I do not want that, little witch," he patronized her. "I have suggestions for you, if you'd like. Will you avoid raising your voice to me?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Will you take into account the kindness and honour I offer you by placing you under my personal care before you accuse me?"

"Yes."

"And how will you treat me?"

Hermione froze. No, she couldn't say what he wanted. He was no master of hers.

"As a person?" Hermione tried hopefully.

"Not quite, little witch," he purred. "Try again."

"As the Dark Lord?"

This made him pause half a moment. "As your lord would be perfectly acceptable for right now," he seemed to allow. "Very well, you are forgiven. Stand and take my arm."

Hermione complied, not daring to cast her eyes to Megan after her kneeling apology to the enemy. They apparated back to the room, and this time Hermione hardly reacted to the apparition. Her stomach was already in knots, and there was nothing more apparition could do to discomfort her.

"You require rest after that adventure, Miss Granger," Voldemort hissed at her. His arm swept towards the bed. "Rest. There will be no more questions tonight."

She didn't try to resist him. The idea of curling up and letting today be no more was far too appealing, and Hermione quickly pulled the covers around her and curled to one edge of the mattress in a shocked horror. She couldn't sleep once he entered the bed and magicked out the lights, leaving her with the images of the quivering Megan, the begging Hermione, and the dark pleasure in Voldemort's eyes as he caused both them both.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

The rape is in this chapter. It's unavoidable, but hopefully it was done tastefully as possible.

The girl was infuriating. He didn't like freezing people like that, and it took the fun out of torture. If he hadn't, though, his little witch would have jumped in between them and possibly would have attempted to fight him completely muggle. She wouldn't have even thought twice about it, he mused. She would have gladly taken the little Hufflepuff's place. He had almost hoped she would have accidentally used her magic right then, but it was too soon for that kind of response.

Voldemort hadn't necessarily needed to sleep. Not much, at any rate. He slept a rare few hours a night, then woke either with his wand pressed to some Death Eater's throat for the disturbance or with a sheen of sweat covering him from a nightmare that had left him unable to sleep again. No, the reason he had needed the bed tonight at all was to give her a vital clue to her fate. He knew she was smart and logical, even if impulsive. He had given her plenty of hints about her fate.

The only thing he had to decide was exactly what kind of protection he wanted the girl to perform. The one with the most personal benefits was definitely having her as a personal shield. Binding her to his side might prove irritating at first, but he would have her in a place where she would protect him with her very life. It would disconcert her allies, it would bolster his troops, and he would have the pretty little witch for whatever he needed.

However, if he wanted to win the war a momentary shock wasn't enough. Having her as a defender of the home instead of his person would have definite merit. Linked to all his followers through blood and the Dark Mark, she would share that link. She would be the last measure of defense for their homes, and it meant he could keep a permanent foothold in Britain for quite a long time. His followers would receive as good of protection as he could provide them for their homes and families, and he would have a direct way to monitor their goings-ons. She would be magnificent in that role, always there whenever there was to be a raid or a Ministry sanctioned investigation. She would pop up and with his training she would eviscerate anyone that trespassed. Yes, that may not keep her fixed at his side, but it would be immeasurably more practical.

Yet, she could be anywhere she wanted. That would be a problem. The bond with her would only allow him to order her return if there was an emergency, so otherwise she was free to be anywhere between the estates. She might even find friends, which would be unacceptable. Embedding the Dark Mark upon her forearm wouldn't solve the problem, as she needed to accept it willingly, and the bond couldn't be changed to make her more obliging. A tracking charm would be instantly negated because of the old magics, same with the darker versions of it. He could always threaten her, but that wouldn't do as she was too much of a Gryffindor. Once this plan was in place, she would know he valued her for her usefulness and that she would be of no use even remotely injured. He would probably give one of his followers to keep her healthy once the bond was formed.

He looked at the young witch in the bed. She was rather pretty compared to the normal purebloods he dealt with. It could just be that he liked his women to look natural, as she did. She did not look
like a statue, even when she slept, and her hair was wild and uncontrolled. It spilled over her pillow in every direction, making it look like she was floating as opposed to resting. Everything about the young witch was uninhibited. She was angry when she felt it, she was saddened when she wanted, and she demanded when she could. Her intelligence was apparent in her behavior, but it didn’t hinder her reactions. Her intellect informed her reactions, making her already more bearable than the frantic Mme. LeStrange.

Almost unthinkingly his hand stroked part of her curly crown. It was soft, he noted. He moved higher up the strand, analyzing it as if it were a complex spell or an intricate potion. His hand came high enough to touch her face, and he marveled at the youth in her skin. Had his own been as vibrant? Moving down to touch at her bare neck . . .

That was it.

Hermione spent the next three days under Nagini’s watchful eyes, and away from Voldemort’s. The first day, she saw it as a blessing. She explored, and found the balcony. It was clearly warded so she couldn’t climb over the bar. She couldn’t tell where she was, but it wasn’t Malfoy Manor. With the war, she’d studied blueprints for the building just in case she needed to know. This home was older, not the Victorian she would have expected. The grounds were beautiful, though, with forests on all sides. She spent her first day like that.

The second day, she was getting uneasy. She had no idea where Voldemort went or what he expected, so she simply did as she had been; Nagini pointed to safe volumes from the bookshelves and she read, she drank her Restorative draught twice a day, she explored her room, and she succumbed to her curiosity about old magic.

The more time that past, the more uncomfortable she became. Her core felt empty. Completely gutted. No spell she performed was pulling her magic back, no amount of emotional distress pulled it out of her, and she felt like a squib. Her wand was somewhere in Voldemort’s care, so she didn’t even have a crutch. Hermione felt as if Voldemort was intentionally leaving her alone until she could feel her magic again.

Problem was that she had no idea what her magic was supposed to feel like.

The book on Pureblood traditions of the Sacred 28 gave her a little idea on what she could do to trigger it. Usually after the ceremony, in between 1-4 days the new magic manifests. The longer it takes, apparently the stronger the magic. The book was telling her to be grateful she was powerless!

She kept rereading that chapter over and over.

'There is a period of wait prior to being able to use old magic. Wizards and witches alike can expect for their magic to return within one-four days. The shortest recorded waiting period was a meager four hours, belonging to Belinda Parkinson (1320-1371). The longest recorded waiting period was eight days, belonging to the triplet brothers Peverell, although that period of wait is believed to have been a result of them performing the ceremony jointly or because of their existing magical bond with each other.

The recuperation period for magic is believed by most families to be an indicator of magical prowess. Many wizards who had longer recovery periods became well respected and powerful wizards, such as Minister for Magic Deol Shafiq (1405-1530), who allegedly took five days to
recover and who, during his tenure, carved the multi-level cavern that houses the Ministry of Magic. More importantly, witches who have lengthy recovery are more likely to be participants in powerful marriage bonds, produce more offspring, and are powerful protectors. The best example of this is Perenia Malfoy (312-399) who singlehandedly defended her family's castle in France from attack from Lord Pierre Halbert in 356 A.D."

Hermione had been insulted by that passage at least a dozen times, but it made her hopeful. The longer she went, perhaps the more like Dumbledore she could be.

If she could just ask Voldemort . . . NO!

Every time she had that thought, she rejected it immediately. She could not be wishing for his company, of all things. No matter how lonely, she wouldn't let herself wish for company. So she tried to get any visitors to keep her company.

She would try to get the house-elves to stay when they dropped of her food; so, they stopped even showing themselves in the room. Nagini wasn't good company, being denied her nightly jaunts outside, so Nagini was curled either by the fire or in her bed, not responding unless I asked her for another book. There was no one else in her rooms, and Voldemort left her completely by her lonesome.

Finally, she gave in. She planned hypothetical conversations with Voldemort. She took the parchment and quill and wrote out all her questions on old magic. From the time frame of her recovery, to the reason for his absence, she had more than a few questions.

She spent another day having fake discussions with Voldemort, usually with a Nagini stand-in. She felt like she was going insane! Every five minutes she checked the clock over the fireplace. Every hour she went to the patio to make sure she couldn't see anyone outside. No one patrolled the grounds. If she thought about it, as a Death Eater, she wouldn't want to patrol with her Master's vicious snake there every night either.

By day four, she was more than restless; she was insane with her imprisonment.

The Restorative draught she had brought with her meal should have helped her recover by now! She was screaming in frustration, pounding at the walls. A Restorative draught is powerful enough to enable a full recovery from any magical depletion within a day! The power of a full day of consistent magic use was in a dose of Restorative draught, and she'd already taken seven.

Hermione had the energy of seven Restorative draughts, and the restlessness of her wild Animagus form behind her. By the afternoon of the fourth day, she was banging on the entrance to the room with anger.

"You kidnapped me!" Hermione screamed at the door. "If you're just going to ignore me, what's the point?"

Then Hermione finally had her bit of accidental magic.

After four days, seven potions, and a lot of loneliness, Hermione felt a surge of magic go through her, rushing around her system before flying towards the door. She felt the crash against the wards, but they crumbled beneath the powerful wave of her anger. It swung wide open. She was free.

Hermione was in shock. The tears had stopped flowing and were chilling on her cheeks. Her knees felt weak. Nagini was now staring at her, finally looking bothered by her antics.

More importantly, Hermione could feel *everything*. Every cell of her body hummed with newfound
magic, her core seemed to swirl with it, her hands burned to use it, and her entire body was now awake with the newfound energy she possessed. She could sense a magical hum around everything around her, but something distant was calling to her more strongly than the magic she could sense. It was like a gasp of air. A sense of cool water running down her being. Before she knew it she was launching herself into the hallway to follow the strongest of the amazing feelings she was having.

Hermione ran down the hallway in a flash, her mind screaming at her to just use this power and escape and her body ignoring it and following the trail of magic. Stronger and stronger came the pull, and she felt herself let go of even using her feet. She was flying through the air towards her target.

She even stopped looking. She just felt as she flew, not even considering where it was leading her. She crash-landed through a door and onto a cold marble floor.

Opening her eyes, her gaze was immediately drawn to the man sat at the end of the room. She sat perched on a throne, one of cool greys and uncomfortable stone. When her eyes caught the glint of red, her powerful feelings felt stifled, like he was surrounding her weightless matter with a glass dome, letting none of her escape. It was Voldemort. The torchlight flickered on his face, the rain outside felt mad and the wind billowed it around the entrances, granting him even more presence. She could feel the magic radiating from him. This was the cool feeling she had been following. It was this man.

"Congratulations on your escape, Miss Granger," Voldemort greeted calmly. "Although, moving from one prison to another is hardly a daring venture, is it?"

Her feet felt unsteady beneath her as she rose from her fallen position, brushing at the robes he had left her, and giving him a small smirk. "Absolutely. My apologies, I'll try to make things harder for you. Goodbye now!"

She turned heel and tried to apparate. When it didn't work, she sent herself flying again. She hit the door violently, throwing herself to the ground once more. He'd warded her in. It was a trap.

"I don't think an escape is quite on the agenda for tonight," he announced. "However, if you would prefer I hunt you, it can be arranged."

"Alright," Hermione conceded, trying to rise without her head pounding from impact with the door. "You win. I'm here, I have my magic . . . You can tell me what you want, now."

"You already have the answer to that," his tenor voice reverberated off the walls. "You read about it the past few days."

Her heart stopped briefly at his haunting, threatening tone. Then, it sped up to a run. What had been holding the Voldemort of nightmares back – her lack of magic – was gone. She was now at the mercy of whatever plans he had laid for her. His bone-chilling smile did not bode well for her.

"I will not take any undue pleasure in this, Miss Granger," Voldemort informed her. He rose to his feet from the throne and deliberately but carefully strode towards her. "However, what better gift can I give my supporters? To my cause? To let your friends have you, unfortunately, would greatly hurt my chances of winning. To harness your power, however, would give us a great advantage. You may very well be the reason we win the war, little witch."

"I am NOT a gift!" She roared in fear. "And I will NOT help you win!"

"You will not have a choice."
Voldemort was closer now, the red in his eyes ghosting over her with feigned concern and real hunger. She could see now why this man had originally done the spell himself; this man had known the ritual might kill him, but to him, nothing would match the pleasure of additional power. Hermione had offered it to him as a naked feast that day in the woods. And now, he had her.

"What are you going to do?" Hermione whispered.

He was nearly upon her. She backed away from him, mirroring his steps. Her frame knocked against the wall. She had no more room. Her eyes widened as Voldemort towered over her, a solid foot above her height. His magic pulsed, pulling hers against his. The sensation was confusingly pleasant, and her fear was mixing with a bizarre sense of empowerment and revitalization. She tried to use her magic to push him away, but every push from her distanced some magic from her, letting him further envelop it and increasing the strange sensation. It was almost physical, and strangely intimate. She shivered as the hunger in Voldemort's eyes increased with every push.

"Shall I invite my followers to the party?" Voldemort purred in her face. "I would like an audience."

"No," Hermione tried to make it an order, but all that came out was a plea.

It seemed to please him. He brought his hand to her face, brushing away an errant curl and using his spindly fingers to stroke a cold, violating trail down her chin. She closed her eyes against him, shivering at his violation.

She wished she hadn't. His arms were around her in a moment, holding her in place against the door. She pushed against him, punched his arms, threw her magic further into the abyss of his own. It only seemed to bring him closer, and increase the strange hunger in his eyes. He restrained her arms and leaned in, inhaling her scent. His mouth was right next to her ear.

"Smart little witch," he whispered huskily into her ear. "Privately, then. Either way, today will be glorious."

He apparated them easily back to the room from whence she had escaped, the familiar surroundings only increasing her attempts at escape. With a wave of his hand, she was sent flying from him and landed on top of the bed. She scrambled to right herself. Voldemort was extinguishing the candles and torches all around them, all except the fire. There was a sinking feeling as she remembered a passage from his book on the Sacred Twenty Eight...

'It is imperative that each family works to protect the virtue and innocence of its daughters. The highest honour for a daughter of old magic is to bind herself to another. She will be giving her husband a great gift with the innocence she spills with him, and the power of their coupling will bring him protection, and her power.'

No.

No. No. NO!

She tried to run. She threw her magic around her protectively, but Voldemort already had her magic surrounded. He cut through shields easily, using his own to pin her to the bed. He had years of experience against her new powers, and she struggled with random bursts of power flying from her only to be cut off by the dark lord who was now hovering above her.

"I see you figured it out," he jeered.

"Let me go!" Hermione screamed.
He tutted her. "Now, I've told you, it brings me no pleasure, little witch. I simply require your power for my services. Once we've finished, you will be the Lady over all of my properties, all of my Death Eaters properties, over everything. A small price to pay, yes?"

"I don't want it! Let me go!"

"You have no choice."

She felt his magic wrap around her rip the clothing from her form. Naked under his predatory gaze, she whimpered helplessly. "Please! Please!"

"Think of it this way, Miss Granger," Voldemort leaned forward, making her cringe, "you're about to be bound to the most powerful Dark Lord there has ever been. It is a great honour."

He raped her.

He teased her, he fondled her, he stroked her, he petted her, and then, when she was sufficiently horrified at her body's natural responses to him, he stuck his cock inside of her, ripping open her maidenhead viciously. She screamed while he chanted the ancient spells, as if her screaming could drown out what was happening. He pounded her relentlessly, using her for both her power and a quick ride. Her pain meant nothing to him as he chanted, and her restraints had her sobbing and screaming for freedom.

Her magic moved even more violently against his, fighting a war of domination. His magic, all that had encompassed her, merged with hers and made her shudder. In her situation, where she lie powerless beneath him, she felt a shiver as power flooded her system. Instead of making her feel empowered, she felt more ashamed.

When the incantation finally finished, the magic that had encompassed them both shot through them like fire, burning and cleansing them. Hermione had visions of all that Voldemort had told her; all the Death Eater estates, everyone who occupied them, and the wards that held them guarded were open for her mind's perusal. Her mind briefly allowed her to find Malfoy, hanging in his family's dungeons, before her mind careened away to more and more new information. Her mind took her all the way to Hogwarts, where she could sense Professor Dumbledore and Fawkes were striving to find her.

Voldemort was being changed. His skin grew slightly less pale and more pink. His nose was now replaced, just as it had been when he was in school. His bald hair sprouted short black locks, his form lowered in height, and his cock grew inside of the little witch, causing her even more pain. He was returning to human form. The returned feelings he experienced increased his pleasure tenfold, and his movements became more rapid. With a final thrust, he spilled his seed deep inside Hermione.

Finally, magic stabilized and coupling complete, both parties fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.
The red eyes took over her nightmares. His hissed grunts of pleasure, his haunting threats . . . They were all coming from a faceless pair of hungry red eyes. She screamed, she ran, she kicked, she fought, but nothing was enough to free her.

Then, she woke up.

She was drowning in her own sweat. She was shaking. There was a thick coating of semen between her legs, and a pain there to remind her of why. She wanted to open her eyes and check for blood, but that would mean she'd need to open her eyes and see if the man who'd done this was still next to her. The fear of seeing him, of acknowledging what happened, kept her face pressed into the pillow.

There was something else though. The magic she had only just unlocked the day before was now changed. Before she'd felt fiery, like it was a crash of fire against the inside of her skin. Surging forward with power. Now, however, it felt more holistic. It was like the feeling of awe that had encompassed her throughout her first year at Hogwarts, now enveloping her and comforting her. Like her magic knew she needed help.

Hermione knew Voldemort was evil before. It was intellectually reasoned out, it was given with extra-personal example and proof, but it had never before applied to her personally. Now, she was bound to him through a rape he had committed against her.

The pain between her legs was only growing the more awake she was. What had started off as a mild burning upon her waking was now a conscious awareness of every single tear. She felt a sharp stab of pain with every breath, every jostle of movement. She needed medical attention. She needed someone like Madame Pomphrey.

The magic seemed to realize this. Within seconds, she felt an unfamiliar lifting sensation, the blankets disappearing from around her. She opened her eyes, and instead of the bed where she had been violated she was in the hospital wing of Hogwarts, lying in one of the beds.

"Miss Granger?" Madame Pomphrey flitted into her field of vision, and the sight of the grandmotherly matron had Hermione's throat clawing at her for tears. Her vision swam as the figure bustled closer. "Miss Granger, are you alright?"

"Help me," Hermione whimpered. "Please."

As the matron approached with her arms outstretched, however, Hermione couldn't bear it.

"Don't. Don't touch me."

Immediately, Madame Pomphrey had her wand out, running diagnostics on her. She was naked, she noted, except for a jeweled studded collar-like necklace around her neck, but she didn't care. Maybe the necklace was a symbol of the bond, like a ring. Or like a collar to remind her of him and her place now. Even when Hermione ran her hand over it, she couldn't find a seam.

Madame Pomphrey, at least, had her trust. Hermione watched in a constant state of anxiety, her magic trying so hard to calm her, while Madame Pomphrey looked at the results of her charm. The way the woman looked at her, the unbearable pity and horror in her face, made Hermione want to scream. Instead, she just let the tears run past her chin, wetting her body without a thought of wiping them away.
Madame Pomphrey provided her with a hospital gown. Then several potions. Then some chocolate. Hermione briefly smiled at the allusion to Lupin, and she did feel better after eating it, so she didn't protest the slab that the matron placed at her bedside. She started to feel a little better when the matron had her washed off.

A cleansing charm and some healing spells later and all Hermione could feel from her encounter with Voldemort was her new magic. It helped some to have the reminders taken from her. She was left to rest and eat her chocolate, but Hermione wouldn't sleep. Not with the nightmares from last night. She focused on the ceiling, the walls, anything to keep her from stretching out her magic and finding out whether Voldemort was still in that bed, back on what she now knew to be Sayre Mansion. She could feel the Slytherin in that place, diluted but there, and she could feel the blood wards and enchantments surrounding the place.

No! She resumed focusing on the walls and windows, on the chocolate and how it melted slightly wherever her fingers touched. Anything but the Sayre Mansion.

She wasn't surprised when Dumbledore and McGonagall came to see her. They both seemed to rush into the hospital wing, as if Hermione was set to disappear. She could, she knew, at any moment if any of the total of 81 homes under her protection needed aid. The number came unbidden to her mind, and she squashed the impulse to check them. That was the magic, not her.

"Miss Granger, are you alright?" McGonagall asked, coming forward to sit by her bed. A hand went to touch Hermione's shoulder, but she jolted and retreated back against the bars at the head of her bed. McGonagall looked shocked, but Dumbledore just nodded sagely at her.

"Miss Granger, we need to ask you a few things," Dumbledore told her gravely. She nodded. "You were kidnapped by Voldemort?"

His name made Hermione flinch. She nodded, intent on focusing, on not finding the owner of the name.

"And you are now a part of the old magics?" Dumbledore asked again, prodding. She just nodded again, finding the criss-cross pattern of the bedding intriguing. "And did Tom," flinch, "take advantage of you?"

Hermione nodded again, looking down into her gown covered lap. The tears resumed, spilling freely and with no restrictions from her.

"How horrible!" McGonagall cried. "Oh, Hermione, we can't imagine what that must have been like for you."

"He wanted it to be public," Hermione whispered, daringly. "I was lucky. No one else saw it."

Both adults were silent. Madame Pomphrey bustled over, handing Hermione a Calming Drought. Hermione downed it with no question, preparing herself. She needed to tell them what happened. She needed to be strong.

"I was a virgin, Headmaster," Hermione whispered to her lap. "He bound me to him. To his house. That's how I ended up here. He's a descendent from Slytherin, and his blood is throughout the school. I can feel it."

Hermione's tears ran freely. "I guess it was the price of my freedom," she murmured. "He took advantage of me, and now our magic is melded together. He gets more power, I get to look after all the houses he's bound to, all the Death Eater estates and the people bound to them. Including him."
"Can you tell us where he is?" Dumbledore asked now, moving closer.

"I don't want to feel his magic again," Hermione whimpered. "If I look for him, I'll feel him."

"We need to know."

McGonagall glared at the old headmaster. "She'd just been through an ordeal, Albus! She's in clear distress!"

"And her ordeal is far from over," Dumbledore told them both. He motioned with his hand towards Hermione's necklace, the one that appeared today. "Did he collar you, Miss Granger?"

"I don't know, sir. It was there when I, er, woke this morning," Hermione explained. The calming draught seemed to be working now. The tears stilled and Hermione was able to look up at them. The same horror she saw from Madame Pomphrey she saw in both of her respected authourities faces. "What does it mean?"

"It appears to be a family relic," Dumbledore told her. "Those are blood stones, Miss Granger. There are multiple uses for virginal blood, Miss Granger, beyond the ritual you were forced into. Many magical ancestors took the blood-stained sheets from their marriage beds to burn, and then turned the ash into blood stones such as those around your neck. They are quite powerful, Miss Granger, if even one stone is used. You have around a dozen from what I see. I imagine he had a purpose for giving them to you. Perhaps to aid in the protection duties, or because, as the blood of those stones are likely from his own family, he might be able to use them to summon you. Perhaps a kind of binding in its own right. It is possible that the Gaunt family gave the collar to their firstborn sons as a way for them to control their wives. They were a dark family, Miss Granger. Dark magic such as that necklace was a regular part of their lives."

Hermione bit her lip. "Do you think I can take it off? Ever?"

Dumbledore took his wand out, muttered something at it. Hermione felt a new magic come and lightly touch at her. It felt a warm to her, like a summer's sun. She welcomed it and had her magic let it through. It touched at her collar, but whenever he did the collar let out a small shock. Dumbledore started chanting, surrounding the collar with magic. He was going to choke her! Despite his chanting, nothing happened.

"It requires a blood-keyed release," Dumbledore apologized. "Only your, er, - only Tom can release it."

"Can I ask you something?" Hermione whispered her plea.

"Of course dear, anything," McGonagall replied.

"Am I technically married to him?"

Silence. That was all the answer Hermione needed. She pressed her hands to her face, trying to hide from the pain she felt building in her person. "I deserve this. I should never have done the ritual. I'm a horrible person."

"No!" McGonagall tried again to touch Hermione's shoulder, and Hermione fought the flinch she felt – as her professors old hands were cold, much like her rapists – and let herself be hugged by the woman she'd loved like a mother. "We all make mistakes, Miss Granger. But we can never excuse the horrors others commit as something we caused. You-Know-Who is a terrible man, and you cannot take any blame for what he did to you. I wish he were here so I could castrate him, Miss Granger. For what he did to you, there's a line out the door for that privilege."
"Can I see Harry?" Hermione asked, almost knowing the answer.

"That may not be best," Dumbledore replied. "I know you two care for each other, but your mind is an open book to Tom. We cannot allow him information that can lead to Harry. Do you understand?"

"I do."

And she did. She was vulnerable to any type of intrusion from the man, including what had happened last night. All her power against him was gone.

Dumbledore nodded. "Do you know what you are bound to protect, Miss Granger? Is it just Tom?"

"It's everywhere he's bound to," Hermione answered, still enjoying the warmth of being held my the mother-figure of McGonagall. "Including all the Death Eater homes. It probably has to do with the Dark Mark, but I can feel every person and every home owned by the family blood of the Inner Circle. I can feel all the Malfoy properties, even the ones in France and America. I can feel everyone buzzing around this castle."

"Why Hogwarts?" McGonagall demanded.

Dumbledore sighed. "Tom is the heir of Slytherin's bloodline," he explained to them. "I assume Slytherin created the wards for Hogwarts?"

"His blood is everywhere," Hermione affirmed quietly. "I'm glad. I don't think he knew."

"And where is Tom now, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked.

"When he, er, did this," Hermione stuttered over it, averting her eyes, "we were in the Sayre Mansion, just north of Suffolk County. He's set up a throne room there, in the ballroom, where he meets his followers. Megan Jones is in the dungeons, as well as a few others that they're holding for political reasons, so it may very well be his base right now."

"Miss Jones is alive?" Dumbledore demanded. "Are you sure?"

"He tortured her in my place four days ago," Hermione answered. She stretched out her magic, looking for Megan. Her magic was faint, but there. "Yes, she's definitely alive still. I can feel her, but she's weak. Probably from her stay there. He'll keep her alive, both for her aunt's sake and because he knows I'll do anything to keep her from harm."

"We must tell Hestia!" McGonagall cried.

"Wait!" Dumbledore told her sternly. He turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, you can feel her now, her location?"

"Yes sir."

"Would you be able to go there, take Miss Jones, and bring her back here through the wards?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione considered this. She focused on the wards around Sayre Mansion. She was a part of them. If she commanded it, they would let her through. She tested it with her magic, and a hole appeared. She sealed it quickly before he noticed and nodded. "I'll grab as many prisoners as I can before he notices," Hermione promised. "The wards know me now, and I can bring them through."
For the first time since she was captured, Hermione felt power. Voldemort had made a mistake; instead of binding her to protect him, he had keyed her to his blood and bonds. He had given her tools to help her friends. She could save people.

"Be careful not to draw attention," Dumbledore warned. "If that necklace starts to burn, Tom is doing the enchantment to bring you to him. He will try to keep you by his side, but trust your magic. It is the same as his, and it can break through anything he does. You are strong, Miss Granger, and you can turn this misfortune into a great advantage for the light."

"Are there any other prisoners, specifically, that we need?" Hermione demanded.

"Ollivander," Dumbledore answered easily. "We know he's being held somewhere by Voldemort, and we need to know exactly what he was told."

Hermione listened to the murmurs within her magic. *Find Ollivander . . . sweet, helpful man. Find him.* There. Malfoy Manor, in the cell right next to Draco.

"He's in Malfoy Manor," Hermione told him. "I'll be back, with both of them at least."

Not waiting for them, she let her magic suck her directly to her recent mental connection, Ollivander. Instead of the apparating pop she was so used to, she just seemed to materialize into existence next to the man who'd sold her her wand. She bent over and grabbed his shoulder. He barely moved, too injured and weak to raise his head.

"Granger?"

She turned to see Draco Malfoy, split lip, bruised face, weak and chained, looking at her like some sort of angel. She felt for his magic. She felt the Dark Mark from his arm, making her flinch at the magic she knew belonged to Voldemort, but his magic was enough to tell her she needed to help him.

"Why did they chain you up?" Hermione asked, pulling Ollivander to his feet.

"I can't tell you," Draco replied automatically, but at least he looked bashful. "How are you here?"

"Say hello to V-Voldemort's new plaything," she tried to say off-handedly, but her voice wavered at his name. "But I'm not going to let him use me. Do you want to go to Hogwarts right now?"

"Granger? Are you serious?" Draco asked, his eyes wide. "You're going to rescue me?"

"If you want out of those manacles, I can do it," she told him. "If you want to escape permanently, I have very little time and I need an answer right now."

She sent her magic over to unshackle Malfoy and he slumped to the ground, gratefully rubbing his arms. She tried one of the healing spells from the old magic book, and watched as Ollivander regained some movement and Malfoy stopped shaking. It would have to do.

"This is the chance you get," Hermione told him. "I'm taking Ollivander to Hogwarts. Coming?"

"Circe, yes."

She apparated to his cell and extended her hand while her other arm supported the weary Ollivander. He grabbed it without hesitation.

She dropped them both off in the Hospital Wing, but didn't stay. She apparated to the Sayre
Mansion and immediately freed Megan and another prisoner. She worked steadily to empty the dungeons. Round after round of people were transported to the Hospital Wing. The dungeon was nearly empty when she felt a twang at her magic.

She focused, and found herself looking at a man with black hair and blue eyes cold as winter. Probably late twenties, early thirties. He was calling to her, from the room she'd left this morning. Perhaps he was a guard? She ignored him, bring her focus back to the last few captives.

Her collar began to burn. Quickly, she rushed the last load of prisoners over to the Hospital Wing before she felt a tug at her collar, dragging her back to the room she had left that morning. The black-haired man awaited her.

"Where were you gone to?" he demanded. "Which estate?"

"Who are you?" Hermione replied with the same demanding tone.

He smirked. Hermione felt unsettled by the familiar look on his face as if . . .

"Don't you recognize your new husband, little witch?"
"Voldemort?" Hermione breathed. Her magic reached out instinctively, clenching to him. It acknowledged his magic as identical now, shared and whole together. There was no denying that this was the man that raped her last night but . . . all trace of that man had vanished except for the magic.

"Correct in one, little witch," Voldemort answered with a smirk. "You can imagine how disorienting it was, waking up with the face I hadn’t seen in 30 years."

"How?" Hermione breathed, backing up.

"The miracle a good rutting can provide," Voldemort mocked. Hermione's body went cold. "No, it was the ritual. It healed my body."

"Healed it?" She hissed. She started panicking. "It recreated it."

Voldemort turned, pacing around the room. "It did more than recreate, Miss Granger. My previous . . . deficiencies have apparently been taken care of."

"Deficiencies?"

Voldemort cleared his throat. "Prior to my demise, I had a certain … personal deficiency. A preliminary diagnostic of my body now indicates that that issue is resolved, as well as my asthma, anemia, and childhood scars from various curses. My blood still runs through my veins, but . . . I am perfected. And I have you to thank for that."

"No," Hermione hissed, backing up further. "You took whatever gifts you could from me, I did not give them."

"And I gave gifts in return," Voldemort replied, advancing. "Come now, little witch, I could have bound you to my person, made you incapable of being without me. Instead, I gave you freedom."

Any fear she felt was superseded with anger, and frustration. Now faced with the man who had done this, looking so different, she couldn't feel the fear she knew she was supposed to. She was a bundle of nerves and confusion and anger.

"So, I should be grateful?" Hermione demanded. "Grateful that the ritual you performed during my RAPE was a kinder one than it could have been? I needed healing from what you did to me!"

"Which leads to my previous question; where did you go?" Voldemort approached now. Hermione averted her eyes, trying to avoid showing him. "There are many Death Eaters, many estates bound to families through blood magic. Who healed you? Where did you go?"

"No comment."

Voldemort grabbed her chin and forced it up. She closed her eyes.

"I will force it from your mind," he threatened. "Show me."

"No."

Hermione was prepared. Prepared for torture, prepared for threats. She was prepared to keep her eyes closed for anything. She was not prepared for a kiss.
Her eyes opened in shock when his warm, non-reptilian lips found hers. And then he proceeded with his mental probe. He saw Hogwarts, Dumbledore, and her rescue of the prisoners. Nothing was safe from him. When he finished, he released her mind and her lips simultaneously.

"How dare you?!" Hermione screamed. "How dare you touch me again?!"

"You forced my hand, little witch," Voldemort hissed, now advancing on her. "You presume to hide your guilt from me? You released my prisoners!"

"Of course I did! You were using them against me!"

He rounded on her, wand raised. "Crucio!"

Hermione felt nothing. She looked from his wand down to her body, as if expecting to suddenly be overtaken by pain. Still nothing. She could feel Voldemort's magic still, but nothing had changed in its power. It wasn't aimed at her. It wasn't pushing into her. It wasn't affecting her.

"Crucio!"

Still nothing.

"Wait half an hour and then go again?" Hermione joked weakly.

"This is not amusing!" Voldemort raged. "How are you immune?"

"Is it just me? I mean, I can't even feel your magic twitching in my direction when you try . . ." Hermione frowned at the cruel look that came onto his face.

"I'll be happy to test it," he hinted. "Any suggestions on who? I no longer have any prisoners, thanks to you. Perhaps your parents-"

"No!"

"And what will you give me to save them?" Voldemort asked. "You are bound to the properties, and unable to apparate anywhere else. If I left for your parents' home, you would be unable to stop me, and unable to get there in time to prevent it."

Her back was to the wall. "And what would you want?"

"A wand oath," Voldemort hissed. "You will vow to never again interfere with my prisoners, for so long as your parents are safe."

"I will promise never to free your prisoners," Hermione countered. "But I will not be restricted from helping them survive."

He considered it. She could see his pale eyes flit around, as if weighing his options. Finally, a look of cruelty entered his gaze. "Yes, I'll agree, but with one more provision; as long as your parents are safe, you will vow to not free any prisoners and to spend each night in my bed."

"What?" Hermione demanded, the cold returning. Her mind brought the unwanted fear back to her. "The bond was completed!"

"But power comes through proximity," Voldemort informed her. "Surely you can feel our magics interacting, your powers and mine joining again and again."

She could. Though their magics had merged, there was still an exchange between them, a flow of
energies. Almost like charges running around in circles. Like they, together, were a battery that without the other charge couldn't operate.

"No matter what you do for the day, which estate you visit – probably Hogwarts, now that it is an option – I require your nights by my side," Voldemort demanded. "I could summon you and force you, but I'd prefer to avoid that distasteful option. Hence, wand oath."

Hermione spluttered. "But, but, I don't even have my wand!"

"But I do."

He handed her the vinewood wand, and it slipped coolly between her fingertips. It felt . . . wrong, somehow. Like her new magic was no longer compatible with it.

"Do we have a deal?"

Voldemort extended his normal hand to her, as if nothing was wrong in the motion.

"If I do this," Hermione bargained, "I need a promise that you won't ever use anyone else to regulate my behavior. You can't threaten punishments, you can't use prisoners against me, and you can't treat me as someone you can order around. You will not force me to do anything you haven't already. You've already taken away my ability to fight in the war, but I'll be damned before I'm forced to submit to you."

Voldemort thought on this. She waited for the light to meet his eyes that indicated his agreement. Before that light hit, he had one more stipulation. "You are asking me to never again use prisoners as incentives for you, and for your parents' safety. I am asking for you to not free the prisoners and to remain by my side each night that you can. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Then, I have one request," Voldemort replied, twirling his wand in his hand now. "Since I am being forbidden from punishing you, and I cannot curse you, I require that you behave with dignity and respect for my person around any of my followers, or their children or spouses. Do you agree?"

"That sounds . . . reasonable. I can do that."

Voldemort regarded her evenly, before taking out his wand. "I, Tom Marvolo Riddle, swear that I will never use people to discipline Hermione Granger, and that I will guard her parents so long as she abides by her own wand oath."

Hermione raised hers. "I, Hermione Jean Granger, swear to spend each night that I am capable with Tom Marvolo Riddle, to never again free prisoners from him, and to treat him with respect in front of his followers, their children and their spouses, provided he keep his wand oath."

"Excellent," Voldemort approved. "I will allow you to retain your wand, for now, provided you don't do anything to make me regret the decision. Now, I would like to introduce you to your home, Miss Granger."

"No," Hermione stopped him. "It's not Granger anymore, is it?"

That gave him a moment's pause. Then, a proud little smirk found its way to his visage. "Now, that is interesting," he purred, now coming close once again. "And what made you believe that?"

"You did a pureblood marriage ritual," Hermione noted aloud. "You successfully bound yourself to
"Is a fool to think that the ritual is enough for me to even acknowledge you as a wife," Voldemort hissed. "While in the old days that was all that was required, to me the ritual was simply a means to controlling you and harnessing your magic. My wife you may technically be, but you will not be acknowledged as such by my followers or by me. Do not get any fanciful notions in your head."

"Fanciful?" Hermione repeated forcefully. For some reason his comment left her shaken, and she didn't want to return to the debilitating shocked state she found herself this morning. She forced herself to address him strongly, looking him in his glacial eyes. "You think marrying you is a fanciful notion? I'm just trying to deal with my reality!"

"Then deal with it without deluding yourself," Voldemort ordered. "You are little more than a tool, little witch, and while it may indeed be fanciful to believe that the man who took your virginity did bind themselves to you in that way, it is false. I bound you to me as a servant, a slave, and as such you are still very much little Miss Granger, Gryffindor Golden Girl."

"At least we agree that archaic ritual makes women into slaves," Hermione murmured in retort, earning a frigid chuckle.

"Now, before that little tangent," Voldemort continued, "I was about to invite you on a walk around the grounds. Would you enjoy seeing your new home?"

"I would love a tour of my prison," Hermione tossed back with feigned strength, "but your followers probably won't enjoy seeing me in your personal retinue, and I don't want to see your face right now."

Voldemort smiled maliciously. "Well isn't that just awful for you. Now, how would you feel about using your Animagus form, then?"

Hermione was surprised that the old magic she now possessed still enabled her transformation. It was comforting, she supposed. She was no longer in the form that was raped, or even able to be raped by Voldemort, and so she was happy to trot along-side him throughout the mansion. Nagini, before they had left, had eyed her like a snack though. She seemed to know it was still Hermione beneath the margay form, but it didn't mean she wasn't viewed hungrily. Hermione resolved not to change into her form around the giant snake in the future.

Voldemort was different in his walk around the mansion. She had expected him to glamour himself back to his red-eyed, reptilian form, but he had informed her that many of his followers were from back before his death, and would remember his face.

"In fact," Voldemort informed her as they left the room, "they will view it as confirmation of my power. Not only can I return from the dead, but I can recreate my original body. They will revere me."

She hissed at that. There should be no advantages given to him after what he'd done.

They ran into a few guards that proved his point. One of them had clearly been around before his reign – Selwyn, maybe? – and had immediately greeted his Lord with awe and reverence, complimenting him on his regained form. The other hadn't been, so when Selwyn addressed him as Voldemort, he had looked a little bit like a frog.

Voldemort seemed amused to have Hermione in her Animagus form. She found it especially fun whenever they encountered his followers to run in between their legs, or jump onto something next
to them so she could look them in the eye. He seemed to enjoy her little rebellious moments on the
walk, chuckling at her. She tried to be unnerved by it, but she found his ‘human moments’ – as she
called them – comforting. She supposed she should be fearful, but she was enjoying herself far too
much in her margay form to consider it.

He brought her to the library, a massive room with the same magical carding system as Hogwarts.

"No one comes in here, usually," Voldemort informed her. "If you can get in here without being
seen, I will permit your use of it."

She meowed in approval involuntarily. A disadvantage from her animal form were the mannersims
and instincts that came with them. It was impossible to keep her margay from rubbing once against
Voldemort’s legs, but she pulled herself up short and froze.

"I had heard that mannerisms of animals come more easily in our taken forms," Voldemort noted at
her tentative rub. "I suppose that is your gratitude, little witch?"

She did it again and hated herself for it. Stupid, stupid animal form.

"I accept."

They were continuing around the mansion when Hermione decided to test her legs and see if she
still had her physical strength in this firm. She ran down the corridor fast, darting around the corner
and hoping to turn around and run back when she practically careened into the legs of a random
death eater. She meowed in fear, turning to run away, when the man in question grabbed her.

"There we are, little thing," his hoarse voice crooned. She felt helpless as she was lifted into the
man’s arms. "Who do you belong to, eh? Money's on Corban's wife; she always did love cats.
Pretty little thing, aren't you?"

Hermione hissed as his fingers went to stroke her, taking a swipe at his hand with a claw. He
yowled in pain, giving Hermione the chance to jump down and run to the corner where Voldemort
was approaching before a hex collided with her side, immobilizing her.

"Someone forgot to train you, huh?" he threatened. "I can fix that."

"Thorfinn . . ." Voldemort called ominously, now hovering over Hermione's form. He had put on
his glamoured form, red eyes and all, and Thorfinn immediately was cowed.

"My lord!"

Hermione was released by their mutual magic and turned to see Thorfinn Rowle kneeling
submissively. She remembered him now. He looked older than he should, having been a seventh-
year Slytherin when she was only a first year. She remembered the blonde boy’s attempts at
ridicule, often understated because he would focus on the older people. He had been a lecher of a
prefect, and she had often seen him pressing girls into various walls for a quick grope or into
broom closets if he wanted a little more. She hissed at the vile man before ducking behind
Voldemort's legs.

Voldemort wiggled his finger at Thorfinn. "Now, now, no need to kneel, friend. You are a guest
here."

Thorfinn sighed gratefully, rising to his feet for the Dark Lord he knew. Voldemort's malicious
smile gave him pause, so he worked to correct his mistake. He let the glamour shimmer out,
showing Thorfinn the new form he had.
"What do you think of the improvements I've made, young Thorfinn?" Voldemort asked, motioning to himself. "I thought a change might befit me."

"You look . . . human," Thorfinn breathed, taking in his master. As if realizing his comment may be offensive, he quickly apologized before continuing his line of questioning. "How on earth d'you manage it, my lord?"

"That is story for another time," he replied dismissively. "I'm sure everyone will be overcome with curiosity at our next meeting. For now, would you mind informing me of your intentions for this little margay?"

"Is this one yours, my Lord?" he inquired politely.

"I'm not a cat person," he replied derisively, earning a hiss of disapproval from Hermione. That made him grin down at her. "However, I wouldn't touch her if I were you; she is Nagini's. My familiar seems peculiarly fond of this little menace, almost like a playmate."

Thorfinn looked slightly white at the mention of his Lord's snake, but nodded. "My apologies, then."

"See that you remember who she belongs to," Voldemort told him. "It wouldn't do for me to force you to apologize to Nagini for depriving her of her friend, now would it?"

"No, my Lord," he replied differentially.

Hermione let loose a little cat snicker as she pictured Thorfinn trying to apologize to Nagini. She wouldn't even listen, she'd just enjoy her chance to make him wet himself in fear, if she wasn't permitted to take a leg for consumption. That was a pleasant picture.

"Enjoy your stay here, Thorfinn," Voldemort said pleasantly. "Oh, and before I forget, how is your seduction of young Ephemia Fawley coming?"

"She's not the issue," Thorfinn told him. "If I gave her a ring, she'd agree in a heartbeat. But I tested out her father and asked for permission to draw up the contract, and he seemed to know, my Lord. He seemed convinced of my loyalty to you and I hadn't even let it slip."

Voldemort looked into his eyes carefully, and Hermione could nearly see the magic he was using for Legilimency. When he pulled away, he looked troubled.

"Hmmm," Voldemort considered this. "Is there anyone he would trust within our ranks, I wonder? Perhaps I shall have Gerald Yaxley bring a contract to her father. She can marry with attraction or advantage, but either must put her family squarely in our court."

What?! Hermione hissed at him. Another girl is subjected to your chauvinism? I'm not enough for you to beat down, you have to do it to every single girl in your way? Deceiving someone into sleeping with you is nearly as bad as rape, you vile, disgusting, heartless, old MURDERER!

"If Gerald can take her, you'll hear no complaints from me," Thorfinn informed him lecherously. "Anyone else you need seducing?"

Voldemort laughed heartily. "Unless you can manage to seduce a member of the Order, unlikely as that is, I will have to think on it, Thorfinn. Good day."

"My Lord," he bowed firmly before retreating down the corridor Voldemort just came from.
When they finally returned to the rooms, Hermione glared at the Dark Lord. He didn't acknowledge her. Instead, he worked on unbuttoning his overcoat and robes and banishing them to his wardrobe.

"I am planning a coup, Miss Granger," he finally told her. He was now in a simple white button up and pants, and if Hermione was honest she would have thought he intentionally dressed down so she would be distracted by his handsome physique. "I will not spare your ears my plans to serve your conscience. There are people I need to have on my side, there are people I need killed, and there are people who I have yet to decide where they fit. Get used to it."

She wanted to fight it. But after making their vows that morning, she found that she no longer needed to. They weren't going to work together, so why should they agree? The agreeable feelings she had during the walk vanished and yet, she didn't want to return to human form yet. To do so would give her a voice that she wasn't sure she could use without cursing at the man who treated people like pawns and less like people. She decided to avoid him until it was time to go to bed, so she turned heel in her cat form and sent her little feline body over to what her magic perceived as the most nature-friendly gardens, known only in her mind as 'La roseraie du chateau Entretat'.
Chapter 11

Hermione really should have focused more on where she was, but all she wanted was to ignore the man who'd aggravated her. It didn't hurt that by running around in her margay form she was also drowning out the loud noise from the magical bounds either. She was determined to ignore everything while in the giant garden, and so she did. She climbed trees, she weaved her way through rose bushes, and she sprinted up and down the well-maintained hedges.

She felt free, at least. This was what she deserved, she told herself. She didn't deserve to go back to the infirmary and get hounded by Dumbledore for what she could do next. She didn't deserve to go back to the Sayre Mansion and get hounded by Voldemort for her immature escapism tendencies. She deserved the chance to not be the human rape victim, but the free, wild, and vicious margay. Chasing squirrels or birds to eat, stretching her muscles, ignoring what the last 24 hours had brought in vicious chronology.

In her mindset, the sudden onslaught of magic disoriented her. It was a warning, pulsing through her body. She say a couple with blonde hair approaching, immediately and completely recognizable even in the fading light of dusk. Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy. Hermione wanted to smack her feline head as the magic forced on her the recognition of exactly whose wards she was within. Of course Lucius Malfoy would be better off out of the country; he had only escaped from Azkaban 6 months prior, after all. And of course Narcissa would join him, at least now that Draco was out of Malfoy Manor's dungeons.

"What do we do tonight?" Narcissa asked her husband, her voice thick with tears. Hermione felt her heart ache. "He'll want to see Draco. When we can't produce him . . . You know he will ask where Draco went, and I don't have an answer. I can't even lie, because I just don't know. Where is he, Lucius? Is he safe? Who took him?"

"The Dark Lord knows when we are honest with him," Lucius replied as stoically as he could. "We did not free him, and he will know that. Where he went is no longer our concern, in his eyes."

"But where would he go?"

Hermione wanted to phase back, let Narcissa know where her son was. But if she did, Voldemort would know. Her mind was still an open book to him. So she settled for strolling out of the bushes, aiming to be a companion for her comfort. Both Malfoys froze at her approach, but didn't draw their wands. Hermione was cautious, showing them she meant no harm by pawing at the ground by their feet.

"What is that?" Lucius Malfoy sniffed derisively at her.

Hermione nearly scoffed, but the other Malfoy was looking at her with a mother's softness. She rubbed herself up along Lady Malfoy's legs, showing her the affection she sorely needed.

Lady Malfoy bowed down to stroke her fur – of which Hermione was distinctly proud of – and elicited a purr from Hermione. A comforted sigh came from Narcissa, and Hermione was slightly placated for having caused their plight.

"Cissy, it could have fleas or diseases," Lucius protested.

"Oh hush, Lu," Narcissa ordered, continuing her stroking. "She looks like an expensive, exotic breed, and she's clearly well behaved. Probably has a family somewhere, don't you? And such a
pretty, clean coat you have."

Lucius Malfoy sighed, but when Hermione looked at him he had a small smile on his face. It was clear he adored his wife, and seeing her find something that kept her from fretting over his missing son made him at least a little bit more favourable. She accepted his mild approval, and cautiously moved to rub herself against his legs as well, trying to comfort him as well.

"If you get fur on my robes, feline . . ."

His anger was clearly in good humour, because his wife laughed quietly at his threat. "Oh, Lu."

His sneer turned kind at his wife's tinkling laugh. "Oh, Cissy."

The couple embraced in a quiet, marital moment. Narcissa didn't cry, but Hermione watched the woman as he face wound and contorted all the while her husband patted her back with affection. Hermione had never before seen the man wear. Pureblooded, bigoted, but still very much caring for his wife. Still capable of love. That, in her eyes, made him redeemable.

Her work complete, she decided to leave them alone. She ran away in the garden, climbed the nearest tree, and watched the couple with a strange sort of youthful envy developing in her. She had been on the side of good for so long, and yet . . . the most intimate moments she had were still with her parents. The same parents she could no longer see, no longer be near, and could barely keep protected. Ron and Harry, while her friends, had never shared that sort of intimacy with her. They may hug and talk, but it was never on the level of that beautifully imperfect scene before her.

She lay her head on the tree branch and continued to watch the couple. Even when they left the garden, she remained quietly and pensively in her tree as the dusk turned to twilight, the twilight to dark, and the dark to night.

There was a large thrum of magic going on at Sayre Mansion when she finally acknowledged the need to go back. People were apparating onto the property, or walking through the wards, and she knew it was nearly time for the party Narcissa had mentioned. A New Year's Eve revel. The increasing thrum of magic made it nearly impossible for her to not return to the place, but she was still reluctant to face her captor. Still, as the last trace of light faded from the West, Hermione stretched and apparated back. She focused her mind, finding his magic. It was not in the bedroom, but in that ballroom. She was clear.

Landing in the bedroom, she quickly phased back into her human form to find Nagini perched on the bed, and a dress with a note on top. Carefully, she picked it up.

'I would get dressed quickly, little witch. The party will begin soon, as will your punishment for releasing the prisoners. Should I still expect a midnight kiss when we're done? – Voldemort'

Midnight kiss indeed. As if he would even sully himself in front of his followers. Hermione decided to test her magic, and in seconds she had burnt the note to a crisp in her hand. She forced herself to ignore his threat and slipped into the provided dress. It's like he was laughing at her through the fabric, with the blood red colour and provocative cut. As if he were trying to advertise why she was here or what he did to her. The deep-cut nature of the dress meant there was no cloth near her neck to distract from the collar there, and she looked every bit the slave he wanted. She focused on putting her hair up using a charm that at least kept it into a somewhat neat high bohemian-looking bun. It was the only look she could really pull off, because bohemian to her meant messy. Looking every bit a slave, she went and sat on the bed to stroke Nagini.

"I'm surprised he didn't bring you with him," Hermione murmured to the snake. "I would think he'd
use you to scare the Death Eaters into submission."

Nagini gave Hermione a look that was self-important, basically say 'Yeah, he does, and I will be called before the end of the night.' Hermione just nodded at her.

"I guess he'll show everyone their new plaything tonight," Hermione mourned a little aloud. "He'll strut me in front of his followers, he'll let them know what I did to deserve being there, and I will be hated and cursed – maybe literally – until your master allows me to leave."

Another few Death Eaters entered the estate, and the steady murmur of her magic was become a bit more of a roar. The signatures of their magic weren't new, but the combination of all the bloodlines she was set to protect all being in the same place was giving her a small headache. She tried to focus only on the feeling of scales beneath her fingers, tried so hard to ignore the 50 some-odd people that were now on the estate.

She remained there for an hour, waiting on the bed and distracting herself with Nagini. She seemed content with Hermione's ministrations, so that was a comfort to Hermione. The snake eventually curled around Hermione and bend her down, forcing her lie down as she waited for Voldemort to summon her. Summoned like one of his Death Eaters.

When Voldemort entered her room, she was still face down in the mattress. She had been wallowing in her fate for about an hour, listening to the music coming from the ballroom and hoping to avoid joining them. The errant thought that Hermione was no better than a Death Eater plagued her mind. So when Voldemort came to fetch her, she was close to tears already.

"Get up, it's time for our dramatic entrance," Voldemort ordered.

Hermione stayed pressed against the mattress. "Why Death Eaters?"

That gave him pause. "Pardon?"

Hermione lifted herself up and Nagini unwound herself from her friend's body, letting her rise more completely to face her Master.

"I mean, why did you decide on the name 'Death Eaters'?" Hermione asked. "I'm sure your men didn't want that name."

"It was a label put on us by the then Minister for Magic," Voldemort reminisced slowly, as if unsure of her motives. "Originally, I had no thought for silly names or labels, just the pursuit of power. When they started calling us Death Eaters, it became a running joke. And yet . . . the name changed a few of my men. Some became more ruthless because of the name, some became more careful . . . even as a joke, the name itself held power."

"And we both know how you feel about power," Hermione sneered, trying to be strong. Still, involuntarily, her hand went to cover the organ he had violated. His eyes flashed over her greedily again, bringing back those red eyes she had felt piercing her nightmares.

"Indeed," Voldemort rumbled happily. "Now, come along. We have a ball to attend."

"Don't you mean a punishment?" Hermione bit. "I thought we sorted that out with our vows this morning."

Voldemort quirked a brow. "We resolved a few differences, Miss Granger, but you still released multiple prisoners and took one of my Death Eaters from me."
"Who?" She demanded.

"Young Draco," Voldemort reminded her. "He bore my mark."

She glared. "Clearly unwillingly."

He waved away her complaint. "As such, I will provide my followers with an example of what happens to those who disobey me, so they do not doubt my power to keep what is rightfully mine. You will be punished, and then put on display as the lovely possession you are."

His wandering hands moved to hold Hermione, and she flinched violently when he touched her. Both because of her body's natural response to him, but also because the magic they both shared seemed to flood her body more strongly than ever at the contact.

"Do you feel that?" Voldemort hissed, his eyes intent upon hers. She nodded. "That means you are MINE."

It broke her from the trance of his contact and she wrenched herself back forcibly. Her chin high, she levelled her eyes at the man. "I am a person, not a toy."

He smirked. "So you say."

He grabbed her arm more forcibly this time, and she couldn't wrench herself from his grasp before he pulled her into apparition.
Chapter 12

Voldemort had pulled her into a room just off the ballroom, his face now carefully measured and his new appearance not taking away from the frightening way his gaze landed upon her.

"You vowed you would be respectful in front of my followers, Miss Granger," he warned her. "Now you act upon it. You will not do anything any of my followers tell you, and if they try to punish you, you will call to me, no matter the timing. You will, in that instance, call me MASTER."

"I will never-" I tried to object.

"In public, in front of my followers, you will." The flicker of fire in his eyes told her he was serious.

"I will obey, for now," she seethed.

"You will obey forever," he hissed. "Because you are never getting away from me."

He didn't let Hermione have the last word. Voldemort swished his robes around him to turn and throw open the double doors. Immediately, the music ended and the Death Eaters split to make way for his walk to the stone throne. Hermione bowed her head with all the humility she could muster, and followed directly behind him, matching his steps. Murmurs and eyes followed her movements behind their master.

When Voldemort reached his stone throne, he sat, and regarded Hermione coolly. Unsure what to do, she stood there, at attention, waiting for his verdict.

"My followers," Voldemort announced, "you asked me earlier this evening about our prisoners. You asked me about my new appearance. You asked about the whereabouts of our youngest recruit, young Draco Malfoy. The answer to all those questions stands before you."

Hermione remained still. He wouldn't let any lasting harm come to her, not with the power she provided him. She would have to let him finish, let him finish his course.

"Long ago, our families worshipped magic in a way forgotten and forbidden today," Voldemort continued. "They looked at the greater good, at magic, and decided that they would do everything in their power to prove themselves worthy of it. Old magics abounded, power abounded, and while a few unworthy died, the worthy flourished. Their worship and sacrifice is what made our families pure, and is what made them great."

He rose, coming close to Hermione once again. Their magics flowed in their seamless current through them even as he approached her like an enemy.

"Miss Granger has done exactly as our ancestors did," Voldemort told them, grabbing her shoulders and spinning her to face the room. "She embraced the old magics, the old rituals, and proved herself worthy. However, her loyalties are not with us, are they, Miss Granger?"

She glared at him. "No, master, they are not."

His smile was overbearing and sickly sweet, and she averted her eyes to avoid the clenching in her stomach from guilt.
"Yes, she was a problem," Voldemort told his followers. "She broke in a released all the prisoners we kept here, and then finished the job over at Malfoy Manor. She took them, and the young Mr. Malfoy, directly to Dumbledore himself."

"No!" Narcissa gasped from the sidelines. "My son!"

"He won't hurt him!" Hermione insisted. "He was being abused in that dungeon, I couldn't just leave him!"

"Silence, mudblood!" Bellatrix screeched, raising her wand.

"Bella . . ." Voldemort called, his voice lofty and patronizing. "May I finish?"

The monstrous, depraved creature known as Bellatrix Lestrange pocketed her wand swiftly, nodding at her master. Hermione latched onto the significant part of the exchange which was that Voldemort hadn't told her no. Only that he needed to finish.

"Miss Granger made the right choice – to prove herself above her blood status – but for the wrong reasons," Voldemort announced. "As evidenced from her appalling behaviours, she is a powerful weapon. Power such as hers simply needs to be used by the right master, don't you all agree?"

Voldemort circled her once more. Standing before me, he leaned close and ordered, "Kneel."

She did, with a glare at him. His followers hooted and cheered.

"I bound her to me," Voldemort informed them, "used her magic for myself, and have made her a defense for all of us, loyal servants and dedicated followers. A perfect pet, now and forever to be a powerful keeper for my use.

"However," Voldemort monologued, "as wonderful of a pet as she is now, she did something very naughty. She released prisoners from my keeping without my permission and needs punishment. I shall need your assistance in training her to behave, my followers."

A cheer from a few members of the Death Eaters.

"There are others that need discipline as well, however," Voldemort said. "And what better way to start the year than with a fresh perspective on our failures, hmmm? Malfoy, Selwyn, Pyrites, please join Miss Granger on the floor."

Now that was him using her to demean some of his followers. The men in question did not hesitate, walking forward before bowing to their lord on their knees. Uncomfortable as she was on her knees in front of Voldemort, it was worse with the other three Death Eaters around her. As if they would pick her up and use her as a shield at any moment.

"Lucius Malfoy," Voldemort hissed, "as your son is not here, his failure so far is on your head. I asked for the death of Albus Dumbledore, and he has left me waiting. Moreover, he has failed in an attempted curse on his, making him cautious. You will accept his punishment."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Stefan Selwyn, Damien Pyrites," Voldemort hissed, "it seems as though our informant, Griselda's successor and daughter, Isabella Marchbanks, was tortured to insanity. Up until now, our control of the new Minister was close to absolute. The young Mrs. Marchbanks was leading him along in her position as the new Undersecretary and with her position in the Wizegamot. Feel fortunate we still have the new Junior Minister, but his connections with the pureblood families are negligible at
"My Lord, she was resisting the imperio we placed on her," Selwyn begged with as much dignity as he could. "Her mind was becoming too strong. I thought if I could weaken her enough-

"Silence!" Voldemort ordered. "First, you fail to find me Slughorn, then you fail to eliminate the new head of the auror department, and now . . . tell me, Selwyn, do you enjoy punishment, or do you simply seek it out for attention? Crucio!"

The Death Eaters laughed as Selwyn was hit with his punishment. His screamed seemed to increase and increase, and Hermione felt her magic spike. Selwyn's family manor in East Winging seemed to pull her to action. It pulled her, nearly to jumping in between them. Only the knowledge that he wouldn't die or suffer permanent damage from this kept her magic from behaving erratically. She looked away, willing the tears away from her face. She whimpered, using her nails to dig into her legs and distract her from the feeling.

The screams turned to whimpers, and Hermione looked back. She saw eyes now focused on her, including the pale blue eyes of Voldemort. She tried to straighten up and look unaffected, but it was no use. Everyone could see the tears that dripped from her chin and everyone had seen her looking away.

"You find this a distasteful punishment, my little witch?" Voldemort asked, tauntingly. "Does it disturb you?"

"You made me a protector of them, Master," Hermione bit as much as she could, though the warble in her voice got in the way. "My magic is protesting his treatment."

Voldemort smiled maliciously. "Do you wish to heal him, Miss Granger?"

She bowed her head. He could feel her magic's reply, it's excited move towards Selwyn's, but he would make her say it out loud. "Would you hurt him again if I did?"

"I suppose I need to have my fill first, hmm?" Voldemort replied. Selwyn started screaming again, and Hermione started crushing her thighs between her hands to keep them from directing the magic to the writhing figure. The other Death Eaters weren't batting an eye.

Finally, Selwyn was released in a gasping, seizing heap on the floor. She looked to Voldemort.

"Ask me to heal him, Miss Granger," Voldemort demanded. "Politely."

She bowed her head. "Please may I heal him, Master?"

"Go."

Hermione moved over to the Death Eater's trembling form. She laid her hands over his chest, almost instinctively. Her magic flowed from her, sinking into the spasming nerves of Selwyn's body. After a few moments, the man in question was calm and glaring up at her.

"Hands off, mudblood," Selwyn said sharply.

She stood quickly, but remembering her vow she moved with dignity away from the man. Voldemort stopped her with a stern look, then turned to Selwyn.

"Ah, ah, ah," he admonished, "did I not say she is my pet, Stefan? Did I not call her pure, now, by virtue of the magic she's performed? Her position with me warrants a degree of respect, I would..."
The order was implied. Selwyn went white at the perceived threat, and turned to Hermione. "Thank you for the assistance, Miss Granger."

Hermione went through the pain of magical denial twice more when he tortured Pyrites and Malfoy. The four Malfoy estates made it particularly difficult to avoid healing Lucius. She may have grabbed her head in between her hands and screeched as she was forced by her oath to respect her master, but by the bond to heal Malfoy. Finally, it was over, and only Hermione was left kneeling at his feet.

"Bella," Voldemort called the woman, "I believe you wanted a go with my pet?"

"Oh God, no," Hermione whimpered.

Bellatrix sauntered forward proudly and madly, each movement showing the confidence and poise of her upbringing with the edge of desperation and madness she had brought from Azkaban. Her eyes were bright as she twirled her wand for the spectators, and for her master who had returned to his stone throne to watch.

"No permanent harm, Bella," Voldemort warned her sternly.

"Of course, my Lord," Bella cackled. "We're just going to play, aren't we girly?"

Hermione tried to move, but to do so was to show disrespect and the wand oath burnt her hand at the movement. She hissed in pain before Bellatrix even came upon her.

Bellatrix levelled her wand at her, then, thinking otherwise, she reached out and yanked Hermione's hair out of its containment so she could grab at the rambunctious curls. Hermione yelped in pain as her scalp protested. Her magic wanted to curse her, but the oath recognized the impulse as disrespectful to him. He had decided to punish her, and she was being forced to accept it unwillingly thanks to her stupid oath. It was worse than not being able to heal Malfoy. This was forcing her defenselessness. She hadn't even thought of this as a consequence when she made the vow, but now she was afraid.

Bellatrix laid into her. A few smacks across the face to start, sparking involuntary tears and roars of laughter. A few *crucios*. She went to cut her hair, but Voldemort stopped her. "I want her presentable later, Bella." So instead, she used her wand as a whip and set to her back with a fury. Suddenly Voldemort's dress choice was even more detestable, with the open back letting everyone see the lines she was receiving. After so many painful hits, Hermione felt herself fading. She was shaking badly, her tongue bleeding slightly from her attempts to avoid screaming, and her body was shutting down from shock. Her back had multiple bleeding lines where the magical whip had ripped her open, all of them dripping slow drops onto the floor. She fell forward, avoiding the last stroke, and curled into a ball of defense.

"Thank you, Bella," the sick overlord's voice came. Bella hissed at the interruption, but did stop and stalked back to the crowd.

"I hat-t-te y-y-you."

Hermione let herself sob into the floor.

"Miss Granger, I give you permission to heal yourself now," Voldemort told her from his dais.

Her magic immediately responded to the allowance and wrapped around her comfortingly,
sweeping her shaking and healing the marks on the bare skin of her back. She didn't move, even as her marks healed; she was too scared, too shaken by what had happened. She remained curled up on the ballroom floor.

"I'm pleased with your obedience tonight, pet," Voldemort projected over the expanse of the room. His praise fell on her ears like ice water over her too-hot skin. "You may approach me."

Her magic knew she would be harmed by the oath if she didn't approach him. It pulled her up and hovered her, as she wasn't sure her legs would work. She drifted closer to the man she had been bound to and watched as he upraised her certainly weary and fussed appearance.

He summoned a pillow and placed it by his feet. "Take your seat, little witch. You have earned a reprieve."

Her magic dropped her on her feet at the base of the dais, and she climbed to the step below his and sat on the pillow he provided. Her magic prompted her with little hints to help her: lift up her head, don't make eye contact, sit tall, and maintain dignity. She just wanted to return to her rooms and die a swift death.

"I believe the night's festivities have only just begun!" Voldemort called. "Recommence the dancing!"

Everyone moved to begin a fancy pureblood dance, and Hermione closed her eyes in fatigue and leaned back into the stone arm of Voldemort's throne. She froze in a mixture of shock, revulsion, and pleasure when the man in question began running his fingers through her hair tenderly. It felt wonderful, but his touch should not have. Still, she didn't pull away.

Voldemort was deep in thought as the dance carried on around him. The little witch he'd corrupted with his own magic, with his body, was taking up too many of his thoughts. Normally he would think of the repercussions of Draco Malfoy's apparent betrayal, or of what that meant for the other Malfoys who'd sworn their loyalty. He would have considered what the responses of Selwyn and Pyrites would have been to their torture tonight. Instead, he was rubbing his little witch's head and marveling in her soft and unruly curls.

He was bizarrely protective of her while she'd been under Bella's wand. He had stopped her from removing the witch's hair – which he now counted as a wonderful choice because of his hand's occupation with her bewitching head – and he'd stopped her the moment he'd seen the tears fall down Granger's face. What did he want with the witch? He'd already secured her powers and her protection, and an oath to prevent her from mucking up any more plans he brought to the estates. What more could he wish?

Loyalty.

Yes . . . he wanted her to kneel because she wanted to. He wanted her to become a part of his empire. He wanted to be able to keep her by his feet forever, not as a pet, as a willing woman.

Speaking of woman, he was surprised at the level of hormones his own body was subjecting him to. These were not the feelings he'd remembered from before his death, but he didn't remember everything physical. It was so intense, the feeling of wanting to someone. He'd rejected physical pleasures long ago, favoring the pursuit of power and knowledge over pursuing some skirt.

And Miss Granger . . . She was hardly even of age, but the little Gryffindor looked decidedly
attractive in the blood red dress and HIS collar. A most beautiful pet he was proud to have at his feet. He enjoyed seeing her delicious little body sitting beneath him, receiving his touch willingly.

He would have her, he decided. Miss Granger was going to be a handy piece of power, but he could take his pleasure from her as well. Yes, he would enjoy making her his. Completely. Time to play a game.

"My apologies for Bella's enthusiasm, pet," Voldemort murmured lowly enough that only she could hear.

"You're only sorry because you couldn't do it yourself," Hermione accused shakily, matching his tone. She kept her eyes closed.

His fingers continued in their slowly circles on her head. "I didn't enjoy your torture, little witch. I won't deny hurting Lucius brought me a little pleasure, but nothing is so satisfying as seeing you like this, perched at my feet."

"I hate you."

"I did apologize," Voldemort pointed out. "I regret the necessity behind your treatment, Miss Granger. Perhaps we can work to make this arrangement more pleasant for you, if you'd like."

"No matter what you did, I would still hate you, and so I would hate the situation."

"How lucky it is that we share a bed from now on, then," Voldemort purred seductively. His fingers hadn't stopped their petting. "I'm certain that after some time together your opinion of me will change for the better."

"Why does it matter if it does?" Hermione hissed. "Why should it matter if I hate you? I can't even get away if I wanted to."

Voldemort's head stooped low enough that his breath fanned past her ear, his warmth meeting her own though their skin did not touch. "My recreated body affects more than my appearance, little witch. You awakened long forgotten desires, ones I had forsaken decades ago. Perhaps I've grown fond of you. Perhaps I hope you'll grow fond of me."

"Is there a fidelity charm in the ritual?" Hermione demanded, fighting the blush creeping up her neck to her cheeks.

"Oh yes, on your side Miss Granger," Voldemort reassured her. "I could go take any number of women without consequence, but should you take a lover, he would be effectively neutered. The chauvinistic side of history has you deferring to me for your needs. Do let me know when you have them, my little witch; I'd be more than pleased to oblige you."

Hermione shivered. "Never again. You will never take advantage of me like that again."

"You are correct, little witch," Voldemort murmured, low enough that she would be straining to hear. "Because when I take you next, you'll be willing."
Chapter 13

Hermione woke to a thankfully empty bed, besides Nagini, and rolled over to spread herself out. She could feel the after-effects from the torture the previous night. It seemed to her like each day was going to have a new horror for her. One day rape, the next torture of another, the next her own torture . . . if this kept going, Hermione wouldn't be able to cope. The marginally peaceful feeling she'd had upon waking was gone, replaced with dread. What would she be forced into today?

She stroked Nagini a few time in greeting, only receiving a hiss that if translated probably meant 'I'm still sleeping, save it for later.' Hermione obeyed the snake's wishes and slid from the bed to face the day.

Hermione may have been free, but she was confusedly still a prisoner. She read in the library, she ate what the house-elves brought her, and she didn't dare leave her room. It took her most of the day to realize it was Wednesday Jan 1st, but once it sunk in she got a little bit saddened. Normally, she'd be home with her parents and making New Years resolutions. She'd be studying for the new semester.

She was painfully aware that she had little to no future. She should probably volunteer to die at the hands of the Order so Voldemort was somewhat more vulnerable. Despite the thought, she couldn't bear to do it. She just wanted to live. And live the life she was supposed to have right now. To be a teenager, to have crushes, to care about her grades . . .

Her grades. Hogwarts.

School was meant to start on Monday. Was she allowed to go? Was she supposed to stay? She was forced to spend every night with Voldemort, but she could now apparate within Hogwarts wards. Surely that meant she could go back, right?

Hermione focused her mind to the place she most wanted to be right now, intent on finding something. She scanned the building. There were some students there for Christmas break. All the staff were still on the grounds. She searched, but she couldn't find Dumbledore. His magic was nowhere near Hogwarts. She thought on McGonagall, seeing if she could find the woman instead. Still nothing. Snape? Gone as well.

Hermione sighed as she realized she had more knowledge than she'd like; they were having an Order meeting. She really shouldn't have been taken by surprise with the fact, as she had released both Ollivander and Draco to them. She knew the prisoners she freed would impact the war, but she couldn't help but feel disappointed. She had wanted to apparate to Hogwarts and see someone, anyone, that could talk her through the coming years. Anyone.

Her magic picked up on her request. Instead of Hogwarts, where she had been focusing, she was now thinking on Grimmauld Place. Of course! Bellatrix was a Black, after all. The blood wards there still recognized her, but the Fidelius and anti-apparation charms were there now. If Bellatrix had tried to go back, she wouldn't be allowed. Hermione herself couldn't feel the magical signatures within, they were concealed, but Hermione could still feel the wards around it and acknowledgement of her from the Fidelius. Her magic was telling her she was allowed to apparate inside.

Without a second thought, she apparated.

The housing in question accepted her into the wards quickly, flooding her system with a
pleasurable magic. It acknowledged her, it took in her need, and it plucked her from its magic to dump her directly into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place . . . and right in the middle of an Order meeting.

Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape – all the people she was looking for – were here. However, so were all the aurors they had. Wands were drawn in an instant, and Hermione flinched back, hitting the wall of the small-ish kitchen.

"Don't!" She screamed.

Her desperation pushed her magic outwards and before she could stop it, it had pushed out a solid shield that knocked the nearest Order members off their feet and back a few metres. That meant Tonks and Remus. People were shouting, each trying to figure out what to do.

Hermione breathed to calm herself. She wasn't here to fight them. She wasn't here to spy. She had just wanted to go back to school, to pretend she wasn't spending each night with the monster who had raped her and used her. She wasn't prepared to now be labelled the enemy.

"SILENCE!" McGonagall had finally calmed the raging room to murmurs. She was walking forward toward her now, a sad look on her face. "Miss Granger, please, we're not going to hurt you. Will you lower the barrier?"

Hermione was tempted to stay shielded, stay protected, but the look on McGonagall's face was enough for her to feel a little bit less like a symbolic leper in the temple. She lowered the shields with a nod. This was what she was here for.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She was. She had been desperate to find them, so much so that she had risked Voldemort reading her mind for whatever details were present at the meeting. She had just . . . NEEDED someone. "I shouldn't have come."

"You're right, you shouldn't have," Alastor Moody growled, his wand still trained on her. "Last thing we need is Voldemort's pet here."

"Alastor!" McGonagall snapped.

Hermione looked down at the floor. His words were the exact same as Voldemort's; she was his pet. His little project. His prisoner and unwilling slave. Hermione's tears were fighting for release.

"He's right," she croaked, unable to avoid the sound of tears in her throat. "I'm his pet. I shouldn't be here. I just . . ."

The words refused to come out, but the tears did. She refused to meet anyone's eyes and let the tears stream unbidden down her face.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall sighed, coming forward. She was wrapped in her Head of House and happily threw her arms around the woman. The smell of cat, scotch, and floral comforted her greatly. "You're here now, so you will stay. I'm not letting you go back there yet, and nobody is going to force you away."

"I don't have a choice," Hermione sobbed. "If he calls, I have to go."

"Bit like Snape, eh?" Moody accused. "Another little Death Eater."

"Enough!" Dumbledore called everyone's attention. His face was grave. "Miss Granger, you know better than to do this. Your mind is open to his. Until that changes, you cannot be here."
"I'm sorry," Hermione whimpered.

Dumbledore raised his withered hand to stop her. "However, you are here. Perhaps you'd like to tell us why you sought us out?"

Hermione's tears kept flooding. "I was desperate, sir. I'm sorry. I just wanted to speak to you."

"About what, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes sadder now.

Hermione's tears didn't cease. "Am I allowed back at Hogwarts?"

There was a heavy silence on the room. Tonks looked at Hermione incredulously, but the majority of them looked on her with pity. Dumbledore stroked his beard in consideration, but Snape sneered at her.

"After everything that occurred on New Year's, you decide your schooling is what warrants distress?" Snape demanded. "Did the Dark Lord treat you for your torture? I would accuse you of letting it addle your lauded intelligence."

"You were there?" Hermione whispered, trying to remember. She didn't remember seeing him.

He nodded curtly. "I saw what occurred, yes. Had you been anyone else, the Dark Lord would have killed you. Feel fortunate."

Hermione nodded. He was being strangely kind to her. Confusing her. Stroking her hair possessively, insisting she sleep in his bed, attempting to win her over. Snape was right; anyone else, and she'd be dead. But Voldemort favoured her power, valued her. She refused to think of it, instead looking to Dumbledore, who was deep in thought.

"What brought this concern forward, Miss Granger?" the headmaster asked.

"I was thinking of my future this morning," Hermione admitted, ignoring the others. "I don't really have one any more, do I sir? Even when he dies, I'll be bound to a dead man's home, and those of all his followers, won't I?"

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "There is no way to break through that sort of bond. You may, should you desire, leave the estates, but if you do so for a even a few days they will call you back much like the collar Tom fitted you with. You'll be his until you die, Miss Granger."

"I could still go to Hogwarts," Hermione pleaded. "It's part of the bond. Please, Headmaster Dumbledore. You won't need to house me, I'll be returning to Sayre Mansion every night. I'll stay away from Harry, from Ron, I'll start learning Occlumency . . . Just please let me have a piece of my life back."

She didn't care that they were regarding her in pity. She didn't care that she sounded desperate, because she was. No, she just wanted a fraction of normalcy. She wanted to take classes, overachieve. She wanted it.

"How does Tom feel about this request?" Dumbledore asked gravely.

Hermione shook her head. "He said he didn't care what I do all day, so long as-" Hermione cut herself off. She didn't want to verbalize it.

Still, it seemed as though Dumbledore would not let it be. He motioned her forward with his withered hand, and she stood in front of him in his seat.
"Miss Granger, will you tell me, or are you more comfortable with my seeing it directly?" he inquired politely.

"I don't want to say it," Hermione begged. "Please, HE does it anyways."

Dumbledore nodded gravely, but spared no further moment before plunging into her mind. She watched as he replayed her last two days in detail, as well as the days prior to her magic's reappearance. He lingered on her wand oath, her Animagus transformation, and any information on the Death Eaters. He played the scenes of Voldemort's attentions to her. They made her shudder at both the reminder of his violation and the audience, so he didn't linger as long as some. Finally, with a sigh, he withdrew.

"I can't, in good conscious, deny you your education," Dumbledore told her with grave voice. "But while he already has seen too much in regards to Harry from your mind, you are correct that any further contact with him would be dangerous. In fact, your own safety would be in question around your old house should any of them find out what had happened."

He stroked his beard thoughtfully, searching for a solution.

"Headmaster," Professor Snape murmured, "perhaps my own house . . ?"

Hermione looked to him in shock.

"I could keep them in line for her," Snape offered, "as a service to the Dark Lord. Many of the children would know to treat her with respect without my interference, and the rest fear me enough to know not to test my ire."

"She would still be in classes with Gryffindor, for the most part," Dumbledore frowned, "although perhaps it would be best, so Harry can see her occasionally."

"But students aren't allowed to switch houses," Hermione jumped in. "Are they?"

"I think a one-time exception can be made," Dumbledore said politely. He turned to Snape once again.

Moody interrupted first. "Dumbledore, why are you agreeing to this?" he demanded. "She is a risk. She should not be trained to be a more dangerous weapon in his hands."

"What did you see in her mind, Headmaster?" Kingsley asked.

Dumbledore zeroed back in on Hermione. "Ah, yes, I suppose I must address that. Miss Granger, would you say Tom is working to earn your loyalty?"

"He's demanding it," Hermione admitted. "I wouldn't say he's doing the best job at it."

"Tom has never behaved in this manner," Dumbledore told her, pensively. He regarded Hermione with curious eyes. "From what I saw, Tom is exceptionally eager to possess more than your magic, Miss Granger. He regained his human form?"

Hermione nodded. "I don't know how, but when h-he . . . when h-he bound us . . ."

Professor McGonagall gasped. A few others who weren't around before were confused. They had never thought of him as anything besides the monster Harry described, Hermione realized. She was trying not to remember her proximity to the monster they imagined, the monster Harry had seen.
"Indeed," Dumbledore mused. He nodded to himself. "It is valuable information you have provided, Miss Granger. We did receive word of his regained form from Severus, but to know that it occurred at your binding gives me a great deal of insight into what happened. And, as of right now, you have more consistent contact with Tom than even Severus."

"Dumbledore," Moody growled, wand still extended, "She is a risk."

"Yet, she could be the perfect spy," Dumbledore returned. He looked to Hermione. "Miss Granger, you can, should we need it, be able to tell us the exact location of each Death Eater with the Dark Mark, correct?"

Hermione shook her head.

"It's only if they're on one of the many properties," she tried to explain. "I could explain who was unaccounted for, but not where they were."

"Better than we currently have, Alastor," Dumbledore told him. "However, someone would need to teach her Occlumency. In Slytherin house Severus, you could have time to-"

"She grants You-Know-Who protection!" Moody insisted. "We need her out of the way, not trained more."

Hermione recoiled. She heard McGonagall screech, "Alastor!"

"We do not kill innocents!" Lupin jumped to Hermione's defense, the first thing he'd done all meeting. "And certainly not victims!"

Moody didn't flinch at the reproach, just continued training his wand on Hermione. "This is a war, people. There are casualties."

McGonagall swept Hermione behind her and glared Moody down. Several other Order members jumped into action to train their wands on the Auror. Tonks jumped forward, placing herself in front of Moody herself. There were shouts of outrage, Tonks' words of warning to Moody, etc. But the only silence came from Dumbledore and Snape.

Hermione felt guilty, wanting to live. She never thought that would be a thought she would have. She didn't want to die, but she knew Moody thought she should accept it graciously. Never had she felt more guilty for not being suicidal. In her emotionally vulnerable state, she looked for something to hold onto, to avoid triggering her magic's worst responses. She couldn't look at Moody, or at the people defending her. When she glanced at Dumbledore, he only reminded her of her lack of a future.

Hermione looked at Professor Snape and saw in his eyes a pity she rarely saw. Like he knew exactly what she was going through. It pierced her through and took all her defenses with it. She wilted like a plucked flower. She broke.

She crouched down low and tried to calm her breaths between her legs, but soon the breaths became sobs and her closed eyes became sobs. The room became more quiet as people focused on her, which made her sob more. She didn't want to be weak. She wanted to be strong.

"Alastor," Dumbledore murmured, his voice low but carrying, "could even you strike her down in this state?"

"Stop," Hermione whimpered. "I d-don't d-deserve pity."
Then, something happened which shocked the room. Severus Snape knelt down next to the girl he'd insulted for years, that was bound to his master, that was friends with the boy he hated but swore to protect, and he comforted her.

"You don't deserve pity," he told her in a low voice, so very few of the Order could hear, "you are correct in that. You do, however, deserve respect. Respect for the difficult position you are in, respect for your feelings, and respect for your person. You will earn even more respect as you fight to gain control, every day, of the situation that keeps you prisoner. Know this, Miss Granger: you deserve to live."

She started breathing normally during his speech, and was now able to see as he looked to the Headmaster. "I must take her and teach her Occlumency. Now."

"Go."

"Miss Granger," Snape murmured, "can you apparate us directly to the Dungeons of Hogwarts?"

Hermione nodded, and extended her hand timidly. He accepted it without hesitation and she pulled him along with her through both sets of wards, through the blood enchantments, through space, until she landed them in the Potion's classroom.

Snape took Hermione and set her on top of one of the desks before turning and collecting a few things from around the classroom. When he returned, he had an armful of books and a glass of alcohol.

"I will allow you to take these books once I am sure you'll be able to hide them from the Dark Lord," Snape told her, setting them next to her hip. He offered her the glass, which she looked at incredulously. "It's not firewhiskey, Miss Granger, just a scotch. You look like you could use it."

Hermione accepted the proffered drink and sipped it, watching her Potion's professor carefully. He was observing her. She gulped down the rest of the drink and gave the glass back with a timid 'thank you', to which he nodded.

"How long until you must return to him, Miss Granger?" Snape asked, sitting on the opposing desk.

"I have to return when dark is the only thing in the sky," Hermione murmured. "My magic tells me. He requires I spend each night in his bed."

She saw Snape briefly close his eyes, as if dispelling her words. She blushed.

"You probably didn't need to know that," Hermione murmured, a bit more than embarrassed.

Snaoe shook his head. "I did, Miss Granger. I apologize for my reaction, but I find this situation . . . most distasteful."

"For him?" she asked. "Or for me?"

"Overall," he told her, placing her scotch glass on the desk behind him. "Miss Granger, I must offer my apologies. I did not save you this fate, and neither did I attempt to ease your situation. That ends now."

"Don't apologize, Professor," Hermione whispered. "You did what you could."

"Not enough," Snape told her. "Still, I find our situations disturbingly similar. If you need advice, or a mentor in this situation-"
"A friend?" Hermione flinched at the expression on Snape's visage from the words that came forward involuntarily. He looked at her with a probing glare. "Sorry, sir. I shouldn't have."

"You have friends still, Miss Granger," Snape reminded her. "No matter the situation."

"But I can't see them," Hermione reminded him with a small grimace. "I can't be their friend, even if they are still mine."

Snape nodded, although you could see the tense of his jaw. "Very well. Should you require a friend you may search me out."

Not skipping a beat, he diverted her gratitude to the topic at hand. "Now, what did Mister Potter tell you about Occlumency?"

Together they worked through the theories of Occlumency, how you could just block the entry or focus the mind to show him exactly what was needed. Hermione was going to build a shield against him.

"I seem to recall Potter teaching your ilk to conjure the Patronus charm," Snape said. "did you manage that feat?"

"Yes sir."

"Show me."

She produced her wand and thought to her happy memory. It seemed even happier now, that her life was so bleak, to think of herself with her friends. Friends she would never see unless she could do this for them. To think of them, at her side, defending her from Malfoy. Them, there when she woke up from being petrified and hugging her. Harry, the DA . . . she raised her wand as the hope and nostalgic happiness filled her and incanted, "Expecto Patronum."

She expected to see her otter there, dancing around the room. Instead, the mist took a moment, as if hesitating, and then drew itself together to create a much calmer image than Hermione expected; it was a turtle. It glided through the air as if through water, contemplative and self-assured. Hermione summoned it in front of her and looked at it. Its eyes were filled with a look one could only describe as ultimately reassuring.

"I take it it changed?" Snape asked, breaking Hermione's concentration and banishing the patronus.

"It used to be an otter," Hermione admitted, her thoughts heavy. "Lighthearted, fun . . . it was nice."

"I daresay lighthearted is not the attitude with which you were taken by the Dark Lord," Snape intoned, rising to his feet. "Miss Granger, the patronus takes the form of that which we most need in the face of our Dementors. You were a child when you first cast your patronus, and it adopted a child's point of view to adversity. Unwavering optimism and happiness. You have experienced dark things, acts that you never believed would occur to you, and so that which you used to cope changed. I would be more concerned if it had remained the same; you have started a new life, and therefore, a new perspective is necessary to survive."

"It was reassurance," Hermione told him. "That's the feeling it gave."

"And it should reassure you," Snape agreed. "You will need it in the times to come."

"Now that we have that underway, the easiest way to defend your mind is similar to a patronus. The invading mind is a dementor, in this example, and in the face of it you need to call forward a
memory to protect you. It's a diversion, but you can run the person in circles as much as you wish. For today, when you see the Dark Lord, this is what you must do. Now, prepare your mind for my intrusion."

She went through the first few steps of becoming an occlumens that afternoon. Snape taught her to hide the lessons from Voldemort first, knowing it meant both their hides, and then after she learned to use her mind to divert him. They wouldn't start building her shields until school started, but Hermione was feeling better than she had in days – she had a little bit of privacy again.

So when her hand started to warm, warning her of her oath, she was ready to face Voldemort again. She looked up to Professor Snape with a look he knew.

"You must leave." It wasn't a question.

Hermione nodded. "Can I do this?"

"You’ve taken to it quickly," Snape nodded to himself. "That does not mean you need to test it. Lie to him, keep him from looking. THAT is the best defense."

Hermione nodded. "When can I have another lesson?"

"Come to me when I'm brewing," Snape told her. "I trust you're more than able to find me in the castle?"

"Yes, sir."

Snape nodded. "Then find me when I'm in the adjoining room, whenever you can. I need not tell you I'm risking much to teach you this, Miss Granger. I trust you to fight with everything you have should that knowledge be at risk."

"Yes, sir," she bowed her head. "But can I ask why?"

She could have sworn she saw some degree of softness in his expression. "Miss Granger, no one knows more than I what the Dark Lord is like, and what it feels like to be underneath the heel of his boot. While developing your mental shields is of utmost importance to the Order as a matter of security while you're at Hogwarts, what I believe is more important is teaching you how to cope. I daresay you felt guilty for not letting Moody kill you, am I right?"

Hermione nodded, not trusting her voice. His black eyes were understanding.

"There will be days where death is preferable, Miss Granger," Snape informed her, not hiding the truth for an instant. "There will be times when you enjoy your treatment, and the thought that you are becoming everything you fought against will terrify you. But you have every chance of surviving this war, Miss Granger, and our side has a good chance of winning. Believe this, and perhaps it can . . . reassure."

Hermione dove forward and wrapped her arms around her potion professor. "Thank you."

With a squeeze and a deep breath, Hermione disapparated away to meet her captor.
Severus Snape was shocked by few things. The Dark Lord's interest in Hermione Granger was one. Miss Granger's insistence on him being her friend, another. Her hug, that first day of lessons, another. What didn't shock him was that the second Miss Granger apparated away his door opened and Albus Dumbledore walked forward to greet him.

"Severus," Dumbledore greeted, "how went the lessons?"

"It was as I expected," Snape said in monotone. "She has an organized and disciplined mind, and had already been studying it when Mister Potter was to be trained last year. She should be able to divert the Dark Lord until we can erect a shield."

Dumbledore's expression relaxed slightly. "Good. Very good."

Severus Snape quirked a brow at the Headmaster. "Are you planning on helping the girl yet? Or has Moody convinced you she's too dangerous to keep around?"

"Alastor was sufficiently reprimanded," Dumbledore replied lightly, but the underlying implication was grave. "Minerva was not impressed with him, to say the least."

"Am I to assume you've come with her accolades for my own performance?" Snape sneered.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled happily then. "You certainly shocked them all. Severus, you seemed to genuinely care for the girl."

Snape shrugged, careful not to show anything. "I feel . . . responsible for her well-being. As you are aware."

"I daresay we all feel a certain guilt for her situation," Dumbledore allowed, his own showing. "You, however, are not to blame."

Snape nodded, his face carefully hidden from the Headmaster. He knew perfectly well who was, but to accuse Dumbledore of intentionally leading the girl to her doom was not a conversation he wished to have. Miss Granger may not have been a favourite student previously, but he'd be damned if her treatment at the hands of either of his masters sat well with him.

Miss Granger had been prodded along in her studies of illegal magic by Dumbledore, then scooped up by the Dark Lord to be used and abused, and then, on top of it all, ordered trained by the man who had prodded her into it. Dumbledore would never admit to it being his plan, certainly not since the girl was abused and raped, but Snape knew well enough that he'd planned on the girl trying the ritual. And with both Masters dead set against her rescue, all that was left for him to do was train the girl to cope.

Still, he could not shake the feeling of the girl's trusting embrace from his mind. She'd been so eager to have anyone help her that within a few hours of his instruction, she trusted him nearly completely. How anyone in her position could trust anyone, let alone a man, was beyond him. She was of such singular mind that Snape himself couldn't quite understand how she wasn't an occulmens already; she was already partially occluding. The details of her rape were things he couldn't find in her mind when he'd looked, and it seemed as if the trauma from the situation had relocated those memories behind an accidental occlumency barrier. He would not be telling Dumbledore that.
"You were in her mind today," Dumbledore continued. "Did anything in particular strike you?"

"The Dark Lord is changed," Snape noted aloud.

That much was definitely true. The girl had memories of him both before and after the change. He was different, more emotive. Snape repressed a shudder at the memory the girl had presented in practice, of the Dark Lord's fingers through her hair. He'd watched that interaction himself on New Year's, but to hear the Dark Lord's words in her ears and to know him as he did still made him shudder. It had been a strange interaction, laced with his approval but also a darker desire that Miss Granger hadn't picked up until the end. Something was drawing the Dark Lord into the girl, and he didn't like it.

"I believe so as well," Dumbledore affirmed, his face both grave and focused. "The binding did something to both of them, Severus. Miss Granger seems more . . . darkly inclined than before, and Tom himself is more human. Do you agree?"

"No." Snape made sure his tone brokered no argument. "Miss Granger is, as far as I'm concerned, much the same girl she once was. She has merely been put through an ordeal far beyond her ability to handle. The darkness you see is not something that was not there previously. Remember the end of Dolores?"

"Ah, yes." Dumbledore nodded. "Miss Granger did do quite well in punishing her. And Miss Edgecomb, as I recall. Assuming it is only Tom, then, that is changed, I have a confession to make."

Dumbledore explained to Snape the horcruxes of Tom Riddle. Snape listened carefully, then.

"You put on the Dark Lord's ring knowing fully well it was a horcrux?" Snape demanded. "You knew it was cursed with dark magic, yet you still wore it!"

"Curiosity is an old man's foible, unfortunately," Dumbledore agreed sadly. "Still, perhaps if Miss Granger had been put through the ritual last year, the mistake could have been averted. Tom seems more . . . put together than before."

"You believe the old magic binding was enough to destroy his horcruxes?" Snape posed carefully.

"Not destroy," Dumbledore corrected, "merely fix them. Old magic can do many wondrous things which even I have not known the limit of. Two people with old magic flowing through them, one of them completely whole, the other not, being bound? Perhaps magic saw fit to put them on equal footing."

Dumbledore sighed whimsically. "Very much conjecture, at this point. I'll need to find another horcrux of his to be certain. Keep your eyes open, my boy. Perhaps you can help me find the next."

Snape nodded curtly.

Dumbledore went to leave, but before he opened the door, he turned back to Snape. "Severus, I've known you for quite some time. I am aware you have doubts regarding Miss Granger's foray into old magic."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "And you would tell me that it was not your intent for her? That you didn't intend for her to find that ritual and yet no warning as to its consequences?"

Snape watched as Dumbledore's shoulders sagged slightly under his accusation, and it confirmed for him the Headmaster's involvement. He saw the weariness in his eyes, and the guilt that lit up in
"I had no intention of Tom taking her," Dumbledore promised him in a low voice. "But yes, I did intend for Miss Granger to enact the ritual."

"Knowing she could have died." It wasn't a question.

Dumbledore nodded. "Call it an old man's intuition, but Miss Granger reminded me so much of Tom, so much of myself, that I knew if anyone could do it successfully it would be her. The risk of her failing was minimal."

"And why would this be necessary?" Snape asked.

Dumbledore sighed, and leaned up against the door. "I am dying, Severus. I have been as comfortable with death as Tom, but I have resigned myself to its coming. Without me, Tom would take over the Wizarding World quickly and without hesitation. Surely you see the need for someone to replace me. I needed another with old magic to keep Tom balanced out. I had hoped . . ." he shook his head. "I had no intention of her being used against us. I had hoped to have her be my successor."

"So your meddling, instead of producing her for you, was vague enough and indirect enough to give her to the Dark Lord on a silver platter," Snape accused. "Damn it, Albus, you could have told her! You could have saved her!"

Dumbledore just nodded, the weight on his shoulders now evident. His blue eyes met Snape's with heady regret. "I could have. Instead, I have doomed her."
Chapter 15

Voldemort was not used to being ignorant. The bond with Hermione Granger was something he was now considering himself ignorant about. His own magic had changed the moment the bond had been completed, and he felt singularly dependent on the girl. He felt the moment she left the mansion, and his magic seemed to mourn the loss and colour his castings. His wand was no longer responding well to his promptings, and he no longer had Ollivander to interrogate at his leisure. He would need a new wand, if he couldn't find the issue.

There was more to it than him, however. It seemed like Granger was in pain if she denied the magic. It shouldn't even be possible to deny the magic that forced her to protect, and yet it had happened just the night before. The more he read the more the magic seemed like a possession of will, where the witch might not want to react but was forced to much like an *imperio*.

He had scoured the texts and records from centuries back when he had first looked at performing the ritual himself, revised them when he considered bonding himself, and yet he felt as if it was singular and strange what was occurring.

He took out his wand and examined it. Still the same wand that had reacted so to Potter all those years ago. What had happened to it?

The rarest tomes concerning this magical upheaval would not be easy to find. Yet, it needed to be done. Throwing his cloak around him, Voldemort went to collect a few followers to accompany him. He needed to visit Alexandria.

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Harry had never felt happier in his life, and for the life of his he couldn't tell why. Hermione was missing, for crying out loud! He shouldn't be happy! Two days ago he had had a fainting spell, confusing and worrying everyone in the Burrow. He had seen Hermione's crying face in his vision and then . . . nothing. Not a peep from Voldemort in days. No ominous feelings, no anger at the scary and immortal prick.

He was sitting at the Weasley's kitchen table eating dinner, everyone strangely quiet for the situation. No anger or accusations, just quiet.

Dumbledore decided then to pop into the Burrow, emerging from the fireplace with a look of caution on his face. Everyone simultaneously rose, looking to him for some kind of word on the situation. Mrs. Weasley was the only one who seemed to have her tongue.

"Albus, come in," Mrs Weasley hustled forward to greet the Headmaster. "Cuppa for you?"

"Your hospitality does you credit, Molly," Dumbledore said kindly, his eyes sad. He turned to the Weasley family and Harry and gave them a sad smile. "Please, sit. I did not intend to intrude on your family meal."

"Any news, Albus?" Arthur asked him, voice soft.

Dumbledore's face looked strained to Harry. "Yes, Arthur. Quite a bit. There have been two order meetings over the past two days regarding the situation."

Molly frowned. "We weren't called?"
"Your family has always been close to Miss Granger," Dumbledore placated the man. "We felt it best to wait to tell you until we were sure of the situation."

Dumbledore remained standing at the head of the table, but now everyone had stopped eating and was simply looking at him, waiting for him next words.

"So . . ." Ginny finally braved the silence. "Hermione?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Miss Granger appeared in the hospital wing early yesterday morning," he told them all. "It is as we feared."

His words hit everyone with mixed feeling. The parents looked sick. Ron looked as murderous as Charlie and Bill, while the twins just shared an incomprehensible glance. Ginny was shaking next to Harry and he put his arm around her comfortably, their previous boundaries forgotten in the worry.

"So, she's back?" Harry hoped. "She's still in the Hospital wing?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, Harry, it is not so simple. Tom has, well, Tom technically has possession of Miss Granger. She is bound to him."

"Where is she?" Ginny asked, her voice sad. "Did she go back?"

"Not by choice, dear Ginevra, I assure you," Dumbledore said sadly. "Miss Granger did, however, strike a blow to Tom before he could summon her back to him. She has rescued many prisoners from Tom's forces, including Mr. Ollivander and the niece of our own Hestia Jones."

The twins smiled at that, sad though it was. "That's our spitfire."

"This is awful!" Molly cried out. "What's going to happen to her?"

"Ah," Dumbledore grabbed a rustic chair and sat himself down. "That is something Miss Granger herself has been trying to find out. Tom may have bound her to him, but the ritual he chose to perform was meant more to defend the estates of old magic families. As Tom is a descendant of Salazaar Slytherin, Miss Granger has discovered that she is also bound to Hogwarts."

"Wait, how is she getting away for him?" Harry demanded. "If she can escape, come to Hogwarts, why can't we keep her there?"

"Getting to her and keeping her are very different things, Harry," Dumbledore informed him with infinite patience. "Tom has taken to many old pureblood traditions to restrict Miss Granger. Firstly, the binding. Secondly, he has taken to collaring her with family blood stones."

The Weasleys gasped while Harry just looked confused.

"Harry, blood stones are, we shall say, relics of previous marriages within the family bloodlines," Molly explained. "They are extremely powerful. If they were made by Hermione's family, they would have given her additional power and protection. Since they're from You-Know-Who, it is a direct link in blood from him to her."

"He has the power here, Harry," Dumbledore summarized for him. "He has shown he can summon her from within any wards, and she is unable to remove the stones herself. Between that and the bond, Miss Granger is at the Dark Lord's disposal."

"She's a slave," Harry pronounced, looking for Dumbledore to deny it.
He didn't. His wise eyes weren't twinkling, his face was sad, and all he offered to Harry was a nod.

"Then what are we going to do?" Harry demanded. "We have to break her free!"

"We cannot," Dumbledore intoned gravely. "These bonds are formed through virginal magic, and as it is only accessible at one time, unless we had gotten there the moment of the binding we cannot reverse it. These bonds have been considered dark for at least a century for that reason."

"We have to do something!" Ron exclaimed, banging his fist on the table.

Dumbledore raised his shriveled hand to stop the outcry from the table. "Miss Granger has been given a degree a freedom from Tom, much to his detriment. Because of this, Miss Granger has been taking occlumency lessons from Professor Snape, hopefully enabling her to gain some privacy over her mind with her proximity to Tom. She will progress quickly, Severus assures me, and as such will be able to use her unfortunate circumstance to aid the Order. And as she now has access to Hogwarts wards and can apparate there anytime, she is being allowed to return to school each day for term. This is all we can do for her."

"We can see her?" Harry caught on, his eyes now wide. "She'll be at school?"

Dumbledore shook his head reluctantly at the young man. "Miss Granger will not be able to interact with anyone affiliated with the Order except Severus until her Occlumency is strong enough. She knows the risks, and has agreed to avoid interacting with you all."

"No!"

"We need to see her!"

"But she's our friend!"

"Enough!" Arthur yelled out in Dumbledore's defense. THe quiet man's exclamation had everyone silent. Arthur turned to Dumbledore. "How is this going to work?"

"She will be placed in Severus' house," Dumbledore told them. "You will see her, but know that you will make it harder for her if you interact with her."

"The Snakes will tear her apart!" Ron protested loudly. "She's like dirt to them!"

"Severus has taken her safety upon himself," Dumbledore assured them. "As I understand it from both Severus and Miss Granger, she has a unique and important position with Tom, akin to a pet. Any children from homes with one or more of his followers will know not only to leave her be, but to not allow harm to befall her. Miss Granger will be safe in Slytherin house."

"Poor Hermione," Ginny murmured, her voice shaky. "A pet to him."

"There is some good news," Dumbledore told them. "We believe that the bond with Miss Granger has affected Tom's strength. He may be in a vulnerable, mortal state because of Miss Granger."

Ron and Harry shared a look. They knew what he meant. They might be able to kill him.

"There is another piece of good news, although that may depend on you and your children, Molly, Arthur," Dumbledore looked on them deferentially. "Miss Granger rescued many prisoners from Tom's grasp. This included one extremely scared, heavily abused young man who was unwillingly given the Dark Mark."
"Goodness," Molly shuddered, "I can hardly imagine."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said gravely. "This young man asked Miss Granger to save him from his home, and is now in mortal peril should any of his followers find him. Currently, he is being treated by Madame Pomphrey, but should anything happen at Hogwarts, and for the summer breaks, he is very much on his own . . . and in need of a family."

"Of course he'll be welcome here," Arthur offered generously. It didn't escape his notice that Dumbledore didn't wish to reveal his name, but he knew enough from what he said to trust his word.

"Thank you, Arthur," Dumbledore accepted gratefully. "However, he will also need people to look out for him should overly zealous students take his punishment for defecting into their own hands once term resumes. I'm sure Miss Granger will protect him when she can, but she is at the disposal of Tom. Harry, Ginevra, Ronald?"

They looked at each other and nodded.

"We'll protect him," Harry announced. "Who is he?"

"The young man I refer to is the young Lord Malfoy."
Chapter 16

When she apparated back to Sayre Mansion, Voldemort was by the fire with a large, ancient-looking tome in his lap, studying it carefully. Nagini was curled by the fire but looked to her and hissed a greeting. For a moment, she wondered if it was the only greeting she would receive. A false hope.

"Where did you spend the day, little witch?" Voldemort asked, not looking up from his text.

"I visited the gardens of one of the Malfoy's French estates," she lied convincingly. "I missed running around in my Animagus form."

Voldemort nodded at her in acknowledgement before turning the page of the tome. "Come, select a book and sit by my feet."

Hermione scoffed openly at that, earning her the first look up from the pages. His eyes narrowed at her.

"It was an invitation, not an order," he told her with a peculiar glint. "I could force you, but I wish to spend a pleasurable evening reading this text and not fighting you for control. If you would like to read, you will do so sat by my feet like the good pet you are. If not, the bed is there."

Expecting her obedience at the threat of removing her books, he turned back to his text and allowed her time to seethe at him. Hermione really wanted to give him a hexing, but knowing that her opponent was a vicious and powerful man stayed her wand. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself. She didn't want to go to bed yet, she was sure. Yet, she certainly didn't want to be perched at his feet . . . like last night.

Hermione's breath caught as she tried to remain firm in her resolve. She tried to rationalize the desire she had to be at his feet as a need for her regularly given physical affection – she did, after all, have two male best friends who were constantly hugging her and a father and mother who would kiss her on her forehead goodbye whenever they left for work – and it wasn't something she should feel ashamed for. But feeling like she wanted something like that from the Dark Lord was something she shouldn't be tolerating, even in exchange for books.

As she was conflicted, Nagini had taken it upon herself to slither to the witch she'd started to enjoy and offer encouragement. Nagini lifted herself from the floor to nudge Hermione forward towards her Master, making Hermione stumble before turning to give the snake a warning look. Unfazed, Nagini pushed the young charge again with her head.

Because of her insecurity in the situation, Hermione let the nudges of Nagini make her choice for her. She strode towards the bookshelf and selected a text on craft magic before striding confidently over to the Dark Lord's armchair and plopping herself down on the carpet without ceremony.

"Don't think I'm so easily convinced," Hermione told him with a mild threat in her tone. "I would normally fight you tooth and nail over this. You're lucky Nagini is more persuasive than you."

That earned a warm laugh from the evil overlord that made Hermione want to laugh as well. She fought her reaction to him, favouring looking over the text in her lap over showing emotion. She felt his hand come to her curls and begin stroking her, gently and firmly all at once, never snagging on a curl. The pressure felt wonderful against her scalp.

"I am lucky," Voldemort agreed, his tone warm with regards to his familiar. "Do not forget,
though, she is a cunning little thing. She knows how I enjoy having something to pet while I read, and unfortunately doesn't always feel up to it. She is using you to keep her proximity to the fire."

Hermione glared at the snake comically. "Traitor."

Nagini hissed back at them without malice, and Voldemort laughed at her. Hermione didn't ask what she said, but smiled at the familiar herself.

Voldemort stroked her for a while, and Hermione said nothing of it.

"You do not object to my touch, little witch?" Voldemort asked after a while.

Hermione tried to shrug off the judgement there. "If I'm your slave-wife-thing, I think I should get some benefits."

"Oh?" He didn't stop massaging her scalp.

"Don't worry, I'll keep your hidden talent a secret," Hermione teased half-heartedly. "The only person to put his hands through Hermione Granger's hair without getting stuck. You should get a certificate for the accomplishment."

"Hmph," Voldemort huffed at her tone, but apparently in good humour because he kept his hand moving through her hair. "You may use my services until you find a competent man, then."

At his unexpected joke, Hermione accidentally let out a laugh before slamming her hand over her mouth, horrified. She focused on the text in her lap, ignorant of the victorious smile the regenerated Dark Lord was giving her kneeling form.

Her next few days were fairly consistent. She would wake up with only Nagini for company in her bed and would eat whatever the house-elves put out for her. After prepping herself in the different robes that were in the wardrobe, she would apparate to Hogwarts. If Snape wasn't in his private brewing room, she would wait there for him while practicing her Occlumency or reading books he left out for her in just that situation. With only a few days until term recommenced and Harry and Ron would see her, Hermione gave everything in her to at least learning occlumency. She wouldn't allow herself to compromise Harry and more.

Then, she'd apparate back to Sayre Mansion to find Voldemort in his armchair, pouring over another ancient-looking volume. He wouldn't tell her what he was researching, and she never asked. She simply selected one of the rare volumes from the shelves and sat at his feet without prompting, reading until she would lean back and fall asleep against Voldemort's legs and chair. She assumed he would put her in the bed after that, because that's where she'd wake up the next day.

It was strange, having evenings with the resident evil overlord. She found herself enjoying those evenings with him as much as anything in her life, much to her guilt. He would answer any questions she had about a text with no judgement or doubt in her abilities, simply an enthusiasm for the magic she was learning about. He would stroke her head and make her feel special, and she found she craved the interaction.

She was shamed by her own response. Professor Snape saw this in her mind and took pity on the girl. She had started sobbing when she'd accidentally revealed her shame to him, and he knelt down next to her on the floor of his private brewing room.

"Miss Granger," Snape addressed her, "there is nothing shameful about this. Nothing at all."
"But there is!" Hermione had protested, her voice cracking. "He's evil!"

Snape sighed. "It is not so simple, Miss Granger. Evil he may be, but evil does not mean he is not human. You forget, his followers come to him willingly. He has a great deal of charisma, and an ability to know what it is you want. It may seem to you he is unconsciously eliciting these feelings in you, but I would wager he knows exactly what he's doing. He knows you crave physical attention, he knows you want to be treated like a prized person, he knows you love knowledge. In some ways, he may even want to provide them for you. But don't make the mistake of thinking he is doing this for anyone's benefit but his own."

"I'm betraying Harry!" Hermione sobbed. "Every time I crave his company, I'm betraying my best friend!"

"No," Snape insisted adamantly. "You are surviving, finding the best in your situation. Are you not still determined to spy for the Order?"

"Of course I am!" Hermione shrieked, insulted.

"Then he has done nothing to change your loyalties," Snape pointed out. "Do you still want Potter to kill him?"

Hermione's magic protested the thought of Voldemort's death, but her mind knew it would come and pushed through. "Yes."

Snape nodded, aware of the words she hadn't said. "You do not need to feel guilty for treating the enemy as a human, Miss Granger. I have friends in their ranks as I do not have in the Order, yet I know that they must either be imprisoned or killed by the end. It is not something I relish in, but I am aware of what must be done. Let it be the same for you."

She had flung herself forward then, holding onto Professor Snape and seeking his comfort. He provided it without a second thought. It was the beginning of a tentative friendship between him and the girl, one he strangely hoped would continue.

She continued her lessons. Despite Professor Snape's encouragement that Occlumency should take a while to build up, she found herself angry and disappointed at her slow progress. She couldn't keep anyone out, only deflect them from memories. She was pushing herself to exhaustion by practicing every hour of the day, but nothing Professor Snape said could stop her. It was the only action that kept her guilt at bay.

One day, she felt a shift in the wards while she was waiting for Professor Snape. She reached out, but the of the three people who were entering two had no magic to register. Her heart stopped. Muggles.

She immediately apparated to the gates of Hogwarts, and saw Professor Snape walking towards the castle with two familiar muggles beside him.

"Mum? Dad?" The couple turned around to look at her, and her eyes travelled all over their figures and to their familiar, comforting faces. Her parents.

She fell to the ground and sobbed.

"Hermione!" Her parents cried, dropping their trunks and launching themselves at their lost daughter.

Hermione couldn't find her words. She was suddenly face to face with the people she loved, who
represented her old life, her parents. She hugged them back with everything she had in her.

"Are you alright, baby?" Her father asked her.

She just shook her head with her tears, hugging them desperately.

"We're here, we're here."

Professor Snape watched the interaction between parents and child with an awkward disconnect. When Dumbledore ordered him to move the girls' parents into hiding, he had nearly done it without a thought of the girl and her feelings. Her occlumency still wasn't good enough to force out the Dark Lord if he wanted to find something, and it could mean a round of torture for him to allow her her goodbyes.

Yet, seeing her break down at the sight of her parents made him feel almost parental as well. The round of torture in order to bring her this little bit of her life back seemed more than simply worth it. When he witnessed her breakdown at the sight of her parents, he was reminded that she was just a 17-year-old girl. A teenager whose life had been flipped on its head within the span of a week, and who was in desperate need of someone to comfort her. He had managed well enough to keep her psyche from breaking, but to have her parents here . . . he was painfully aware of all the times he'd wished his own parents would offer a shoulder to him, and knew that the girl would find their presence healing no matter how short a time they were here.

He watched in quiet reflection on the changing dynamic between them as the girl sobbed her apologies to her parents and they, in turn, comforted her in a way no one had taught him to do or receive.

While they shared their pain together, Snape saw the Headmaster come down from the castle. Snape went to intercept him, intent on letting the girl have her moment with her parents before the manipulative Headmaster took them away.

"Don't you dare interfere," Snape said immediately upon being within hearing distance of the Headmaster. "She needs this, and for Circe's sake you owe her this much."

He was about to go after the Headmaster, but the look in the Headmaster's face was enough to halt his approach. He was . . . crying. The last time he had seen tears on the old man's face was the time he'd held the infant body of Harry Potter in his arms. Albus had seen memories of his where women were beaten, where men were tortured, yet the only time the man looked away with disgust was when a child was harmed.

"Forgive an emotional old man, Severus," Albus said with a sad smile. "I had merely forgotten how young Miss Granger was."

Snape agreed with him. He had been angry at the headmaster for days since he'd admitted his part in Miss Granger's fate, but now the anger faded into understanding. There was never a sight more child-like than a child seeking comfort from her parents. Dumbledore was admitting that he'd been wrong, in a language few understood but Severus himself. So, with his heart no longer bearing anger, he stood at Dumbledore's side once again and turned his attention back to the family kneeling on the frozen ground by the gates.

Hermione let her parents comfort her through her tears as if it were all just a nightmare she had woken from. The crying felt like a release of all the darkness hurting her soul. Her collar and magic became the only reminder of that terrible night as the bulk of her pain and shame fell from her eyes with her tears. They didn't judge her, they loved her, and it was what she needed. A piece of her
heart healed.

Finally, with everything out in the open and her knees frozen on the ground, Hermione's tears ended and she pulled away from her parents with a wet smile.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," Hermione admitted to them, her final tears still finding their way down her cheeks. "Why . . . how are you here?"

"Perhaps I can answer that."

Dumbledore approached the family with Professor Snape at his side. Hermione felt awkward under the Headmaster's sad gaze, but she only tightened her grip on her parents' hands and listened to what the Headmaster was to say.

"With your connection to Tom, we felt it best to have your parents moved to a secure location," Dumbledore told her with his grandfatherly smile. "Severus brought them here to give you a chance to say your goodbyes."

Hermione looked at her parents, their eyes sad.

"You guys are giving up your practice?" Hermione asked. "But your life . . ."

Her dad squeezed her hand comfortingly. "We love you, sugar plum. Our life can wait until you're safe."

"Besides, we've been given work to do," her mother told her with a grin. "Apparently, the house we're going to be in is a little run down, and we'll be given a bunch of magical items for safekeeping, and then we'll have anyone who needs a place coming to stay. We're actually going to be running the safehouse."

"While the Dark Lord may have promised you their safety, Miss Granger, he did not promise their comfort and freedom," Snape reminded her. "Eventually, he will exploit that loophole. He may be unable to harm them, but nothing would prevent him from taking them prisoner. Therefore, we felt it necessary to take a few precautions."

Hermione nodded, her expression now somber. "Thank you."

"Let's take this conversation inside," Dumbledore recommended mildly. "We can take an early lunch and have a conversation. I sense some hot apple cider might not be unwelcome either, given the situation, am I correct?"

The Grangers jumped to their frozen feet at the prospect of a warm drink and followed the Headmaster into the castle. Hermione didn't let go of her parents' hands, and they didn't make her.

They went to what Hermione had to guess was a staff room, because it was equipped for a small gathering to eat as opposed to the Great Hall. Elves were called to prepare a luncheon, and Hermione's parents shed their winter wear and went to the fire to warm up. To keep Hermione close they sandwiched her between them and wrapped her in their arms. She didn't mind in the least.

"I don't want to leave you," Hermione murmured, so only her parents could hear.

Their arms tightened, and she could see just how tight their expressions were. "All this magic, the problems it's making for us, even if we don't understand it, we will be here," her father said firmly.
"The biggest thing is that you're alright," her mom sighed, tightening her embrace. "We don't know exactly what's going on, but it's clear you're in danger and we will do what we can to help you."

Hermione's heart stopped at her comment. "You mean you don't . . . no one has told you?"

Her parents grimaced. "We understand that the man who took you, er, did things to you. Things that should be kept between a man and wife."

"I want to kill him," Hermione's father muttered darkly. "Dark Lord or not, he touched my baby girl. I would go after him myself if anyone in your organization thought it wasn't a suicide mission."

"It makes it complicated, doesn't it?" Her mother murmured to her, her voice strangely soft. "It's not a crime that we can punish him for, if he lives outside the laws of this world. And they tell us you can't leave him?"

"This," Hermione touched the collar on her neck, "means he can, er, he can teleport me back to him whenever he wants. If I try to leave, I'll be back there anyways. He's only used it once, but . . . the threat is there. Always."

Both parents' arms encircled her tenderly, comforting her against the tears she felt clawing at her throat. She returned their embrace.

"It is the worst crime to have your free will taken from you," a dark voice came from behind the family. Professor Snape stood there, observing the family. "It gives a perspective to exactly why this war is important to our world, and yours. This is far from the worst crime the Dark Lord has committed, and it will not be the last."

His gaze shifted briefly to hers. "Miss Granger has not only used her situation to save lives in a time when no one would blame her for shutting down, or giving up, but she has been working with me in the hopes of turning the horror she has experienced into a great aid in the war effort. You should be very proud of the daughter you raised."

His words raised her spirits remarkably well. For all the times she had tried to impress Professor Snape in class, all the times she'd vied for his praise, he was now saying he was proud of her. With this, and the rapport he'd engaged her in during the lessons, she thought perhaps there would be a friendship with the dour Potions Master in the near future.

"Thank you," Jean said, her voice watery. "From what I understand, you are in a dangerous position yourself, sir. We're grateful that you've been helping her."

Snape nodded severely at the couple. "Unfortunately, my loyalties need to remain divided. I will, however, do everything in my power to help Miss Granger succeed in her situation. You have my word."

"Severus' word has never been given lightly," Dumbledore interjected then, finally becoming a part of the conversation. "Michael, Jean, everyone on our side feels greatly for your daughter. Whatever can be done to help, will."

"Thank you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore's twinkle returned abruptly. "That is quite enough of this depressing conversation. A lovely repast awaits us, and then we can discuss your accommodations."

They enjoyed a warm meal and several mugs of cider together, not bringing up the conversation
again for quite some time. Dumbledore distracted them with stories of the Order, or Professor Snape really pushed his limit on interaction to discuss occlumency and potions with Hermione whenever they threatened to draw her into discussion. He seemed to understand her need to internalize the problem, no matter how much Hermione was glad to see her parents.

When it came time for Dumbledore to take her parents to the safehouse, the awkwardness of the situation and the unease over the incomplete and dangerous end to their discussion left the two parents unsure of how to talk to her, and Hermione afraid of what would be said.

Finally, after a moment's pause, Jean wrapped her arms around her daughter in a goodbye hug.

"I never thought these things would happen to my wonderful, good little girl," her mother murmured to her, holding her tightly to her chest. "Your father and I are here for you. I'm sure you can ask your Headmaster to send us letters with any questions you have, my sweet girl."

"If that Dark Lord tries anything again, remember the self-defense I taught you," her father encouraged. "Go straight for his nuts. Kick, punch, stab . . . he deserves every bit of pain."

She remembered that she could. She could hurt him, just as he could hurt her. She couldn't kill him, though. The thought came easily, unbidden, and yet at the same time her stomach clenched awfully at the idea. She hated blood, true, but this wasn't about that. She didn't think she could kill. She didn't think she could kill him. And she wasn't even sure why. It wasn't her magic that said it this time, she knew, and the thought made her sick.

"I don't think he'll do it again," Hermione reassured weakly. "He got what he wanted."

Both parents wrapped themselves around their daughter, staving off her tears with their comfort. Severus once again found himself feeling deeply for the girl who had been thrust into this situation.

"Mum? Dad?" Hermione whispered carefully to them, hoping beyond hope they'd know what to say. "Am I an awful person if I don't think I can watch him die?"

There was no need to clarify who their daughter was talking about. Father and mother looked at each other, similar expressions of heartbreak on their faces. They had taught their daughter to be compassionate, to see the good in everyone. They had wanted her to forgive and forget as often as she was wronged. But this . . . They clutched their daughter close, reassuring her where their words couldn't. They vowed to help their little girl.

Despite intending it only for her parents, the other two occupants of the room heard her words and shared a look. They knew of her bond with him, how she couldn't kill him if she tried, but her words were not of one being forced to hold back.

Snape knew well enough that the girl enjoyed the man's company – to her horror and guilt – and with her delicate mental state it may well break her to see the Dark Lord dead or to be forced to defend him. He felt nothing but pity for the girl. He'd felt close to the man at one point, before he'd become unhinged, and at time his own guilt at those feelings overwhelmed him. His feeling of debt to the man who'd put him through his apprenticeship, shared his magic with, talked to like an equal at times . . . he had, at one point, considered the Dark Lord a friend. He knew exactly what the girl was going through. His promise to help her through this rang through his head and lodged itself in his heart.

Dumbledore, however, saw something more. He pitied the girl who was so much like her captor. Of all the people currently under Tom Riddle, she was one of the few who entered it with her eyes wide open and with atrocities performed against her first. Yet . . . Tom had clearly regained the
pieces of his soul he had lost. His humanity restored, perhaps he was more kind to the girl than he'd previously supposed. He pitied her for her large heart, and for her situation. He promised himself that he would show her the memories he had of Riddle's past. If anything would help her guilt, it was knowing of the violence of Tom's quest for immortality.

So, with newfound vows in everyone's hearts, the group separated and Hermione's schedule began again.
"Thank you," Hermione said, once she found her voice again, "for bringing them."

Snape nodded at the girl, adding the rose thorns to another potion. They had taken to his private brewing room immediately following the encounter, and they had kept a strained but contemplative silence. Hermione knew Snape had heard her confession to her parents, and he knew she would prefer those thoughts remain private and unexplored for today.

"If you wish, I can pass on letters to them at their safehouse," he offered. "It may be some time before you can see them again."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione murmured gratefully.

There was more silence as Severus stirred the potion, his eyes low to watch the change of colour with shrewd eyes. At the precisely right moment, he added the Horklump juice and started to stir counter-clockwise.

"You're handling this well, Miss Granger," Snape informed her. "Whatever you must do to cope, know you will find little resistance from me."

Hermione allowed herself a melancholy smirk. "Are you encouraging me to cry, or telling me you'll let me drink my troubles away?"

"I have Ogden's Finest Firewhiskey in my study," Snape allowed. "Or, if you prefer, Minerva always gifts me ridiculous flavours of mead around the holidays. Last year the impertinent witch thought I'd be more inclined to celebrate Christmas if I consumed what equated to a burning version of a ginger snap. I believe I have the previous four years of horrid flavours hidden in my liquor cabinet."

Hermione laughed. "I didn't know you and Professor McGonagall were friends."

"Minerva," Snape emphasized, "is not one you can refuse easily. I will never admit to entertaining a friendship with the witch, but she will never hear otherwise."

They shared another moment of silence. Hermione remembering her head of house while Snape thought on another female Gryffindor who, much like Minerva, had come to have his loyalty. He thought on the fate of the young witch after the year was out. When Albus died and the wizarding world fell to her master, what would the girl do?

"Sir, school begins again tomorrow," Hermione commented. "I don't have any of my books, or even have my uniform."

"I had your parents give them to me prior to their relocation," Snape told her. "Your trunk is yours. Do you believe you can bring it back with you to the Dark Lord's base without him destroying it?"

Hermione thought on this. She hadn't yet asked about returning to Hogwarts, but she had thought Voldemort would deny her request. She shuddered at the thought of him blasting his way through her school books. "I don't know, sir. I'd prefer to not give him the opportunity until I've spoken with him."

Snape nodded his head. "I would do so tonight, Miss Granger. He will learn from one source or another. If you return tomorrow without informing him, I will be doing so myself regardless."
She shuddered at the thought. "Alright, tonight. What will you do with my things?"

Severus focused on his brewing, ignoring his instinct to freeze at the girl's questions. "As you will not be residing here, Miss Granger, you will need only a temporary home wherein you may change and gather books for your classes, perhaps rest and study if you feel so inclined. There is a space, linked with my own chambers, reserved for a number of students who require my personal supervision. The other heads of house use it for troubled students who may not be ready to integrate with their housemates. I have few students who qualify, and none who would prefer my company to behaving themselves in their house. As such, you may use one of the rooms for our purposes, if that is agreeable."

"Really?" Hermione took in her dour Potions Master. "You're letting me into your personal space?"

"I fully expect I will come to regret it," Snape sneered at her reflexively, "and should the Dark Lord ask me I will inform him that it is to ensure the safety of his pet."

"And the real reason?" Hermione didn't flinch at his words, only moved closer to him as if looking for an answer in a rare book.

Snape grimaced at the intense scrutiny and focused his own on his potion. "Have you given a thought as to how you will avoid attention this term? Your usual sanctuary of the library will do little to deter your Gryffindors from ensuring your well-being, or the children of Death Eaters from seeking you out."

Hermione frowned as she thought on it. She hated dreading her friends company, but she knew they would ask her about what had happened and . . . Hermione shouldn't want to avoid them, but she would rather not give excuses for things she did or moments she had. Her guilt over giving Voldemort another weapon against Harry was still overwhelming whenever she thought of the scarred boy. She couldn't use the Room of Requirement, as they knew of it and would know it had been instructed to keep them out, and Moaning Myrtle would tell on her to Harry for a smile. The only place they wouldn't follow would be here, with Snape.

"So . . . you're offering a room with you so I can hide?" Hermione put forth, apprehensive.

"If that is what you need," he affirmed. "You may be a part of the Slytherin house for the term, but you may find better company in my proffered chambers with the sole other occupant."

At her silence, Snape backtracked. "It is not your only option. We can arrange for a private chamber for you if you prefer."

"No, that's fine," Hermione insisted. She looked down awkwardly. "It's very kind of you."

"Kind?" Snape sneered at her. Her eyes widened at the sudden hostility, and Snape sighed as he lost the will to be mean to her. "Don't tell Minerva. I've been trying very hard to convince her of my selfish tendencies."

Hermione grinned.

Snape did the last few stirs into the elixir before taking the strainer and draining the finished Nocturnus Potion into a separate cauldron. He carefully used a copper ladle to decant the liquid into the glass vials he had on hand before corking them and sealing all but three with a wax coating.

"I need to take this to the Hospital Wing," Snape addressed her finally. "You are free to remain here, if you wish."
"No, I'll come." Hermione jumped up from her stool. "I could always apparate you there, sir."

"And risk giving Poppy an early heart attack?" Snape drawled. "No, Miss Granger, we will walk."

Hermione was starting to catch on to her stern professor. He cared, and it was refreshing to be able to see that in his words. He cared for Madame Pomphrey, for her, for McGonagall, even when everyone believed him cold and heartless.

*Like someone else you know*, Hermione noted. No, she wouldn't allow herself to think like that. Snape was one thing, he was genuinely looking after her. Voldemort, however, was not some innocent forced man. He'd given her up to be tortured and he'd raped her himself. She couldn't allow herself to forget it, no matter how human he now looked and acted.

The thought left her melancholy on their walk. Snape didn't try to engage her in conversation, seeming to be focused on his task, and Hermione offered nothing in return. The walk let Hermione fall back into herself, fully aware of her situation.

Snape swept into the Hospital Wing with Hermione on his flank, letting her freeze in the doorway when the occupants of the wing turned to stare at her.

"Oh God," Hermione muttered under her breath. How could she have forgotten the people from just a few days ago, still here being treated? It wasn't everyone, as some would have gone home to their families like Ollivander and Megan. But one set of eyes penetrated her as she froze in the doorway – Draco Malfoy. Grey eyes met chocolate, and Hermione approached cautiously to the young classmate that Snape was now administering his potion to.

"Drink this promptly," Snape told the young heir, pressing the dark potion into his hand.

Draco lifted it to her. "To Granger."

Hermione stayed after he'd downed it, letting Snape take care of delivering the other vials. She looked down on Malfoy in his bed, looking better than he had when she'd brought him here. Some colour had returned, the bags were all but gone from under his eyes, and he actually looked better than dead. In fact, he may look the best he had all term.

"How are you?" Hermione asked weakly, unsure of how to speak to the boy.

Draco smirked at her. "A fair bit better than you, Granger. You look terrible."

The usual anger she felt at him rose up at that. "You can't just be nice, can you?"

He raised his hands in surrender. "It's a joke, Granger, relax! I'm just . . . Look, you saved me back there. I' not going to deny I'm grateful for that. But you don't get to worry about me, Granger."

"Really?" Hermione glared at him. "Who does?"

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. "Not you, Granger. Take care of yourself."

"I do!" Hermoine growled.

"Stop it," Draco chastened roughly. "You're always looking for the worst in what I say, Granger, but this time I don't mean any harm. I don't mean you can't look after yourself, but . . . really, Granger, you look like hell. Hey, I did too after being under You-Know-Who's thumb for a week, I don't blame you."
"What?" Hermione whispered, crossing her arms across her chest.

Malfoy looked at his childhood rival with concern and pity. "Granger, you told me he got to you. You're still a prisoner, aren't you?"

Hermione closed her eyes and took a breath, trying to hide her vulnerability from her childhood enemy.

"I'm not trying to hurt you," Malfoy whispered to her. He'd never seen a girl so obviously upset but not crying. Even his mother had her moments, but Granger was forcing herself to be strong in front of him, and for some reason he hated it.

"Granger, you're the one everyone here has been talking and worrying about. Jones told everyone about how she was tortured, so we know that You-Know-Who has some sort of hold on you." He shuddered visibly. "Trust me, I know what that's like. Are you alright?"

Hermione had to grin a little. "You, Malfoy, are offering me a shoulder to cry on? It's official, I didn't pull Malfoy from the dungeon, it was a weird non-evil twin brother. No wonder they locked you up."

Malfoy scoffed. "Believe what you want, Granger. If you're going to be rude, go pester my godfather."

"Interrupting your beauty rest?" she sniped, unable to help herself. "Wait, godfather?"

"Severus," Malfoy informed her with a signature smirk. "Come on, you knew that."

"I did not!" Hermione shrieked happily, laughing at the new information. "Goodness, that explains so much! No wonder he favoured you."

He gave her a pointed look. "I'm not the only one he favours now, I think. Just how did you manage to become friends with Uncle Severus, Granger?"

Hermione shrank under his teasing scrutiny. "I don't know if we're friends, really. He's just been, er, helping me through this. It's been a hard couple of weeks."

"I believe that," Malfoy affirmed, his face turning dark. "For what it's worth Granger, it should never have been you. You deserve better than that."

The earnest expression on his face had her leaning in closer to the young Malfoy who, before, had made her life a living hell. He didn't look on her with pity . . . no, this was different. It was an understanding. He had been through hell the last six months after Voldemort's return, and she could see how it had changed him.

"How much did they tell you?"

Malfoy leaned back into his pillow. The movement made him wince, but he fixed a look of determined apathy on his features at the pain and chose not to let it pause their rapport. "Not much, Granger, not much. My parents clearly had no idea before my rescue, so my godfather's the only one I've trusted to tell me anything. All he said was 'Miss Granger let her idle curiosity get the better of her and was unlucky enough to end up as the Dark Lord's pet.' What does he mean by that, Granger? And how were you able to apparate within my family's wards?"

Draco watched as the strong Gryffindor he knew shrank into herself at his questions. She went to hug herself, hold herself in agony, and he reacted on impulse. He reached out with his seeker
reflexes and snatched Granger's hand before she could roll herself into a depressed ball. Her hand was cold in his, a stark contrast from the fiery witch he knew. Her chocolate eyes met his, as if asking why?

"Don't do that," was his only response. At her look of confusion, he elaborated. "Don't look so pathetic, Granger.

"Why?" Hermione asked him, her eyes wide and vulnerable. "Why can't I?"

"It's not you, Granger," Malfoy simply said. "You became the Dark Lord's pet and immediately turned around and bit him by freeing his prisoners. You are a fierce Gryffindor lioness, and to see you like that is just . . . disconcerting."

Draco Malfoy was encouraging her. This couldn't possibly last long.

"What would you do if I started crying?" She teased, trying to lighten the mood again.

Malfoy smirked at her. "Probably call for my godfather, who would then smack me upside the head for not knowing how to deal with you."

Hermione laughed. "He wouldn't be much better. He'd shove a calming draught at me and glare until I drank it. Probably act the same way he did when I recited the textbook."

"I was always jealous of how you did that," Malfoy frowned at her, clearly reliving the past. "How in the name of Merlin did memorize every textbook?"

"I didn't memorize," Hermione protested, "I just read and reread until I could recall all the major points. Don't tell me you weren't similar, you're second in the year."

Draco held his nose up snootily, faking an aristocratic sniff. "I'll have you know that some of us like to have social lives during school."

Hermione laughed openly at the rogue Slytherin, earning smiles and sparkling eyes from the offending youth. He looked quite handsome when he did that, or more when he wasn't being a prat.

"How touching," a familiar drawl broke the moment.

Hermione leaned away from Draco as if shocked. Both children avoided the piercing black eyes of Severus Snape as he looked down on them. Hermione hoped her cheeks weren't pink.

"Putting aside your differences?" Snape inquired, his brow quirked.

"Yes, sir."

He nodded at them. "Good. You will have ample opportunity to interact this term, and I would not wish to regularly place you both in full body binds. I informed you both there would be only two occupants to my delinquent chambers this term, correct?"

Hermione and Draco looked at each other simultaneously, eyes widening.

"We're living together?" they yelped.

Snape smirked at them. "Consider it training for any promotions to Head Boy and Girl. I would consider giving a glowing recommendation for the both of you if you manage to survive the term marginally intact."
Malfoy snickered at his godfather's comment. Hermione snorted. Both of them looked at each other, shocked that they found his comment funny. This would take some getting used to.

Snape stood next to Draco's bed with authority in his stance, but humour in his face as he looked at them. Hermione got the feeling he was going to enjoy pitting them against each other this coming term. "Is that agreement?"

"Yes, sir."

Snape nodded. "Now, Draco, there is another matter that we need to discuss before we let you rest. Miss Granger has certain . . . capabilities that the Dark Lord uses her for. One of these may help with the issue we discussed previously."

"Sir?" Draco asked, suddenly wary. "Is it safe to ask her?"

Snape rolled his eyes at his student and turned to address Hermione directly. "Miss Granger, Mister Malfoy would not tell this to you, but he is concerned for the well-being of his parents. Will you confirm their safety for him?"

She looked at the strained look on Draco's face. It was clear he cared for his parents very much, so much so that his expression was close to breaking as his eyes flitted over her face uncertainly. Her own parents' faces were stuck in her mind from just the hour prior, and she found her heart going out to him.

"I'll see, Professor," Hermione agreed. "Give me a moment."

She closed her eyes and felt out for the signature of the Malfoy matriarch and patriarch she had met the previous day. She got briefly distracted when Malfoy asked Snape what she was doing, but refocused her attention to the wards she was linked to. Like zeroing in a fly in a large room, she found their signatures at Malfoy Manor. They weren't in the dungeons . . . they were separate, one in the chambers or some room on the third floor, the other pacing on the first floor. They both seemed OK, with a strong enough magical signature for them to feel healthy to her. Voldemort wasn't in the building, and the only others signatures she found we of the house-elves, which felt as linked to her as the masters of the house.

Interesting, Hermione thought, I wonder what that means?

She opened her eyes and turned her gaze to Draco.

"They are healthy and alone at Malfoy Manor," she reassured him. When his eyes went wide, she took it as a response enough. "Do you want me to check in on them regularly? Make sure they're safe?"

Her heart went out to Malfoy as he frantically nodded.

"How do you do that?" Draco demanded.

She grimaced.

Severus interjected. "You did not think the Dark Lord would keep around an insufferable know-it-all around for her company, did you? I thought you were more intelligent, Draco."

"What?" Draco looked between his godfather and Granger. "Did he do this, or could you do this before?"
"He did," Hermione grimaced at the memory. "Or I made it so he could use me like this. Please, let's not talk about it. Your parents are safe, that's all that matters."

It didn't look like Malfoy wanted to let it go, so Hermione raised her hand to silence him. She decided to get out of there. She stood and pulled her robes to make them more presentable.

"Well, I'll be going, Malfoy," she told him anxiously. "See you in class."

"I'll be another moment, Miss Granger," Snape told her before she could leave. "If you can help it, do not leave until I have a chance to speak with you."

She nodded curtly and promptly rushed from the Hospital Wing.
Chapter 18

Voldemort was close to certain that none of the texts in the Malfoy Library, Dark Arts Library of Alexandria, or the various other estate libraries held a solution for the strange feelings the bond was eliciting in him. There were many more texts he needed to search, but the ones with the most comprehensive information on pureblood bonding rituals were useless in this regard. He hadn't had hair in twenty years, but he'd taken to running his fingers through it whenever frustrated, just as he had in his youth.

Worse, he had plans he needed to implement during the day and so the only times he had to research the bond was when his bondmate returned for the evening. After the first time he'd had her kneel at his feet, he'd found it his preferred position for her. He liked her head proud at the level of his knee, his hand in her entrancing, unruly, glossy curls. He hadn't researched nearly as much as he wanted the past few evenings, both because of her welcomed distraction and his unwillingness to stop petting her once he began. He would finish looking through tome after tome, but upon finding nothing could not bring himself to fetch more texts and leave the curly-haired witch for a moment. It bothered him how he was becoming quickly addicted to her presence in the evenings.

Worse, since her spike in magic, she had become more and more entrancing to observe. He could feel her magic dance with his and it gave him no small degree of pleasure. He wished to never be without that feeling, but he left it every morning before she could awaken. He wished upon his head that she wasn't physically attractive, and yet he found when her lithe body was pressed to his when he carried her to their bed that it garnered an extremely effective physical response. She needn't even be touching him, only stroking Nagini, and his mind would go blank in observing the dainty way she skimmed the serpent with her fingers. Surely, he thought, she must know the effect such a suggestive act had, but her innocence was apparent to even him. The witch was driving him mad.

Needless to say, he welcomed distraction these days.

So when Dumbledore requested a meeting with him, he was uncharacteristically glad as it offered him a respite from his dangerous chain of thoughts concerning the witch. Dumbledore had sent some requests previously, every time stoically ignored. He was not eager to be in the presence of the man, or to walk into any traps. This time he replied with a location, a strict warning to arrive alone, and a threat on his person; it was a very kind response by normal standards.

He sat in the open in a wizarding bistro in southern Italy, enjoying the sunlight not found in Britain. It was as safe a place as any. Few people here wanted to be involved in his reign of Britain, and those who did would not recognize his early-thirties looks. The Italian Ministry was more open to him, having a less extremist approach to old or dark magics, and it made this meeting place perfect. So he sat, sipping some elf wine and waiting for the old man.

He did not wait long.

Dumbledore, in all his brightly-coloured eccentric attire, strolled up to the bistro and sat down as if the meeting was a chat with an old friend. He had a twinkling look in his eye, and a happy gait. Where people hadn't recognized Tom, many wizards and witches stared openly at the well-known defeater of Grindelwald as he ordered a sugary Italian soda. They took in his companion as a side-note, wondering who was worthy of sitting in his vaulted company. If they knew . . .

"Tom," Dumbledore greeted cheerfully, "good to meet you on ore cordial terms."
"Enjoy it while it lasts," Voldemort bit, his hackles rising at the use of his father's name. "You happened to catch me in a giving mood with your last missive. What do you want, old man?"

"Straight to the point, I see?" He twinkled infuriatingly at the Dark Lord. "I don't suppose you want to catch up with your old Professor?"

Voldemort scoffed, but didn't dignify it with a response.

"I see." Dumbledore straightened in his seat. "I suppose it is too much to ask that we negotiate peace before the war escalates?"

Voldemort sneered. "Negotiations? You'd kill me now if you could. I believe negotiations are supposed to be based on some shared goals or trust? We could not be more opposite, old man."

"Yet we are some of the few so similar as well," Dumbledore intoned wearily. "It could save so many people to end this conflict now, Tom. We must all compromise at some point for the lives of those we care for."

"And you would support the reinstitution of old magics, the ancient ways?" Voldemort snapped. "You've opposed the ancient ways from day one, regardless of your own hypocritical dabbles in the subject. Any negotiations with you would kill them dead."

"The ancient magic is based on dark arts, Tom," Dumbledore insisted. "You may believe it a reasonable sacrifice for every third person to die performing the ritual, but there is a sanctity in life, and value in those you do not necessarily deem strong. We do not need the ancient ways anymore. Society has moved on."

"And my followers?" Voldemort ground out. "Are they not a part of your society? We are not here for our own enjoyment, Dumbledore, despite what you may believe. The ancient ways keep our magic strong and give us power. My followers fear for their bloodlines and want the power they used to wield. Not everyone agrees with you, fool."

"However," Voldemort continued angrily, "more than that, without the ancient ways, you expect us to live in fear of muggles. To hide ourselves and our gifts. To become increasingly less powerful by the generations until we ARE muggles. We refuse!"

"Tom," Dumbledore implored, "it has been centuries since families have adopted the old magics. They still live, magic still lives, it is not a threat."

"There are more squib births than ever before," Voldemort reminded him. "You think you're the only one who believes they know why? It isn't from intermarrying, it's from the lack of renewal to our magics. We're going to die out until only the muggleborns have the precious gift of magic. All because you don't view magic as important enough to risk a few lives!"

"Reconsider, Tom;" Dumbledore requested, "you needn't do this. The ancient ways will die with us, let's leave it that way."

"Interesting," Voldemort purred viciously, "because they will not end with us at all. In fact, one of your own students felt it worth the risk to her own life. What does that say about your beliefs, old man?"

"Ah," Dumbledore nodded. "The second issue I wished to address with you, then. I'm concerned for Miss Granger."

Even this meeting was cursed to bring back the ridiculous new feelings he'd acquired from the girl.
The never-before felt clenching in his stomach, his desire to impress her . . . He frowned at the mention of her before masking it with indifference.

"Oh?" Voldemort quirked his brow, hiding his interest. "I do believe the little witch is no longer your concern."

Dumbledore ignored his objection. "Miss Granger has come to Hogwarts many times over the past few days, as you're undoubtedly aware."

"I assumed as much," Voldemort allowed, his eyes narrowing. "And?"

Dumbledore leaned towards the Dark Lord with concern evident in his features. "I want to ensure her care and safety, Tom. You may mistreat your own followers, your prisoners even, but do not do it to her. I cannot condone that against a student."

"Student?" Voldemort grinned. "Now, this is interesting. I wasn't aware she was set to return to Hogwarts. Do you really think she's at the same level as even the seventh-years, Dumbledore? Her magic is powerful, moreso than I expected, and even I have heard of my pet's grades and academic standing. What good would it be for me to allow her to return?"

"I wasn't aware you required her to seek permission, Tom," Dumbledore replied politely. "If you wish to keep her away, I suppose you could, but she would stagnate without knowledge. Miss Granger thrives on learning just as you or I. Were you intending to teach her about her magical capabilities at your residence, then?"

"It's none of your concern," he said flatly, hiding his anger. "She will certainly not be learning from you."

Dumbledore regarded Voldemort over his half-rim glasses, as if trying to look straight through him. He just glared in return, avoiding the primary thought in his head at his old Professor's piercing gaze - Dumbledore is not allowed MY witch.

Dumbledore nodded a fraction before catching himself, alerting Voldemort to something else going through the Headmaster's mind. He focused on the interaction, intent on figuring it out.

"Tom," the Headmaster said wearily, "surely you know you need to care for her? If not for your conscience, then for the defense she provides."

He was silently seething. Only Dumbledore could make him so angry through his blasted interference. He refused to allow another person to have control over his life, no matter how powerful. He wished his eyes were daggers so they would stab him with his intensity.

"Nothing to say with regards to your wife?"

That did it. "She is NOT my wife. She is useful, nothing more."

"Now, it does no good to lie, Tom," Dumbledore asserted calmly. "The Ministry of Magic is quite adept and detecting binding magic, despite their lack of use for the past few hundred years. You've married her, whether or not you intend to honour that sort of commitment or not. In the Ministry files, and her school files, she is now registered as Mrs. Hermione Jean Riddle."

His wine glass shattered in his hand, spilling the expensive drink all over the stone terrace. Dumbledore was staring at him with unfazed, victorious eyes that made Voldemort feel like killing. The waiter came by and magically cleaned up the spill before leaving the two wizards to once again speak to each other.
"I did not come today to speak of HER," Voldemort hissed, "and I am not here to negotiate. If there's nothing else, Dumbledore, I will leave."

"Why are you threatened by the girl?" Dumbledore asked probingly.

"It is NOT your concern!" Voldemort roared. "She is MINE! Your interfering will change nothing!"

Voldemort stood and fastened his cloak, intent on leaving. Dumbledore lifted a cursed hand to stop him.

"Tom," Dumbledore implored the younger man, "one more thing, before you storm off?"

"Speak."

Dumbledore looked at him over his half-moon glasses. "The fates are often the cruelest taskmasters and our most generous mentors, giving the gifts we never thought we'd need but that are to be the most precious. Tom, gifts given by them may one day be taken away, so we must enjoy them while they are within reach."

"More riddles, old man?" Voldemort shot, moving away. "As always, they're uninformative and unappreciated. Goodbye."

Dumbledore watched as Tom dissaparated from view, an old, weary smile gracing his lips. "Goodbye, my boy. Perhaps this time you'll out."

Upon returning to Hogwarts there were various thoughts on his mind. It was clear to him from their brief meeting that Tom was more disturbed by his proximity to Miss Granger than he'd previously supposed. There might have even been a touch of affection for the girl in Tom, which was certainly unexpected. He'd been determined that Tom's birth under Merope Gaunt's love potion was enough to make him incapable of any type of affection. Something had changed in Tom, he was certain.

He remembered what he'd seen in Miss Granger's mind, what Tom said about regaining his form. 'My previous deficiencies have apparently been taken care of. I am perfected. And I have you to thank for that.'

Could it be that all of Tom's deficiencies had been rectified? Even those resulting from the love potion? Old magic was powerful, to be sure, and not at all researched, but it was already a stretch to say it had healed him of his Horcruxes. Could it really heal his birth defect?

He hoped Miss Granger was coming along with her Occlumency. He needed to show her everything he knew about Tom Riddle, and the sooner the better.
Hermione was caught by Dumbledore before she made it to the dungeons. There was a solemn look that halted her in her steps.

"Hello Headmaster," Hermione greeted haltingly. "How are you?"

"I find myself taken by thoughts I haven't considered in more than thirty years, actually," the Headmaster said reflectively. "It's strange how pictures painted by many years can be addled by a moment in time."

"Sir?"

He looked at Hermione with a focused eye now, brought to the present once again. "Forgive me, dear. Old age brings a tendency to look back a little too often, I find. Did you enjoy your parents' visit?"

"Thank you for letting them come sir," Hermione said. "I needed it."

The Headmaster nodded. "I'm glad you feel that way. Will you walk with me, dear? I think we have a few things to discuss."

Hermione stepped next to the Headmaster and followed him to his office. They walked the empty corridors with a slow gait. "Your parents were situated safely, you'll be glad to know."

Hermione nodded, not speaking in case it disrupted the old Headmaster from his clearly rehearsed thoughts.

"Have you noticed any changes in Tom recently?" he asked her then, his eyes once again on her. "From before your binding to now?"

"I didn't spend time with him before my change, sir," Hermione told him. "I really wouldn't know if he had changed."

The Headmaster nodded. "I had thought not. I need you informed of things like this, Miss Granger, and I think it would be best if I were to share what I know of Tom. Do you know anything of his childhood?"

"Nothing, sir, beside he attended Hogwarts."

The reached the griffin statue then, and the Headmaster said a low 'Licorice Snaps' and it opened to the both of them. They both refrained from continuing until they were seated in his office. Dumbledore drew his chair forward so he could perch his elbows on his desk and sat, his gaze on her.

"I have a story for you, Miss Granger," Dumbledore began calmly, "and it's one I think will help you to understand the man you've been bonded to. I will allow you to ask questions, but please allow me to answer whatever I can before you ask."

Hermione nodded.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "We will do this chronologically. His story actually begins with his family, the Gaunts. They are members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but who, over the centuries,
became the lowest of all of them. Years of gambling, bad luck, poor alliances, and inbreeding left them with only one final heir to their line, Merope Gaunt. Tom's mother."

He drew a picture from a drawer on his desk and presented it to Hermione. "I remember teaching her, you know. She wasn't exceptionally talented, but she wasn't lacking. Her only strength, in the eyes of the faculty, was potions. Love potions."

Hermione's eyes went wide as she looked at the picture of Voldemort's mother. She had his black hair, and the lightest green eyes. She looked ill, with drawn in cheeks and all too skinny limbs.

"It was after her final year at Hogwarts that Ms. Gaunt returned to her family manor. She wasn't employed at this point, and her father and mother were determined to see her married off for the benefit of the family. She fell in love with a muggle, named Tom Riddle.

"He rejected her," Dumbledore stated, "and she decided to she wanted him anyways. She dosed him with Amortentia and kept him on it for over a year. Sometime during that time, she became pregnant with his son."

"Under the influence of love potion?!" Hermione yelped. "That's so dangerous! So few children even survive!"

"That is true when the mother is the one dosed," Dumbledore informed her. "So few instances are recorded where the father is dosed that all we know is it causes the child be born with an addiction to love potion and an inability to feel."

Hermione stared at Merope Gaunt again, trying to see in her eyes what Dumbledore was telling her. Were those eyes the eyes of a woman who would do this?

"So Voldemort . . .?"

"When I first uncovered this part of his history, I thought it was an explanation for his lack of remorse," Dumbledore admitted. "He had never shown any ability to be anything more than sadistic and cruel, persuasive, but with no happiness.

"Back to our story," Dumbledore continued, his face pensive and remembering. "Ms. Gaunt stopped dosing the father with love potion, probably thinking he would do the honourable thing and marry the witch he’d impregnated. He did not. She died giving birth some months later at age nineteen to Tom Riddle Jr, who you now know as Lord Voldemort."

He produced another picture for her, this one of the boy known as Tom Riddle Jr. His eyes were vacant and blue, his face in a constant look of hatred.

"This is him as I met him, many years later," Dumbledore told her. "I took the photo for his school records. I have something to show you."

He pulled out a pensieve and slid it across to me, letting it hover in the space between. "Join me?"

The memory was terrifying. Not because of the young Tom Riddle, who even at his young age was good at threats and ambiguity, but because of the conditions of the orphanage she was shown. Dumbledore walked through it without a care for the children around him working their hands to the bone. The place was small, with only two large rooms for any orphans. It wasn't an orphanage, Hermione realized, it was a farm. A farm using orphan labour. Tom Riddle was pulled from working in the fields around the small farmhouse and brought back inside to meet the Headmaster with bloody and dirty hands from the labor. If he was born in 1926, Tom Riddle Jr. would have been in the orphanage during the Great Depression and gone back every summer during World
War II, when the bombs were coming down. Hermione's eyes filled with tears involuntarily.

When she was thrust from the memory, Hermione's eyes were blurred and stinging. She looked to Dumbledore. "How could you leave him there?"

"Many students lived in similar conditions during that time," Dumbledore tried to soothe her. "We did a service to the muggle parents by taking them in and feeding them for the bulk of the year."

"But you left him!" Hermione accused, no longer finding the situation sad but aggravating. "I've read about the history here, and at this point the muggle and magical world in Britain were still thoroughly segregated. There was barely a recession here, let alone the Great Depression! Grindelwald barely made a dent! You could have still helped them, helped him. How could you just . . . abandon a child?"

Dumbledore looked to his desk. "Time has changed many of our preconceived notions, Miss Granger, one being 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. I thought such an environment would keep him from becoming what he is now."

"And that worked so well," Hermione bit. She sat back in her seat, now fully awake and aware. "What happened during his years at Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore took Hermione through his life. He described his interactions with other students, how they were without affection. He told her about his horcruxes, when he believed he made each one and who he killed. He told her how he applied for a position as Defense Against the Dark Arts professor and was denied, and how he then started using his Knights or Death Eaters for power after that. He described the years of fighting him that Order members experienced. When he was done, Hermione was as much of an expert on Voldemort as Dumbledore was except for one thing . . .

"He doesn't act like that with me," she admitted to Dumbledore, once his story was nearly over. "If you're asking if he's changed from that, I think he has."

"Ah, so tell me, how does he behave?" Dumbledore asked.

She thought about it. He wasn't as extreme as the stories, with his temper only showing after deliberate disrespect or at the one celebration she was forced to attend. Alone he seemed nearly docile, but still studious and brimming with passion over the studies they were engaged in.

"He's just . . . happier than that, I guess," Hermione told him. "Calmer? If he tortured any Death Eaters this past week, it hasn't been on any of the bonded grounds, or I would have felt it. He's downright pleasant to me in the evenings, but that might just be because no one else is around."

Dumbledore leaned forward. "Miss Granger, I feel like it would be best to share my suspicions with you. Before I do, however, how is your occlumency coming?"

Hermione hesitated. "That might be better to ask Professor Snape, sir. I'm not sure."

"May I?"

Hermione nodded and fixed her eyes on the old man's. She felt him probe at the edges of her mind and, upon finding nothing, launch himself forward. She focused on a fog or mist, comprised of innocent memories related to what Dumbledore was searching for. After a moment of going around in circles, he withdrew with a smile on his weathered face.

"Yes, you're coming along nicely," Dumbledore praised. "I trust you will do your best to keep the
following information to yourself, then?"

"Yes sir," Hermione accepted.

"I believe that in binding himself to you, Miss Granger, Tom may have been given a chance he's never had before," Dumbledore revealed. "Harry's connection with him seems to have vanished, and his Horcruxes may very well be no more. If this is true, he may have his soul back. What's more, if the magic that bound you to him fixed any deficiencies he had in comparison to you, he may very well be cured of whatever the love potion did to him."

Hermione's heart stopped. "He raped me, and now he may be able to feel love?"

Dumbledore sighed, leaning back in his chair. To Hermione, he seemed to be considering his next words carefully. "He never had a chance, Miss Granger. He was cursed from birth to be unfeeling, he was born a direct descendant of Slytherin, he was friendless and orphaned and abused . . . There is a chance that he is only now capable of deciding what he truly needs or wants. It does not forgive his previous actions against you or anyone else, it only means that – in the circumstance that I am correct and there is a distinct possibility I am not – there is hope for him where I had written him off before."

Hermione thought about it in her seat, trying to reconcile this story to what she knew. It was easier to separate the good-looking, human Tom Riddle from the snake-like monster who had raped her. It was almost too easy, and it made her unsettled.

"Sir, what do you want from me?"

The regarded each other, each weighing their next words or next questions.

"I just want to know whether it is true, that he is different," Dumbledore said lightly. "Find out whether he may truly love something, or even be kind without it gaining him anything. That is all."

"Then that's what I'll do." Hermione exited her chair hastily and moved towards the door. "Until the welcome feast, Headmaster."

"Farewell, Miss Granger. Give my regards to Severus."
Chapter 20

Hermione was mid-Occlumency fight with Professor Snape when her collar began to heat and the magical power began to flow around her. She cast Snape out quickly, her expression assuredly desperate.

"He's summoning me!"

Snape nodded, lowering his wand. "Calm your mind, Miss Granger, and remember, he needs you. You are safe from him."

She nodded and vanished.

When she appeared, she was in the library of the Sayre Mansion. Voldemort was sat on a leather armchair, several books on the table yet his blue eyes firmly fixed on her. She scowled.

"You rang?" she sneered.

Voldemort's severe expression flitted away in a moment, giving way to a smirk. "Why of course, my dear. I have had a stressful day dealing with fools and meddlers, and I was missing my favourite little pet."

"So after a stressful day of dealing with people, you decide to summon me?" Hermione said with disbelief. "I clearly haven't been doing my duty. I should be stressing you out more."

Voldemort sat back in his chair and lifted a book. "This is a book from the Malfoy family library concerning the old magics. If you make the tea and come sit by my feet, it is yours to study."

He had tried, unsuccessfully, to make her do the same the night before. Make his tea, serve him an evening cuppa. It was something she wouldn’t have minded doing if he clearly didn’t view it as a woman’s – or a servant’s – task. In the end, he’d had a house elf make him a cup and she’d gone without for refusing. She could always do that again – tea is not that important – but, the book ....

Hermione gritted herself against her pride and turned towards the tea set. This week’s flavour was a black current white peony tea from some uppity importer who claimed it was hand-picked, something her captor had divulged yesterday while trying to get her to comply with his demands and make it for them. It smelled heavenly, she had to admit, but it was still degrading how he viewed the task. It seemed so small a thing, but just knowing he wouldn’t do it himself really rankled her.

The tea steeping, she turned to see Voldemort’s smug face and his proffered tome. Her humiliation at the floor position had left her days ago, but she still didn't relish it. The indignation returned with the addition of the tea to this nightly ritual.

With a sigh, she plucked the tome from Voldemort's fingers and sank next to him on the ground. It took no time at all for his fingers to find the familiar pattern in her hair and for her to lean against his warm leg in support. It took a little while longer – until the tea was served and in their hands – before Voldemort spoke and showed his true motivation for bringing her back.

"You've been at Hogwarts many times over the past little while, witch," Voldemort said over her, his hands still stroking. "The old man wishes to see you returned as a student."

"I thought I would," Hermione replied hesitantly, unsure where this was going. "I'll come back
every night, like I promised. Professor Snape has offered to protect me from the population."

"And you're worried about them?" Voldemort asked, his hands never failing in stroking her.

"There are quite a few Death Eater children at Hogwarts," Hermione admitted sadly. "It takes one person for everyone to know I'm . . . here? . . . A tool? . . . There are people who will do anything to get revenge on you. Not to say that will work, but one word about me being your pet and people might assume I went dark. Some will try to get at me."

"Yet you still wish to return?" His voice was low, incomprehensible.

"I won't beg you," Hermione stated slowly, trying to figure out his motives. "But, yes, I want to finish my schooling."

She heard no response immediately. His hands continued their massages and caresses in her hair, and she stayed bent beneath him, just breathing and waiting.

"I have terms," Voldemort announced, at last. "Firstly, for any Charms or Transfigurations or Duelling, you will not use your wand no matter what the instructors say. Take detention if you must, but refuse them outright. You need to practice your new skills and using that crutch will not help you."

"Alright."

"Secondly, you will allow a house-elf to prepare you each and every morning," he ordered, his voice low. "I'm aware you've been resisting it, little witch, but I will not have myself ill-represented in public. As you said, some people will realize you are mine . . . I want them to see how well I take care for those under my protection. I must have you appear well-cared for and well-kept."

"I don't think even elf magic could straighten my hair," Hermione offered in weak protest. "They can't even dress me really, since I need to wear uniforms."

"And you will," he agreed. "However, Tible will ensure that every aspect of your form is flawless. Even your hair. Although I daresay that any elf who tries to remove your curls will meet a terrible fate; I'm rather fond of them." He ran his fingers along her scalp gently making her shiver. "Do you accept?"

"Fine," Hermione sulked. "Anything else?"

Stroke, stroke, stroke. "The final condition, my pet, is that you return earlier in the evening to the castle to practice your powers in true form under my direction. I wish to begin training you."

Hermione finally smiled, for the first time since coming back. Finally! Finally, she was going to learn about her powers, and she found herself bouncing in excitement.

"Yes!" Hermione exclaimed happily. "Absolutely, I'll come back early every day. What time? When do I start learning? How do you learn exact-OWW!"

Hermione's bouncing and excited bobbing of her head made her curls snap in Voldemort's fingers. Voldemort laughed at the pained look she gave him and slowly untangled her hair from his hand.

"Stay still, witch," Voldemort chuckled. "You do get rather excited, don't you? I've never seen this side of you before … Suddenly Severus' comments about your 'incessant hand-waving' make much more sense."
Hermione blushed in embarrassment. "Don't be ridiculous. I did the ritual to have these great magical powers and right now all I have is one healing ritual, whatever you did, and wandless magic. Of course I'm eager to learn more. Anyone would."

"Although not all would react with such . . . exuberance," Voldemort noted with amusement. With a final tug, and a screech from Hermione, Voldemort freed his hands from her head. "There, better?"

"Much." Hermione felt his hand reappear on her head and felt warm at the touch. She ignored the sensation best she could. "So, when would I return in the evenings?"

"If I begin your training now I will be able to tell you," Voldemort began.

"Yes!" Hermione shrieked excitedly. At his look, Hermione looked away. "I mean . . . I would like that."

Voldemort chuckled. "You may not be so enthused when we begin. I will test you, try you, and if I can stand to teach you more than a little, then I shall allot more time to your future lessons. If you are boring and slow, I may just reject teaching you altogether."

"So if I really impress you . . ." Hermione prodded anxiously.

Voldemort smirked at the impertinent schoolgirl. "What would you like if you do, little witch? What has brought that little glint of mischief in your eyes?"

He couldn't resist. He brought a hand to the side of her face and stroked her cheek, leaning towards her. His proximity brought a delicious blush to her cheeks that once again caused the clenching in his stomach that pushed him towards taking the young girl's mouth against his own. He kept his distance, though, resisting her strange pull.

Hermione had frozen when he came closer, bringing his face closer to hers. She couldn't mistake the direction his comment and physicality were leading her, and she felt the fear she'd been avoiding for days come back. Would he force himself on her again?

"Tell me what you want, witch," Voldemort murmured.

His request unfroze her and she turned away. "An extra Saturday training session?"

It was not the response he wanted. He felt a sting of rejection as the little witch turned her face from his gaze, and he clenched his fist angrily. She was difficult to seduce, that was clear. He retreated to his reclined position in the seat, regarding her.

"It's difficult to impress me, young one," Voldemort told her coldly. "Let's see whether you are capable of such a feat."

He grabbed her wrist roughly and apparated her to the ballroom with a pop. He held her fast as she teetered around for a moment, clearly disoriented. After a moment, he released her roughly and used his wand on the ground of the ballroom.

Hermione watched in mild fear and trepidation as her bipolar keeper moved around. He was clearly upset with her rejection, and that made him dangerous. His anger was affecting the magic as it danced between them, sending jolts through that made her adrenaline spike. Her worry only fled slightly as she watched Voldemort turn his anger from her to perform his work.

She observed on her toes as Voldemort drew a glowing blue and extremely large ritual circle onto
the ballroom floor. It was massive in its span, including seven individual circles on the outskirts, three in the middle, and a final one on the inside. She focused on the seventh circle he drew on the outside, the one that was slightly out of the ritual circle. It seemed to be the channel for the power of the circle, and it pointed directly at Voldemort's stone throne.

She got distracted trying to read the runes around that one particular circle and didn't hear Voldemort approach her. He grabbed her shoulder and she yelped at the surprise.

"I will need to touch you during these lessons, Miss Granger," Voldemort murmured threateningly. "You do not impress me by resisting it."

He thrust her forward to the ritual circle. "Use your magic to select one or two of the outer circles. Don't ask any questions, just do it."

Hermione huffed at his rudeness, but complied. She focused on breathing, avoiding her fear and anger and just focusing on the magic that pulsed between the two of them. Listening, she stepped onto the first circle. There was a small response, but she didn't think it was what Voldemort had in mind. She jumped to the next.

She reached the seventh circle without much difference. Finally, stepping onto that jutting circle she felt the runes touch her magic and blend in harmoniously. She grinned.

"This one," Hermione told him smugly.

Voldemort looked perturbed by this, looking at her with a strained look. "No others felt as harmonious?"

"This is the one," Hermione reasserted strongly. "Do I get to know what it means?"

He hesitated. "Miss Granger, the one you have selected is synonymous the power of a person's casting and magic. That is the conduit circle. Every other circle represents a specific branch of old magic, divided into three sub-categories, united into a whole. For you to begin at the conduit as opposed to a specific branch suggests versatility and power. If you would, try the three ritual circles towards the middle. Tell me how you feel."

Hermione did as he bade, her body humming with excitement. Was she special? Was she powerful? She stepped to the middle circles quickly, letting her magic guide. She started to hope that none would be more powerful than the others, but when she reached the second circle the magic enveloped her in a happy harmony.

"This one," Hermione breathed, barely registering the other person in the room. The magic was soothing and sweet, exactly as she wished it to be.

"Fascinating," Voldemort intoned, observing her. "This is either an extreme coincidence, or a fated event. Miss Granger, you observed that both Albus Dumbledore and myself are the only others you can think of who manipulate the old magics, correct?"

"As far as I know," Hermione admitted slowly. "Although, I thought Grindelwald also would have unlocked it."

"Correct," Voldemort affirmed. "What you do not know is that Albus showed an immediate affinity for this ritual circle," he pointed to the one on her right, "whereas Grindelwald and myself favoured that one," he pointed to the one to Hermione's left. "These are the subcategories of change and control. Albus' knack for Transfiguration heralding his affinity for change and Gellert and my use of Dark Magic as an indicator of our affinity for control. The one you showed an immediate
affinity to is Healing."

He regarded her with a subtle intensity in his gaze. "How interesting that of the three old magic users in Great Britain each represents their own subcategory."

Hermione shivered at his dark tone.

"What's next?" she asked.

Voldemort circled the glowing ritual runes until he stood at the head of the seventh circle. "First, we teach you how to use the seventh circle to summon your power. This is usually taught last of all the seven, as the power you're summoning changes with the discovery of the other six types of magic. However, since the circle chose you, it should be the easiest one for you to master and you will simply need to apply each lesson to this circle as it comes. Enter the conduit circle."

He was a good teacher, despite Hermione's reservations with his physicality. Power was where she excelled here, easily activating the power of her old magics. He directed her in exercises to focus her magic next, and that's where she failed. He gave her distant targets to work on her accuracy, but every time she attempted to reach them she gave off a wide-spanned burst instead of a focused shot. Her failure was grating on her, making her short-tempered with the man teaching her.

"Enough!" Voldemort barked. He entered the ritual circle then, grabbing at her shoulders. "You need to focus. You're letting yourself get away with being weak, and you are NOT!"

"Let go of me!" Hermione struggled against his grip, disconcerted by her lack of aversion to his touch. "I'm trying!"

"Miss Granger, focus!" Voldemort snarled. "I will not hurt you, but you need to calm down."

"Why?" Hermione hissed.

"So I can help you!" His blue eyes fought dominance until Hermione gave up and slumped in his grip. "There. Now, I understand you're frustrated, but it is normal for this circle. This circle is all about how you perceive yourself, your skills, and your magic. From what you displayed in power, you are an extremely adept witch and you know this. However, that is different from knowing oneself. If you're the least bit ignorant to each facet of yourself and, by extension, your magic you will not move on. Right now I'm pushing you into what you believe your magic to be and you are failing, because your vision of yourself is marred."

He halted a protest with a shake of his head. "I have ways to break through your walls when you struggle but you must show some degree of trust, Miss Granger. Can you?"

"You've given me no reason to trust you," Hermione ground out.

Voldemort rolled his cerulean eyes and moved his hands down her arms and gripped her hands in his.

"Look into my eyes, Miss Granger," he murmured, trapping her in his gaze. "I will be putting a thought into your mind, and I want you to follow it wherever it may lead you. Do NOT try to fight it. Understood?"

"Where will it take me?" she whispered, trying to shake the sensations taking hold through their contact. He smelt too good, like spices and water. Invigorating and refreshing.

His eyes probed hers. "Wherever it needs to."
His ambiguous answer had a clear message – will you trust me? Do you want what I have to offer? Decide, Miss Granger, if you want to be worth my time? She was locked into his cold, calculating blue eyes, indecisive and scared. He was dangling knowledge and power in front of her, bringing her to the brink of the Marianna's Trench of old magic knowledge and asking if she trusted him to provide her with oxygen to make the trip to the bottom.

Dumbledore's words now meant everything. He never had a chance, Miss Granger. There is a chance that he is only now capable of deciding what he truly needs or wants. Could it be she had a chance to make this tyrant want something else?

"Make me see what you do," Hermione breathed.

At that, Tom Riddle gave her a full-blown smile. "Good answer."

His magic focused and pushed into her, and Hermione followed it into her own mind.

Everything was black. Her mind was clearly was intently focused on his magic and what he was doing with it, as little else seemed to matter. His magic seemed to lead her along down a path in her mind that felt unused. It started with an image of herself at his knee, smiling and bouncing up and down. She looked beautiful, and it was clear this was how he saw her. By association, some memories came forward. Her in the mirror before Yule Ball . . . Harry, Ron, and her facing the troll . . . Her raising her hand in class . . . The warm hugs of her parents as they comforted her earlier that day . . . Dobby showing up with all her SPEW knitwear . . . Her secret meetings with Firenze in the Forbidden Forest that year . . . The joy at discovering her Animagus form.

Then her mind took her on a darker turn. The memories it pulled to the front of her mind were angry, vengeful. Marietta Edgecomb with the word SNEAK written out in boils on her face . . . A firework shot directly at Filch and pushing him into a broom closet during Fred and George's escape . . . Umbridge carried off by the centaurs . . . the birds she sent after Ron the day he snogged Lavender . . . Hermione resisted then, fighting the train of thoughts she was having. She knew where it would lead, and she couldn't relive it.

'Stop fighting it!' Voldemort hissed in her mind.

'I hate these memories!' Hermione threw back. 'Why do I need them?'

'These aren't memories you hate, little witch, but memories you enjoyed,' Voldemort let his words fly around her mind. 'You fight and you resist, but you felt vindicated, free, and satisfied when your enemies received their dues. You are in the circle that deals with truth, and is blocked by lies, and you . . . you are lying to yourself about your very nature. You are blocking a part of your own magic by denying a very real part of yourself. No person is all good, Hermione. Let yourself be more than perfect ... let yourself be REAL.'

After his words, the memories came back. She felt the emotions each scene brought to her, and with the shame a herself also came pride. She had let herself be put down by every single person in these memories, and then she had given them a piece of what she was capable of. The memories continued, nerve-wracking and revealing. Her first piece of accidental magic when she cursed a girls' head bald . . . Sneaking cookies from the jar without her parents' knowledge . . . Everything she never let herself think about flooded back into her memory but one, and she struggled with the feelings of guilt and shame that followed. Her magic nudged her forward on the darkened path, taking the guilt and showing her exactly what it was; the past. The memories she held were her past and the formed who she was now, but they only hold her as much as she let them. Her mind was sifting through them with a rosy lense now, taking her past and categorizing and sorting.
'Very good, pet,' Voldemort's voice came through the din. 'You're nearly there, but there needs to be balance in your magic. You're hiding some painful memories, refusing to bring them to light. In order to accept yourself and all aspects of your magic, you can't keep hidden from your memories. Bring them out.'

'It hurts too much!' Hermione shot back. 'I can't do it, not with you here!'

'Why?'

His question was genuine, but Hermione was scared. Her magic was prying at her mind, trying to find the last piece. Finally, with a resignation that she felt didn't suit her, she let her painful memories come forward. She relived the bullying girls in elementary school … Ron's words which led to the troll-filled lavatory … Snape mocking her buckteeth … Mudblood.

The memories shifted, and she knew the pain was coming. She watched her interactions with Voldemort, the very real and terrifying intimacy with which they interacted… She watched him allow her to be tortured on the ballroom floor… She watched him save her from Rowle… The nights spent stroking her hair and reading by the fire … Then, the main memory of the set came forward … Her stomach clenched.

She watched herself fight and run and try to get away from the red-eyed Voldemort, she felt the pain as he entered her, the horror and disgust as he gave groans of pleasure, and her helplessness to stop him. Her magic soaked it up, and she saw it pull from her memory what it needed; this was what she was like at her lowest point, a low she never knew she had before. It was what rounded out the magic and made it whole.

The scene ended and Hermione was back in the ballroom, her legs giving out beneath her. Voldemort held her up, balancing her. Tears pricked her eyes as the emotional exhaustion set in.

"Was it truly that awful?" Voldemort asked quietly. She looked up into his face, his eyes, looking for what his question was. His eyes were glassy and hard.

"Every second … It was like I had died and gone to hell," Hermione murmured tiredly. "It was every nightmare combined … every irrational fear made rational, even ones I had no idea I had. When people touch me, I flinch. That's what you did to me."

"I saw the memories included when stroke your hair every evening," he murmured quietly. "Does it frighten you when I do?"

Hermione hesitated. How could she tell him anything about her feelings? But she was still holding onto him, letting him hold her up. He needed to have some sort of reasoning. "At first, it had me terrified, but when you didn't do anything … I guess it became normal."

"May I continue to do so?" Voldemort asked. "With your permission?"

Hermione nodded. She didn't trust her words, because if she could she might ruin the very human interaction she was having with the resident Dark Lord. What he was saying now . . . it was almost an apology. Could Voldemort be changing, like Dumbledore said? Was he changing for her?

"We've finished lessons for today, little witch," he told her softly. "Let me bring you to bed."

"No, I want to do it again," Hermione insisted, straightening up in his arms now. "One more chance?"

He regarded her carefully. She knew he thought her exhausted from whatever mind magic he had
worked on her. She tried to make herself look strong, ready, determined. She thought he'd laugh at her for it, but instead, he gave her a quick nod and plastered another target on the far end of the room and moved from her front to holding her up from behind.

"This is about having complete control of your magic, my witch," Voldemort murmured in her ear. "We've seen and accessed each of its parts. You are now aware of what makes your magic and yourself. Accept your magic, accept yourself, and focus every single part into one, single, powerful shot."

She tried to gather her magic, but something was missing, something was wrong. She focused on just accepting herself and every aspect of it, but there was still something else missing. She searched her magic for an answer … Followed its threads … And it led her straight to Voldemort himself. She gasped a breath of shock. Of course, it was linked to him as well. She needed to acknowledge and accept that a part of her magic was tying her to him.

With that thought, she caressed his magic with hers and brought some of it with her through the contact with his body as he held her up. It felt so intimate to her, warming her heart. She gathered every facet and thought of a single lightning strike.

Power ran from her toes to her arm gathered at her fingertips, this time the wholesome energy that held every facet together. It excited her, brought tingles to her fingertips. She focused it … pulled it together … pointed her hands … and shot.

Energy crackled heady and forcefully as she released it. The target sizzled and burned before her eyes. She'd done it.

"Well done, my witch," Voldemort brought her even closer. Her body went limp with fatigue and she rested her head on his chest. "How did it feel?"

"Brilliant," she breathed. "Is it always like that?"

"The rush of power?" he asked. "You become used to it after a while, but the sense of oneness, the feeling of being complete with your magic? That never needs to end so long as you keep yourself in balance."

He hoisted her up and lifted her bridal-style in his arms. "The fatigue will pass as well. It is a result of having your magic changed within the ritual circle. Be prepared, this will happen every time you pass a ritual circle."

Hermione didn't care if it happened every time, because it was a tired that left her body warm and happy. Even when he side-along apparated them to their shared bedroom, her dizziness was nothing compared the giddy happiness of getting through the circle, of working through her issues, and of coming out whole. The thirty-or-so year-old Dark Lord deposited her in the bed and looked down on her with incomprehensible eyes.

Voldemort had never felt more conflicted in his entire life as he did when he looked on this young, tired girl. Her memories of her binding to him had been as unexpected as they had been intense. It had been a formative memory for her, and one that would stay with her all her life, and he had made it violent and painful and degrading.

Yet she lay there on their shared bed, letting him lift her and carry her and touch her, letting him even be there. The clenching he'd felt before become full-blown guilt and care for the young witch. He knew, if she asked him for anything in that moment, he would probably give it to her. Anything to stop the agony he felt for her memories of him.
He couldn't help but ask, "Are you alright?"

"Do you care?" Hermione asked in return.

Her earnest question made him pause. She was looking for some sign from him that he had some place in him for her. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. His stomach clenched in rejection as she stiffened underneath him.

"Rest, little witch," he murmured to her, not looking her in the eye. "You did well."

His desire to seduce her had steadily faded over the course of a few days, and now as he stood over her in a bedside vigil, he knew he wanted more from the little witch. His Slytherin sensibilities knew that with her powers on his side he would win the war easily, but his feelings weren't there with that plan.

He wanted to fix her memories of him, to replace them with new ones. He wanted her to see the good in his cause. He wanted her by his side with a smile and that mischievous gleam taking over her face as she gave in to her baser instincts to reap her vengeance or tease her friends. In helping her discover herself for the conduit circle, he'd discovered her too and he wanted her.

He could have gone the whole war without an ounce of regret and he would have been better off if that had been the case. Instead, he now felt deeply for the young girl he'd hurt and bound to himself.

Merlin help him.
Chapter 21

She still had the nightmares, the ones with crimson eyes and a skeletal fingers. She still woke up shaking and terrified that she would be helpless, held down, and raped again. Hermine was still exhausted, but it was as if her brain was resisting any more rest.

As usual, Voldemort was gone before she awoke and she was left to her own devices. Normally, that would fill her with glee – nothing felt as good as being free. However, after last night and their tumultuous first training session together, Hermione was confused.

How could she, with her nightmares still plaguing her and the act only having transpired a week prior, still enjoy her time with the same man who'd done that? Hermione knew at least part of it was the fact that he looked different, with blue eyes instead of crimson, human features and hands instead of deathly extremities. It made her feel vain and shallow, but there was nothing in his features that reminded her of the man who'd raped her. More than that, though, it was the way he was treating her. She was convinced that he was intentionally being kind, slowly breaking down her barriers. She knew she couldn't trust him, but he hadn't done anything to her since the torture. She was lowering her guard.

Hermione was about to climb out of bed when a house-elf popped into the room with a tray and a no-nonsense look on her big-eyed face.

"Morning Missy Granger," the elf greeted, levitating the tray over Hermione's lap. "I is Mamsy. I is yous get up elf. I helps Missy Granger gets up in the mornings and gets her ready for day. Master hads me give you this as well."

She waved her hand and a single rose was presented to Hermione, who took it with wide eyes.

"Now, eats your breakfast. Mammsy be back when Missy Granger needs getting dressed."

"You know-" her complaint was unheard as the elf left her. Hermione grimaced. That little elf would probably insist on her dressing in her school robes – which were still in Snape's delinquent quarters and, she remembered, still in Gryffindor colours – the second breakfast was finished. The robes changed automatically with your house, but would they change if Hermione was assigned by the Headmaster, not the Sorting Hat? The welcome back feast wasn't until five, when the carriages came in from Hogsmeade with the returning students. If worst came to worst, she could have Mammsy change the colours.

With the imminent disappointment of the matronly house-elf, Hermione dug into her breakfast with gusto, trying to finish it quickly and get the elf back to resolve the issues that had now consumed her brain.

When her meal was finished, her concerns had apparently been for nothing because Mammsy popped back in with a full uniform in her arms in Gryffindor colours. Hermione frowned at the elf.

"Where did you get my robes?" Hermione asked.

"Master is giving them to Mammsy to fit to Missy," Mammsy said in a no-nonsense voice. "Now Mammsy be dressing you."

Hermione shrieked as the elf vanished her clothes from her figure, and she tried in vain to cover her bits from the elf's view. Within seconds, the robes in the elf's arms were on her body. They were tighter than her regular robes, but Mammsy seemed to see that the only issue with the outfit was
The skirt length, which she extended to the knee.

"Yous looking good, Missy Granger," Mammsy said made her regulation socks and black oxfords appear on her feet as well. "Is all good, Missy Granger?"

"Umm . . ." Hermione hesitated.

Mammsy was not amused. "Missy needs tell Mammsy what is wrong with uniform, Master saids so. What needs you change?"

"I, er, I've been reassigned to a different house." Hermione told the elf hesitantly. "Mammsy, is there any chance you know how to change the trim and the badge to Slytherin colours and arms?"

Mammsy nodded sternly at Hermione. "Mammsy knows all abouts Hogwarts, Missy Granger, Mammsy has been in family for many masters and masters childrens. Mammsy changes it for you now."

Hermione watched and the gold became green and the gold became silver. Her lion crest switched for a snake, and Hermione cringed at it. If Ron and Harry had thought they'd talk to her at school, her robes would probably send them the other way.

"Missy looks good in greens," Mammsy nodded approvingly. "Now Mammsy does hairs. Comes to washings room with Mammsy."

Mammsy led Hermione to the adjoining bath and stood her in front of a mirror to look at her ridiculous bed-head of curls.

"Does Missy Granger know what Missy likes?" Mammsy asked her.

She grimaced at her own reflection. "If you can make my curls behave, it's more than I can do. You do whatever the Master would like, Mammsy."

That, apparently, was the right answer. The elf clapped her knobbed hands and nodded with a smile. "Mammsy be happy to make Master happy, Missy Granger. Mammsy make Master love you."

Mammsy took to her task with the serious maternal instinct of Molly Weasley and the know-how of Lavender Brown times fifty. Mammsy lengthened her hair, changing it from just past shoulder length with her curls to waist-length on her, hanging in tight ringlets down her back. In a sort of preppy queen style she didn't know existed, the entirety of her curly mane was fastened into a loose, low-hanging style with a Slytherin green ribbon that Mammsy's magic held in place in spite of its loose hold on her hair. To her happiness, her hair reminded her of Emmy Rossum.

Mammsy made her happy by keeping her face mostly intact, with only some ochre around her eyes and the rest left alone. Her biggest pain was when Mammsy berated her for chewing her nails and used her magic to fix the length before threatening to smack her hands with a wooden spoon if she did it again in the mansion.

Mammsy looked her over, from the polished and inspected shoes, to her ribboned hair, and nodded sagely. "Mammsy has readied Missy Granger. Missy, if you takes my hands we will be givens the blessings or punishments from Master for you."

"What do you mean?" Hermione started.

"Mammsy is to takes you to Master fors looksie," the elf told her, holding out her hand. "Mammsy
There was a moment of hesitation when Hermione didn't want to see his magical megalomaniac, but she swallowed it and took the little elf's hand in hers. Mammsy didn't need to turn even a small margin to apparate her, and she arrived in a grand looking study, occupied by only the Dark Lord and Lucius Malfoy. The former looked on the disturbance with little more than neutrality, but with a glint in his eye that Hermione would have denied enjoying to anyone but herself.

"Master requested Missy Granger when she mades ready. Is Master pleased with Missy's being prepareds?" Mammsy asked.

Voldemort coldly looked at Mammsy, and then at Hermione. He surveyed her appearance from top to bottom, a heavy look in his eye.

"Miss Granger, I was not aware you were a Slytherin," his voice was purposefully impassive, but the fire in his eyes told a different story.

She raised her chin. "It's your fault I'm tarnishing your house, my lord. The Headmaster seems to think that he should keep Harry and Ron far away from me while I'm under your watchful eye. Slytherin was his solution."

"You tarnish nothing, Miss Granger," Voldemort chastised her. "It would be the summation of all our efforts to have my house filled with users of old magics. Join us for tea, Miss Granger." He turned to Mammsy. "She was well prepared, elf. You're dismissed."

Hermione seethed at the elf's cold dismissal, but said nothing because of who she was in front of. Her magic compelled her to hold her tongue on her S.P.E.W tirade while Voldemort considered how to address her. She deposited herself in her summoned chaise and accepted the proffered cup, barely bothering to taste it.

"Miss Granger, Lucius is here to escort you to the train," Voldemort informed her. "We wouldn't want anyone questioning why you left for the break with everyone else and then somehow appeared in Hogwarts, would we?"

"No, not at all," Hermione bit sarcastically.

Voldemort chuckled at her, as if she were a cute girl instead of a fierce lioness. It made her scowl.

"Would you prefer to be asked, Miss Granger, whether you approve of my plan?" Voldemort queried. "If you don't like it, it opens up the avenue for rejection. I have made up my mind on the matter."

"The whole point is to avoid drawing suspicion, and I'm supposed to show up at the platform with Lucius Malfoy, of all people, \textit{sans} trunk? That's less suspicious than just apparating to the castle?" Hermione demanded.

"Mammsy!" the elf apparated into the room with a grumpy look. "Miss Granger's trunk, please."

Mammsy was back in a second with an expensive-looking leather trunk, with silver-embossed HJG in large script along the top.

Voldemort gave her an imperious look. "I do hate when people assume I'm an idiot, Miss Granger. Lucius will be polyjuiced when he accompanies you, and I have prepared a trunk for you. Oh, did you truly think I'd send you away with nothing? I'm aware you already have your school books and robes and muggle clothing within the school, but I had this trunk packed with copies of the texts I can only takes Missy Granger if she holds her hands. Missy Granger?"
want you to study whenever you can in your classes and out - particularly when you find yourself bored with the sixth-year curriculum. You'll find the texts I've given you a fair bit more complex and rare than anything you'll find in the Hogwarts Library."

"Really?" Hermione eyed the trunk now with an eager grin. Her fingers itched to open it and start to finger through the tomes he was sending her with. "I get to borrow some of your library?"

"Oh no, pet," Voldemort grinned. "My library is not for you. These are yours to keep."

Hermione just about squealed in delight. Realizing how ridiculous her bibliophilia was making her look, she cleared her throat and tried to lower the corners of her mouth with no success. "That's . . . very kind of you. Thanks."

"It is a pleasure to serve a mind such as yours, pet," Voldemort inclined his head in acknowledgement. He picked up the book from his side table and handed it to her. "This text is the one I want you to start reading on the train up. It outlines the training I began with you yesterday, and I believe you'll benefit from a thorough reading."

Hermione snatched it from his hands eager. "This is a copy of Merlin's Treatise on Magic! There is only one, and it's in a library in Alexandria! No one is even allowed to touch it, let alone read it! How…?"

"As you pointed out, it is a copy," Voldemort told her. "I commissioned it from my own edition. Does this please you?"

"'Please me'?" Hermione gasped. "I can't possibly accept such a valuable gift."

"Yet you cling to it as if it were your own flesh and blood," Voldemort remarked dryly. "I do not expect a return of the favour, Miss Granger. Accept it."

She clutched it to her chest. "Thank you, thank you so much for this. I'll take good care of it."

Voldemort couldn't help but feel a little uncomfortable with her sincere thanks. She was flushed with excitement, clinging his gift tight to her lovely little breasts. She looked . . . beautiful. She looked like a Slytherin wet dream, with her preppy outfit that let her gorgeous curves show through. She was innocent in her attraction, that was certain. He wanted to stare at her and have her sit on the floor by his feet for another few hours. He wanted her simply reading the gift he gave her at his feet, occasionally looking up at him with her eyes bright at newfound knowledge and her lips spilling over with the conclusions she had drawn from her readings.

However, with what Lucius had seen, he would have questions and Voldemort was not in a position to allow rumours and gossip to circulate amongst his followers. He needed their unwavering loyalty now more than ever as his plans started to form. He needed her gone so he could focus on his plans.

"My pleasure, Miss Granger," he wasn't lying. "Now, before Lucius accompanies you, I need a moment with him. Would you kindly wait outside?"

It was always terrifying either leaving or entering Voldemort's presence. Hermione had no idea when his moods would shift into dangerous territory, and she knew for a fact that Lucius Malfoy was one of those people who could cause the flip. Still, she rose from her seat and left the room.

Voldemort watched her leave reluctantly, and wished it wasn't necessary.

"You certainly know how to please the little witch, my lord," Lucius commented when the door
closed. "If Draco is to be believed, books are certainly more effective than gems."

"Is there a reason for the comment, Lucius?" Voldemort replied, his tone casual.

Lucius withdrew, aware that without the girl in the room he had no defenses. "Simply curiosity, my lord.

"Well then, let me divert your curiosity, Lucius. It should interest you to know the same precautions have been taken for young Draco. The Headmaster fears retribution from us for his defection."

Lucius nodded, although he looked bleak. "As he should."

"Now, now, Lucius, you have been a good friend and I am pleased with you right now," Voldemort told the patriarch with a smile. "You need not fear me if you defend your only heir."

Lucius frowned. "It does not bring me joy to be separated from him, my Lord, but it is his own desires that have done it."

Voldemort considered his words thoughtfully. "I have not been the kindest taskmaster, and for that I thank you, as you've been exceedingly patient. I offer you an even greater sign of my trust, old friend."

"Of course, my Lord, I'm honoured," Lucius agreed quickly.

"It's not that kind of offer, my friend," Voldemort comforted him. "Your son has forsaken me, but he does not need to be separated from you, nor is his usefulness over. I wish for you to write to your son, and inform him of an offer from me; I will allow him to be free from my service should he provide a way for my Death Eaters to complete the task I set to him. If he provides a way into the castle for my men, he will be allowed to return to you, and you may have your heir back."

Lucius dropped to his knees before Voldemort. "My lord, I would do anything for my son. You do my house a great service in your mercy."

"So formal, Lucius," Voldemort mocked the man. "Listen to my offer first. If Draco offers me this peace offering, he will be welcomed back with open arms and with my protection from the other members of our little family … without a Mark, Lucius. I expect the war to end with the next couple of years, so your son need not be involved as long as you remain loyal."

"I will, my Lord," Lucius vowed solemnly. "I'm sure Draco with be overjoyed at your mercy. He may not have wanted your mark, but he knows family – he will do what he must to return to us."

"As appreciation for my generosity, Lucius," Voldemort informed him, "you will protect Miss Granger today."

Lucius tipped his head. "I'd be honoured to be trusted with something so . . . important."

"It is," Voldemort affirmed.

Lucius offered a weak smile. "None of your followers know quite what to think of your strange treatment of the girl, my lord."

Voldemort frowned at that. "And is there dissent?"

Lucius seemed hesitant to name anyone, but Voldemort knew better. He clearly had someone in
mind when he let it slip, but didn't want to appear to eager. "None doubt the need to keep her alive, as we can see your regained form, but many await your word to punish the girl for her elevated status with you. If she wasn't Potter's mudblood, I believe the men might admit to being jealous of her indispensability and her care at your hand."

Lucius sipped his breakfast tea thoughtfully, letting Voldemort interject if he wanted. When he received no comment, he continued. "There may be some who believe the girl will become a more … communal pet, soon. Antonin has expressed a desire to bed her."

"That," Voldemort assured him lowly, "will not happen."

Lucius stilled, regarding his master. "May I speak freely, my lord?"

"If you must, Lucius."

He set down his tea cup and leaned towards his master. "It would take more of a fool than I to not see you regard the girl as more than a simple prisoner. I have not been the only one to notice, and you may soon need to defend your interest to the others."

Voldemort cursed. "How obvious is it?"

Lucius gave him a blinding grin. "She seems to be your sole focus, old friend, but to the others it is only a slight excess. The question I should be asking is whether it's for a reason or because you've fallen for the girl."

Voldemort sighed. "Lucius, I will be removing this conversation from your mind in a moment if it continues. Do you agree?"

"As you wish, my lord," Lucius replied, quirking a brow.

"I apologize, but you have more . . . experience in this area than I," Voldemort explained. "I find I care for the girl more than I ever intended. I cannot and will not remove her from my life, but these … feelings … are complicating my goals. I find I do not want to hurt her in any way, including her friends. I must somehow sever her connection to them, or protect her from the war entirely."

"Does she know of your intents for her?"

"She is oblivious," Voldemort admitted, shooting a glare at Lucius.

"Then woo her," Lucius said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "If you can convince her to sit in on our meetings and aid in the cause, it may do much to soothe the worries of the others and she would be on your side."

Voldemort ran a hand through his hair. "I do not believe Miss Granger to be the kind to abandon her ideals easily. She will not side with us in this war, no matter what I may get her to feel for me."

"She is also not one to abandon those who've won her favour," Lucius pointed out. "If she forms an attachment to you, she will feel conflicted as to her role in this war the same as you. Explain our side to her, paint us in the best of lights. You needn't force her to side with us, simply to become neutral. That will be enough."

Voldemort was reminded why he recruited Lucius in the first place; he was a genuinely remarkable man with an understanding of people he never had. True, he could often instill loyalty and fear at will, but that was through awe at his power and intelligence. Lucius was charismatic.
"Thank you, friend," Voldemort took his wand from his pocket, leveling it at the man. "Obliviate."

Lucius didn't dare to touch her when he escorted her to the platform. Still, he was unbearably close to her. She could feel the magic on his body skim hers in an uncomfortable way as he followed her through the floo. But however uncomfortable she felt with his polyjuiced form next to her, it was nothing compared to seeing the members of the DA on the platform.

Neville tried to say hi, but she resolutely ignored him. Gryffindors gave her strange looks as she was already in her new, Slytherin uniform.

"Hello Hermione," Luna greeted dreamily. "You look lovely. The mafrikops probably help with that."

Hermione resolutely marched forward, ignoring her. When she got to the train, she reached for her trunk and pulled it from Lucius' grip.

"Enjoy your trip, Miss Granger," he said cordially. "And you'll remember my letter?"

She nodded curtly. "I'll deliver it to your son. May I go now?"

She hardly waited for a response before climbing up with her trunk and the text Voldemort assigned and disappearing into the Express' hallways. Now came the hardest part; where was she going to sit? Dumbledore had made it clear that she couldn't have anything to do with people associated with the Order, which took out a bunch of her friends. Even more, she didn't want anyone put in Voldemort's path for interacting with her. That left her with either the Slytherins, or somehow finding an empty compartment for herself. Though the latter was practically impossible, she hoped.

She was lucky, as several groups of students hadn't boarded the vessel, she did find an empty carriage. To ensure it remained that way, she tried to incant the door with various locking charms. She wouldn't let anyone in.

It was lucky she did, because not ten minutes later a group of Gryffindors came by and attempted to gain entry. They would no doubt tell Harry and Ron where she was, and that she was alone and in Slytherin garb. She buried her head in her books and ignored them. Minutes later, a voice in the hallway she didn't recognize shouted, "Found her!"

She started and looked up. It was the younger Greengrass girl. Astoria? She was waving at some people down the hallway, and trying to pry open the door. Other Slytherins soon joined her outside her cabin – Blaise Zabini, Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Daphne – they all seemed be trying to get in.

Blaise at least was smart. He caught her eye in the window and gave her a grin. "Come on, Granger, we're not leaving until we have a word. Wouldn't want us in trouble for not following orders, right? Let us in."

Well, they were Slytherins. They were supposedly part of her house now, so she waved her hand and opened the compartment door. Astoria and the other stumbled a bit getting in, but Hermione shut her book and just glared at them.

"Alright, you apparently found me," Hermione said. "Now, WHAT. DO. YOU. WANT?"
Daphne rolled her eyes before plopping down next to her. "Relax, Granger. We play nice with other snakes, you know. Not that we have a choice, mind you, but still."

"If Voldemort-" the whole cabin flinched, "has ordered me befriended and watched by you, you'd better leave now. I'm not entertaining his possessive streak."

Parkinson rolled her eyes. "Lucky for you, it wasn't an order from You-Know-Who. Our orders came from our parents, who were more than a little surprised to see you at the New Year's revel."

"Not my mom!" Zabini said proudly. "I'm just here to see you, lovely."

"Great," Hermione sighed, leaning against the seat back. "I so do not need to be involved in inter-Death Eater politics."

Crabbe and Goyle were just standing around in the entryway, defending the doorway. At hearing her blunt descriptors, they shut the door and remained on guard outside. There was an awkward silence around her.

"So, Granger," Blaise leaned forward, "when did you become a beautiful Slytherin snake?"

His compliment had her blushing awkwardly, before Astoria tutted him from her seat. "Decorum, Blaise. What he means, Hermione, is that we were looking for a Gryffindor, and instead we found a Slytherin. It is most unusual, isn't it, to change house?"

"Ugh, you're so proper, Tori," Daphne groaned.

"Let her answer," Theo insisted, the first words he'd spoken. Hermione could see the flickers of his eyes to the young Astoria, as if his defense of her was noteworthy to the young blonde.

"Let's think really hard about it," Hermione snarked. "Why would Dumbledore want to move the stupid girl that landed herself in Voldemort's hands away from Harry? What could be the possible motive?"

"As always, they protect Potter," Parkinson noted, sounding bored. "I told you it was that simple, Blaise. Dumbledore does seem to think all the questionables live in Slytherin anyways, after all, so why not put her there and away from the Golden Boy?"

Hermione grimaced. "Leave Harry out of this. I was stupid, and got caught. It had nothing to do with him."

"You're coming back, though," Blaise pointed out, ignoring Pansy. "How are you caught if you aren't in his dungeons?"

Hermione tapped her collar, sure at least one girl would recognize the black stones. True enough, the girls gasped, and Parkinson looked sick. The men looked confused.

"Is that …?" Daphne whispered.

Hermione nodded. "Bloodstone collar. Only he can take it off, and he has the ability to call me back to him from anywhere. Even inside Hogwarts wards."

"I didn't know they could do that," Pansy stated, her voice tinged with disbelief. "They're supposed to give the women power. Mom has one she takes off all the time; she says it's my inheritance."

"They're great if they come from the woman's side," Daphne informed her. "When the man puts
the collar on, it's usually a means of control. It's horrid nowadays to use it like that, but it used to happen to married women all the time a up until a couple hundred years ago. Mom told us that when we were kids so we knew not to let men put jewelry on us without us knowing exactly what it was."

She turned to Hermione. "I can't imagine what it's like to be collared to him, Granger, but I would think it's bad."

Hermione grimaced. "I'm essentially his pet. He doesn't mistreat me, really. Well, not yet. He's letting me come back to school at least."

Hermione regarded the sympathetic looks on their faces. "So, since you guys clearly don't want to be hexed for following me around the rest of the year, do you want to keep other people from hexing me?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "A Gryffindor version of a Slytherin bargaining. You know, Granger, you don't need to threaten to hex anyone. We were actually hoping to exchange favours. You see, no one knows where Draco is, and as someone close to the top of the chain . . ."

"Oh, is that all you want?" Hermione quirked a brow. "I tell you what happened to Malfoy and you agree to help with the annoyance of being in Slytherin?"

"Yes, please," Astoria murmured.

It was strange, seeing them all in this light. They were still very much the same people as previous years, but this time with just a little bit of human vulnerability, in the form of Draco Malfoy. They loved him, in their own way, and they wanted him safe.

Hermione sighed. "It wasn't a question, you know. Of course I'll tell you."

They all perked up at that. Even Pansy lost her disinterested look and leaned in.

"He's already at the castle, in Professor Snape's delinquent quarters," Hermione informed them. "Been there for less than a week. I'm sure he'll be at the return feast."

"Really?" Blaise asked, his expression lifting. "He's not dead? Tortured?"

"Not dead, no," Hermione pursed her lips, unsure of what to say next. She certainly wasn't going to tell them he was in the dungeon, tortured, and definitely not how he came to Hogwarts. "If you want, ask Malfoy what happened over break. Unless . . . Are you allowed to interact with him? I mean, have your parents said anything?"

None of them had, meaning Malfoy's punishment had been private. Still, it worried her. What was the note in her pocket going to say? Was it to disown him? Threaten him?

"Why wouldn't we be allowed, Granger?" Theo asked now, his eyes calculating.

"Why would Malfoy be in the delinquent quarters and not the Slytherin ones?" Daphne snipped at Theo. "Come on, you're supposedly smart, Nott."

Theo grimaced at the thought. "Point taken."

There was a tense moment. Then, Blaise leaned forward and wiggled his eyebrows. "So, Granger,
what does old Moldy-Shorts look like with his nose back?"

Hermione spent the rest of the trip getting to know the Slytherin group who'd antagonized her for years. They were . . . good. Good kids. Perhaps they could be friends. She genuinely enjoyed Daphne and Blaise's company, and the overt Slytherin nature of Astoria. Theo and Pansy were mysteries, no matter what they said, because they were so very closed off. She wasn't expecting it from Pansy, the way Ron always went off on how close she was to Malfoy, but she was unemotive as Snape sometimes. Theo was just silent, preferring to observe and occasionally make smart remarks.

By the time they arrived at Hogwarts, she was glad to have the group to stand with. Exiting the train with all the other students staring at her made her more than uneasy, and sensing her discomfort, the group of Slytherins actually circled her in a protective formation and kept prying eyes from spotting her.

"Thank you," she murmured lowly, "but it'll be worse in the Great Hall."

"You've been collared by the source of all evil and a little public opinion gets to you?" Pansy scoffed. "Bleeding heart Gryffindors."

"What Pansy means to say is that you've been through enough," Daphne encouraged mildly. "Slytherin takes pride in protecting its own, and you're now an honourary member. If anyone wants to hurt you, they go through us."

"Just…" Hermione's throat clenched. "If Harry or Ron try anything, let them, OK?"

"Why?" Blaise gave a scowl. "You'd let those idiots hurt you?"

"I, no-yes," Hermione stuttered. A tear left her eye, trailing hot and wet down her cheek as she tried to rein them in. "They wouldn't hurt me. They might yell, though. I wouldn't blame them for that. And if anyone defends me to them, it would make them even angrier."

"Lovely," Pansy sneered. "Well, I look forward to seeing what your Gryffindor lack of preservation gets you."

Daphne patted her arm comfortingly. "I'll try and reign them in if anything happens, but if you start crying, I reserve the right to hex their hair green. I learned a fabulous new spell this break, you see, and I've been dying to try a more extreme colour. I could only make my hair a few shades lighter or my mother would have noticed and quickly killed me."

That made Hermione giggle, diffusing the tension. They climbed into two separate carriages and trotted up to the castle. When she climbed down off the carriage, the Slytherins surrounded her again. She was glad for it, as she would have been frantically searching for Harry and Ron in worry.

The students must have at least glimpsed her though, because she heard a few gasps and whispers of her name, accompanied by various glares around them from her Slytherin protectors. The murmurs were growing steadily and by the time they entered the Great Hall they were a dull roar. Hermione climbed into a seat at the Slytherin table with her head low and buried.

"No, don't do that," Astoria sat next to her. "If they're going to stare, you give them nothing bad to say. You sit there like you belong, with your head held high and a grin on your lips."

"Like a Slytherin?" Hermione murmured, depressed.
"Exactly," Pansy asserted. "You are here, so act like you belong and you will, Granger."

"You all are ridiculously bad at dealing with Gryffindors," a familiar voice came from behind her. The group looked up and gave subdued, Slytherin smiles at the blonde interloper. Except Hermione, who just plain beamed at him. "Come on, you have to appeal to their sense of glory. Even I know that. Tell her to make her house proud with a courageous face, and she'll be eager to perform."

"Draco!" His crew exclaimed.

"Malfoy!" Hermione shrieked happily. "I'm so glad to see you!"

Malfoy quirked a brow. "Well, now I'm certain you're polyjuiced, Granger. You're admitting you missed my gorgeous mug?"

"I'm spoken for, Malfoy," she reminded him, tapping her collar. "Oh, I have something for you!"

She reached into her robe and pulled out the letter and handed it to him. At his fearful look, Hermione gave him what she thought was a comforting smile. "It's not from him, Malfoy. It's from your dad. He dropped me off at the platform and told me to get it to you."

"My father dropped you off? As a wanted criminal?" Malfoy shoved Nott down a seat to sit next to her. "OK, Granger, give it to me. How are they? Tortured? In prison? My father won't tell me anything in this letter, so just tell me what is happening with them."

"They're fine, Malfoy," Hermione reassured him. "Actually, I would think your father was in his favour with how they were sipping tea together this morning."

Blaise laughed outright at that, earning all of the looks from around the table.

"I'm sorry," Blaise chuckled, "but he drinks something as mundane as tea? Not the blood of virgins?"

At the word *virgin* Hermione's blood ran cold. She clenched her hands, trying to retain some movement instead of freezing outright. It was just the previous last night that she had been forced to relive it. Her magic curled around her protectively, reminding her of the wholeness that came from her pain. She took deep breaths.

"Shoot, Granger, are you having a panic attack?" Daphne reached over, grabbing her hand.

"Not quite," Hermione murmured. "Sorry, give me a minute, I'll be fine."

Luckily, Dumbledore got up before the others could ask what the trigger was. He twinkled out to the students with a look of grandfatherly affection.

"It's the beginning of the end," Dumbledore announced to them all. "Namely, the end of the year. We welcome you all back to classes and hope you will do well to honour the houses and homes you represent over the remaining few months. Now, before we begin the feast, I have a few announcements.

"Firstly," Dumbledore continued, "our Astronomy classes will be held on the school grounds due to some construction necessary to keep the tower from wobbling. That being said, please hold your romantic rendezvous elsewhere for the time being."

The hall tittered with laughter, while Hermione was waiting anxiously for the announcement most
would hate.

"Secondly, for those of you desiring extra help in OWLS or NEWTS studying, Professor Sinistra has offered to supervise student-led tutoring sessions in her classroom each Thursday night at seven. I advise all of you with exams to consider attending.

"And finally," Dumbledore's eyes fixed on hers briefly, and she unconsciously let her magic erect a shield around her skin, "we've had a student recently re-sorted. I'm sure Slytherin will welcome Miss Hermione Granger as one of their own. Let the feast begin!"

Nobody focused on the food. Hermione could see the Slytherins around her subtly holding onto their wands, as if expecting an attack. The Great Hall was loud and noisy with cries of indignation or concern. Hermione couldn't help it, her eyes slid over to the Gryffindor table to find her friends. Her heart stopped.

Ron looked furiously at her, as if he couldn't understand it. Harry, though, was the hardest to see. One look at his face told her he was blaming himself for what happened to her, and she felt her gut clench guiltily. It wasn't his fault she went in blindly, performing illegal magic. But she couldn't speak to him, per the Headmasters instructions. She tried to ignore the clenching in her stomach as she turned back to the table and put some salad onto her plate, determined to eat but finding everything else looked like it was too much. Mammsy would kill her for only having a little to eat, but she honestly couldn't get much past the lead stone that seemed lodged in her gut.

No one dared to speak against the teachers, but the murmurs continued all throughout dinner. The meal ending wasn't the end of the buzzing. People swarmed together in gossiping droves, but her Slytherin entourage directed her away from them. They didn't stop Harry from approaching though, and they parted so her friend could approach.

"Harry, you can't talk to me," Hermione pleaded with him.

"No, I can't. But I can do this." He gathered Hermione in a hug, pulling her tightly against him. Hermione felt her throat clench. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm so, so sorry."

Hermione felt her arms shake as she went to put them around her brother. "I'm sorry too, Harry. I'm sorry I failed you."

"Don't you dare, 'Mione," Harry held her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "I've been thinking for days on what I would say to you when I saw you, and you're going to let me say it."

Hermione shut her lips.

"Hermione, I may not be able to spend any time with you this year, but that doesn't mean you're any less of a friend," Harry told her. "This week was a wakeup call, Hermione. I'm going to do anything in my power to beat him, and I'm going to get you free. I promise."

Hermione started tearing up. "Harry . . ."

"You both are lucky I remembered silencing charms," Draco inputted from the sidelines.

"Shut it, Malfoy," just about everyone chorused.

There was a hint of silence. "Hermione, Dumbledore told us what happened to you."

Hermione reared on Harry. The pity in his eyes was evident, and it tore at her. She couldn't face that with him. Not with her brother-like friend who already felt guilty enough. "Harry, please,
"But..." He looked at her with such hurt on her behalf.

She glared at him. "Harry Potter, if you look at me like a victim one more time I will hex you."

Harry's bowed his head in shame. "I didn't mean to, 'Mione."

"I know. Believe me, I'm know, but..." she pushed the words out, even though they hurt her heart, "you need to go, Harry. I love you so much, but I can't be your friend until this is over."

"I will end it," Harry vowed, fixing his green eyes on hers. "For you."

They hugged tightly aware that it was goodbye until the end. With a final glance, Harry disappeared into the crowd of people leaving the Great Hall, and Hermione felt the loss of his leaving. She needed to be alone now. She needed to run.

She sped through her new group of friends and into the side-passageway that led to the Great Lake. The echoes in the hallways alerted her to Malfoy chasing after her, calling her last name. Hermione kept running, hoping to get him to leave her alone. She needed to transform. She felt herself shutting down, and needed to be free of humanity if only for a few minutes. When she reached the exit from the castle, she jumped without a second thought before landing as a margay.

Before she could take another step in her for, she found herself swept up in the familiar smeling arms of Draco Malfoy. He held her a small length away from his body, observing her. She gave him an irritated hiss that made him smirk.

"Never expected you to be the illegal type, Granger," Malfoy announced. "Probably shouldn't let anyone see you shift, though, as it kind of defeats the purpose of being illegal, doesn't it. Still, you are quite beautiful like this, as ... well, as whatever you are, it is a shame not to show anyone. Well, I give you permission to change in front of me anytime you want now."

He winked. "Now, do you want to switch back now? It feels weird flirting with a cat."

Hermione refused to reply, instead curling into his arms. He had to pull her close to his chest to avoid dropping her.

"Granger, I may not like Potter, but I don't know what he said to make you run like that," Malfoy told her. "It all sounded fine to me. And yet, whatever it was, it was bad enough that you're now a cat and refusing to turn back. Should I go hex him?"

Hermione hissed and clawed at his arm, making him yelp. "Bloody hell, Granger, OK, I'll leave Potter alone. Sheesh. Well, come on, if it wasn't him, you should shift back."

She refused with a shake of her head. Draco sighed. "Fine, but no hissing or biting me while I carry you, OK? I think you and I need to go for a walk."

Hermione had no intention of switching back to human yet, but she felt tempted to do it just so that Malfoy would drop her. Still, the feeling of being carried against his chest was comforting, and she let herself be held against his seeker's chest.

"I don't think you'll mind Uncle Severus knowing about this, will you?" Malfoy asked her. "I'm taking us down to the dungeons. He's probably more who you want to talk to right now, although he likes Potter nearly as much as I do. But still, whatever happened to you, Severus probably
knows about it. I don't know what Potter was talking about, what You-Know-Who did to you, but he will. Unless you'd like to tell me?"

Hermione shook her head resolutely, eyes still firmly shut.

"OK then."

Draco pushed open the door to the Potions Master's room and Hermione opened her eyes. Snape was reading at his desk, but upon seeing Draco with a strange cat in his arms he shut his book and rose from his desk.

"I'm surprised Miss Granger allowed you to see her form," Snape drawled.

"You knew?" Draco groaned. "Granger, you're killing me. I thought I finally got one up on my godfather."

Draco held her out to Professor Snape, who merely quirked a brow as he accepted her into his arms. He smelt nice, like herbs and masculinity. Hermione buried her face into his robes. "Why are you giving me my student?"

"She got depressed after her run-in with Potter and won't shift back," Draco told him. "Something about Potter knowing what the Dark Lord did to her, I don't know what that means. Since you two are friends..."

"Repeat that sentiment to anyone outside this room and you will feel my ire, Draco," Snape warned him severely.

"Whatever you say," Draco said. "Now, will you help her?"

"I think depressed cats are more Minerva's specialty," Snape remarked sarcastically, "however, Miss Granger will be cared for. You have my word."

Draco nodded and with a final glance at Hermione shuffled through to the delinquent chambers. Snape looked at the cat in his arms for a moment, before deciding something. He took her through to his own chambers so he could sit her upon his lap, sitting upon his highbacked armchair. He didn't speak, and for once Miss Granger was incapable of speech herself. He suspected that part of becoming an animal was intentional on her part, as she wouldn't be forced to speak of what ailed her. He had his own guess.

They had gone over multiple times in their occlumency lessons her disgust at her own feelings for the Dark Lord, but her shields were so strong over her memories of her violation that Severus and her had never addressed the assured lingering problems. There were so many things that could result from such a traumatic experience, such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, and more. He had yet to see her exhibit anything but anxiety and guilt, although from Minerva's description of her in the Hospital Wing she'd had associative post-traumatic stress for the first bit as well.

He hadn't thought Potter would tell her he knew what had happened, but he knew that had put her into this state. What he didn't know was how to convince her to leave it. He stroked the dense collection of spots just behind her ears, clearly meant to represent her hair, and thought the best thing to do for Miss Granger was to tell her why.

"Your capture was brought to their attention after I first saw you in the Dark Lord's chambers," Snape told her quietly. "They were with the rest of the Order and with your parents, awaiting word of your whereabouts. Because of the nature of your capture, we naturally had to ask those closest to you as to whether you remained virginial, and Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter were the best suspects
for any romantic entanglements. From that point, we could not keep them from knowing what was to befall you, and that it had once you returned to us."

Severus sighed. "So, yes, those members of the Order who need to know do, as do your friends and your parents. All other have no clue. Certainly not Mundungus, the rat. I could present you with a comprehensive list, if you like?"

He heard a little cat scoff, and assumed, if she wasn't coughing up a hairball, that it was a laugh. "Unfortunately, Miss Granger, though this is a personal failure and tragedy for you, it is also could be pivotal in the war. I would wish for no young woman to experience what you did, and even less wish for her to have it common knowledge. Yet, that is your lot. You can remain in this state if you wish, but that will not change or help you confront it."

Severus continued to stroke her, unsure of what to say next. Miss Granger didn't seem to mind, remaining still in his lap.

"For what it's worth, Hermione," Snape experimented with her name, using his voice softly in a way as of yet unfamiliar, "you have a great many friends, all willing to support you. And I, I would be honoured to be counted among their number."

He felt a shift in the magic in the air. Hermione emerged from her cat form and, still perched on his lap, enveloped him in a massive hug. He felt her tears drop onto the shoulder of his robes as she clung to him, sobbing. Hesitantly, slowly, he returned her embrace.

It took a long time, with him taking many minutes before he could be comfortable. Finally, with a final choked sob, Hermione leaned away just enough to look at him. "Thank you, Professor. Thank you."

For the first time in his adult life, he restrained the tears that threatened to fill his vision at the sight of the curly-haired witch looking at him with gratitude in her own tear-filled eyes. He felt a nearly paternal attachment to the girl, and he knew he would do anything she asked to provide her happiness. He swallowed heavily. "I believe, as your friend, it might be appropriate for you to call me Severus in private."

Her watery smile made his heart warm. "Thank you, Severus. I'm glad to have you on my side."

"Always," he promised her. He tucked her into his chest and held her tightly there, as if she were his own spawn. "I will protect you from now on."
Chapter 22

Returning that night, she expected nothing but to curl up under Voldemort's hand and continue reading *Merlin's Treatise on Magic*. When she apparated into their shared room, however, she found a strange sight.

Voldemort was holding flowers. Holding flowers and *smiling*. Hermione froze where she stood.

"Miss Granger," Voldemort purred at her, drifting closer. "These are for you."

She mechanically accepted the floral bouquet and he seemed pleased at her acceptance. He led her over to the balcony, looking over the back of the mansion. There was a table set up with champagne flutes, cheeses and berries. It would have been romantic for Hermione, except … this man was the megalomaniac looking to kill her friends. Her stomach felt the anxiety of being in this situation and liking it, trying to convince her to either throw up on the resident Dark Lord or on her own shoes. She wasn't sure if the tight clenching would win out or not.

"I figured you'd need a treat after your stressful day."

Hermione looked at him, and he looked genuinely proud of his setup. She felt put off by his self-assured behavior. There was no doubt in his mind that she would be receptive to his advances, and it disconcerted her.

"What is going on?" Hermione finally spoke, her voice cracking slightly.

"Why, I believe I'm courting my *wife*," Voldemort joked lightly. "Come, sit. I have more treats for you tonight."

His blatant confession only continued to confuse her, and she sat opposite him. As she watched him pour the champagne, she felt questions forming but could only get out statements. "You've never called me that before."

Voldemort grinned at her. "I find I'm no longer as opposed to the idea as I was. You are, after all, quite a powerful and beautiful young woman, Miss Granger."

Again, he looked pleased at his own compliment. It was throwing her off kilter.

"I-eh, what?"

Voldemort chuckled at her speechlessness and passed her the champagne before clinking his glass to hers. She didn't drink first, worried it would be drugged, but Voldemort sipped his delicately in front of her. He looked at the champagne with a sort of … affection? She was confused, but then he explained.

"I had no sense of taste when I came back, you know," he murmured, holding up the class of champagne for inspection in the candlelight. "All food tasted the same, all drinks were wasted on me. And now that my body is revived, I find myself enjoying these little things all the more. The past week has been a heaven I had never dreamed of having again."

Hermione was startled by his observation, as it reminded her peculiarly of Dumbledore and his theory that Voldemort was a new man now. Voldemort wanted to court her, and Dumbledore wanted her to figure out if he truly had a heart now. The path forward was paved for her. She sipped her own champagne, contemplative.
"So that's why I'm here?" Hermione queried. "I gave you back the ability to taste and you're rewarding me for it?"

"You gave me much more, Miss Granger," Voldemort's eyes gleamed at her in the subtle darkness, haunting and caressing all in one, "but I would not celebrate that feat with you, as it is. No, this is simply to take joy in life, for the moment we have it."

Hermione nearly choked on the berry she plopped in her mouth. He hadn't made his declaration sound sinister, but the too cheery tone made it even more of a subtle threat to her. She decided that she would say whatever he wanted to know about the day, in the off-chance he was mad about something. I simple wandless charm checked the berries and cheese for potions and poisons just to be safe.

He noticed.

"I'm not going to poison you," he insisted, leaning back in his chair. "This is for you. I want to hear about your day, listen to your concerns regarding out situation, and then present you with a few gifts from myself. So, tell me, how did your classmates take the change of house?"

He was speaking to assuredly and quickly for Hermione to question each individual point. It left only the final question to be answered if she were to be polite, and since he'd had time to pick up further prisoners she wasn't going to test him.

Hermione sipped thoughtfully. She didn't want to out her new group's parents, so she refused to speak of her Slytherin friends. That left her with only awkward generalities or . . . "I'm sure you know already."

"Oh?" Voldemort inquired. "And how would I know that?"

"You didn't ask anyone to keep an eye on me?" Hermione demanded.

Voldemort shook his head. "Severus is my sole active connection in the school, and I do not call him for daily reports. Now, please, tell me about your day."

Hermione hesitated, but related the events of the train-ride and feast, and spending time with Severus. She skipped over the talk of Harry, but intentionally left in the bit where Malfoy returned to his friends and where he found out her Animagus form because of her stress. She had expected him to react poorly to the news about the Malfoy heir, considering the state he was in in the Malfoy dungeons, but surprisingly he looked pleased.

"I shall have to covertly reward my followers for making your transition easier," Voldemort assessed after she had finished her story. "Their children and their concern is welcome, of course?"

"I think we can be friends," Hermione said carefully, "so, yes, it is welcomed. Why do you care if I fit in or not?"

Voldemort smirked. "Haven't I made it clear how much I value you, Miss Granger? Anything you require for your comfort as my bonded-one is my honour to provide, if you but ask. Every pleasure is yours."

Hermione shivered. He was driving her to drink, she was sure, as she choked back a large mouthful of the champagne to try and keep from engaging him after that comment. Voldemort simply seemed entertained by how he flustered her.

"Now it's your turn," Hermione countered diplomatically, pulling attention away from the lewd
"What does a Dark Lord do during his day?"

"And reveal my diabolical plans to you?" Voldemort chuckled. "Little witch, I spend my days preparing my forces to overhaul the ministry and take out my enemies. The specifics will have to wait."

"Until they come out in the Prophet?" Hermione guessed irritably.

"Exactly."

She took a deep breath and remembered to stay pleasant. "You said there was more to this evening than champagne on the terrace?"

"There are some more things we need to discuss," Voldemort admitted before downing the rest of his champagne. "Tell me, do you enjoy yourself here?"

Voldemort was watching the girl closely. She was trying hard not to reveal her instinctual reactions to him, but it was clear she was shocked and upset. She adorably would open her mouth just a tad, enough for a current of air to make it through, before gritting her teeth and lifting her chin marginally in defiance. It was a proud stance to take, and one that made him hope the lasting damage of the binding might have a chance to fade.

"Enjoy myself as a prisoner?" the little witch asked in offense. "No, I do not. You have been kinder than I thought, and I thank you for that, but I will never enjoy life in a gilded cage."

"Is it a cage or a castle?" Voldemort asked. "You are well fed, cared for, catered to . . . This is a place where you can wait out the war with little concern or effort. A fortress and a kingdom, fit with a princess in a tower waiting for her happy ending."

She fit the role well in his mind. Her idealism untouched as the world flew around, her mind filling with knowledge as she waited for whichever side won to find her and take her for their prize.

"I keep forgetting you lived through the age of absolute misogyny and were dead for the age of equality," Hermione huffed. "Happy endings don't come to people who wait for them, you know. I refuse to be locked away while external forces act upon the landscape that will make the rest of my life."

"You can trust me to act for your benefit, Miss Granger," he supplied earnestly.

That made Hermione snort derisively.

"Because I can trust you to be a decent human being?" Hermione grimaced. "I can't pretend you're not out there killing people in their homes."

"They're people who would see you dead."

This stilled Hermione's rage slightly. "They are allies of the Order, or people who simply don't like you. Why would they want me dead? If it's just the bond then-"

"It's the old magic, not the bond," Voldemort told her simply. "Why do you think I advocate a pureblood reign?"

"Because you think they have superior blood?" Hermione sneered.

He shook his head, amused. "I advocate the rule of old families like the Gaunts and the Malfoys"
because they are families steeped in tradition, with more knowledge about magic and the wizarding world than is ever taught at Hogwarts. Their blood has traces of the old magic that once pervaded their family lines; they have a respect for it, and I want to bring it back.

"But where there is power, there is also fear," Voldemort elaborated. "More power in the hands of the masses would be the result of my little revolution, and you can see why so many would oppose it. Wizegamot won't allow it, as they want to keep themselves happily situated on top. The Ministry won't have it, seeing it as a security threat and fearful of the challenge of raising a nation with that sort of force. Dumbledore, despite his own dabbling in the subject, does not feel the risk of the loss of some during he ritual constitutes a reason to dismiss it."

"They are still people," Hermione told him. "Dumbledore's right! Each life has value, magical or not. And even if the ritual didn't kill some in the process, which you've told me it does, you can't tell me you intend to force everyone to participate in the ritual, do you? That's barbaric!"

"Force won't be necessary," he purred, eyes gleaming. "Witches and wizards will perform the ritual for the power, and then those who do not will be mocked as weak for refusing the power in front of them. People will assume that any who refuse would have died in the ritual circle because they lack the strength, and to defend themselves in honour or from the harm that may befall them at the hands of another, more powerful, opponent, they will then perform the ritual anyways."

"And what about the muggles?" Hermione accused.

Voldemort waved his hand dismissively. "They will live, but we will reveal ourselves. The hierarchy will establish itself naturally."

"Meaning the magical will rule, and the muggles will serve," Hermione ground her teeth.

"While they hope and search for ways to ensure muggleborn offspring," Voldemort agreed with a grin. "My hope is that we discover exactly what makes some people magical and what makes others not. Then we can effectively eliminate muggles entirely in favour of creating an all-magical world."

"They have science, advanced thinking that the magical world hasn't taken to learning," Hermione objected. "Why would you want to eliminate the diversity of thinking that would come from integrating the two worlds?"

"Magic resolves whatever our thinking cannot," Voldemort argued. "They would be a redundant feature of society, only good as workers and not fit for anything else. Power is what would matter, and they are at a deficit."

"You underestimate them," Hermione snapped. "Do you really believe that a violence and power-based society will be better? A society where there's always a better person, based on who could win in a duel? That's not how humans work, it's not what they need. We need a society based on understanding, caring, love-"

"Blind girl!" Voldemort roared. "What good does any of that do? Caring and love, they make all men, even the lesser, equal to the greatest. And for what? Muddling about in mediocrity. With the scent of power in the air men reach and progress and improve, just to show their own strength. It is how the weak are rid from the world and we improve."

"It's not right!" Hermione protested. "There are no weak and no powerful, Voldemort, only people. People who are given the chance to struggle and improve without the need for threats or a power struggle. People are inherently good, who have so much to offer just by existing."
"They are vicious animals fighting over scraps of meat," Voldemort put forth, his eyes narrow. "Inherently selfish and looking out for their own base desires to feed, mate, and dominate. But that is for their own betterment, for only a fool would choose a stranger over himself."

Hermione's heart broke. She remembered the image of a small, skinny and broken Tom Riddle, maybe ten years old, working the farm in the back of the orphanage with nothing but his hands. The way it was, where each orphan had as much chance of living through the next bombing as they did of dying of disease, overworking, or starvation. For someone who survived such a thing incapable of feeling love or affection . . . he would have been forced to be an animal, taking every advantage he could, just to survive the next day. And that's a Slytherin point of pride; they survive.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Hermione murmured, her pity for the man breaking through. "I leave the victor to his spoils."

Hermione strode away from the table, leaving Voldemort with the table of treats and a confused expression on his face. If she had looked she would have seen him gone the moment she returned from the restroom and crawled into bed with his familiar, but she was poignantly ignoring him, hoping the lesson she was expressing was getting through. If he truly wanted her company, he was proving his own philosophy wrong. He was proving that even he had more than just those base desires.

With the tension still rolling off her, she fell into a fitful sleep, where the red eyes and pain were replaced with a small, hungry boy with the iciest blue eyes.
The next day was just as challenging as the former.

Hermione didn't know why, but she had expected Voldemort to be there when she woke. She expected an apology, or an explanation. Instead, she received an ominous note.

'Miss Granger,

We will continue where we left off last night when you return from Hogwarts. I would recommend an empty stomach.'

He didn't sign it, but he didn't need to. She kept looking at it all over breakfast, but she could see the meaning being either sinister or reconciliatory. Either he was going to horrify her enough to worry about her losing her meal, or he was intending to have a dinner with her to continue their late-night conversation in earnest.

Mammsy knew nothing. She simply came in with food and then got her ready, not giving her any ideas as to her master's plans for the night. So, the moment Mammsy had finished wrapping her in her robes and fastening her hair in an intricate braided bun, she apparated to one person who might – Snape.

Unfortunately, she wasn't paying attention when she honed in on his familiar hint of magic, and she ended up apparating directly into his bedroom.

"MISS GRANGER!" Snape shouted. Hermione shut her eyes instinctively.

"I'm sorry!" Hermione shrieked. "I'm sorry, I didn't check, I'm sorry!"

"OUT!"

Hermione ran out of the door which led to the delinquent chambers, bumping into Malfoy. He was looking at her with wide eyes.

"Is he alright?" Malfoy asked. "It sounded like he was dying in there."

"Oh God," Hermione moaned, burying her face in her hands. "He's going to kill me. He's going to hex me blind, just for the cruel irony. Malfoy, are there spells to clean out your brain with soap?"

It took Malfoy a moment to deduce what happened, and like a pin dropping, he started cracking up.

"It's not funny!" Hermione shrieked. "I just saw your godfather naked!"

Draco couldn't speak for laughing. Hermione was standing there with a most-likely bright red face, and Malfoy was leaning against a wall with pure delight on his face as he laughed so hard it became hard to breath. In that state, to everyone's horror, Severus Snape stepped into the passageway.

Hermione was terrified at the glint in his eyes and ran to hide behind Malfoy, who finally stopped laughing when his self-preservation kicked in. He tried to jump out of the way, but Hermione moved with him, earning an indignant cry.

"Granger! I'm not getting hexed because you saw his bollocks!" Draco yelped.
"Silence!" Snape roared.

Hermione's heart was beating in her chest as Snape glared with his coal-black eyes.

"Well, Miss Granger?" Snape growled. "Do you have a reason for appearing in my chambers early in the morning, or shall we get on with assigning detention?"

"I'm sorry!" Hermione squeaked. "I just wanted your opinion on something!"

"On what, Miss Granger?" he sneered. "Quickly, please."

Hermione extended the hand with the crumpled note from Voldemort, offering it to him. He read it over and frowned into it. He reread it several times, given how much time had passed.

"Draco, I suggest you finish getting dressed for breakfast," he finally announced. "Miss Granger and I have business to attend to."

"Come on," Malfoy complained, before he caught the look on his godfather's face. "OK, OK, I'm leaving."

Severus corralled Hermione from her place along the wall and led her to the hallway and across to his office. A complicated set of privacy charms later and Hermione was sat across from him, the crumpled note between them.

"Explain."

Hermione did. She explained the previous night, from him calling her his wife to their argument. His face grew grave at her description of the end of the night, and became contemplative when she finished.

"Miss Granger, I'm surprised no one died because you," Snape told her frankly, "but this is not going to be good. I have no idea why the Dark Lord would be trying to win your favour, but I would not hesitate to use it to win his mercy tonight. Do what you must tonight, with no hesitation, if you want to prevent unnecessary death."

"There's no chance he'll just want to continue the conversation?" Hermione pleaded.

"No." He crumpled the parchment up and burnt it to ash on the desk. "And your rosy perspective where he's concerned does your intelligent little credit."

Hermione nodded. Telling Professor Snape everything was therapeutic, moreso because he had never judged her for finding some good qualities in the resident Dark Lord. But his criticism cut harshly just for that reason. She couldn't bear to share the most innermost workings of her mind out loud, because if he had chosen not to mention it in his purview with Legilimency, to open up the subjects again where he couldn't ignore it would mean his disapproval would be voiced.

He rose from his desk and motioned for her to do the same. "You will stay away as long as you can tonight, Miss Granger, and we will use that time to train your Occlumency barriers. Simply a precaution, but we have no idea what the Dark Lord expects of you, or what he plans to do to unravel you. Immediately following dinner, Miss Granger, I'll collect you from your room. Right now, however, we must go join the school."

He opened the door for her, his face suddenly a shade darker. "I hope I need not remind you that if you breathe a word of this morning to anyone, you will wish you were never born."
She gulped. "Yes, sir."

She and Snape separated as soon as they hit the hallway, both aware that a friendship between the two of them was not something that they wanted publicized. Hermione didn't mind; the Slytherin table welcomed her surprisingly well, and he'd given her enough to think about when he'd confirmed her worst fears.

She was happily distracted from what would be a depressing day of simply waiting for the heat of her collar by classes. History of Magic, where she handed in the essay she'd done what seemed like an eon ago, and Care of Magical Creatures, where they had a practical lessons on glumbumbles, both presented wonderful distractions to the anticipation. Unfortunately, Hagrid seemed convinced that she'd be depressed, because when describing the induced melancholy produced by consuming the treacle they secreted he was looking at her specifically. She shuffled uncomfortably at that, and used an opportunity to spew facts as a way to soothe the gentle half-giant.

The all-Slytherin defense class, however, went just as badly as she could have expected. After depositing their essays on Dark spells and their categorizations, Snape swirled to the front of the room and onto the dueling platform that had existed in the class for the entire year up to this point.

"Thusfar, you have been talk the necessary defensive spells to hopefully survive a fight with a dark wizard," Snape drawled. "However, you do not want to survive a fight, you want to win. When your combatant displays their comfort in ending your own life, and not in just any duel, you must not hesitate to use dangerous and even lethal spells. If you are outnumbered, for example, what would happen if you simply stunned an opponent?"

A Slytherin girl raised her hand. "One of the others could revive them."

"5 points," Snape said as his sole agreement. "For this reason, if you are outnumbered you fightyou're your life and they sacrifice theirs. Spells that will maim, seriously injure, or kill your opponent that are not considered dark will aid you greatly in battle, particularly if you can cast them wordlessly. The first I will teach you today is the severing curse. Go to your practice dummies, and if I see one wand pointed at a fellow student after I made myself clear that this is a dangerous spell, so help me your children will have detention with Filch until they graduate."

They all approached their dummies, and Hermione hoped he wouldn't call her out for not taking her wand out. It was there, in her pocket, but she had promised a certain Dark Lord not to use it for learning spells if he was going to allow her her schooling. It needed to remain pocketed.

"The wand movement is simple enough," Professor Snape told the, drawing their eyes from their supposed enemies. "A simple slashing motion across whatever limb you wish to remove from your foe, as the incantation, *praetrunco*, reaches the final syllable. Face your dummies and practice the motion and timing."

Hermione turned to her dummy, but only had her hand. She nonverbally cast the severing curse, breaking off the dummy's wand arm. Before she could move to the other limbs, Snape had moved in and grabbed her hand. The class froze.

"What do you think you're doing, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape demanded. "This is a wand-based exercise. Where is yours?"

"In my pocket," Hermione grimaced.

"Then use it to cast," Snape ordered firmly.
Hermione bit her lip. "I can't."

Snape's brow rose as the class murmured around them. "I'm sure you could find the strength to lift a simple stick, Miss Granger. Let's be honest, shall we? Are you refusing to take out your wand for the exercise?"

"Yes."

"Regardless of the consequences?" He saw the look in her face and instinctively knew the person who'd prevented her from doing so. She nodded. "You can sit out this lesson until you feel prepared to obey my instruction. If, by the end of class, you still feel incapable of doing so, I will see you at five for detention."

"Yes, sir."

Not much of a punishment, but she was in a class of Slytherins. Malfoy looked confusedly at her, but the others looked genuinely concerned, like she'd lost her wand with Voldemort. She sat down at her desk and took out her textbook, not looking to force him into punishing her. The class went by slowly enough, letting her leave with the other Slytherins and with a covertly reassuring smile at Professor Snape.

"What were you doing, Granger?" Malfoy whispered to her when they'd exited to the hallway.

"I'm forbidden from using my wand in lessons," she informed him. "It was one of the things he told me he needed if I was going to come back."

"The Dark Lord ordered you to not use your wand?" Draco said incredulously. "Seriously?"

She nodded glumly. "He wants me to use wandless magic proficiently, and he told me to accept any punishments that come from refusing the professors."

"That must be killing your inner swot," Draco smirked at her.

She feigned a dramatic heart attack. "Oh, my poor heart. However will I survive?"

The other teachers were impressed with her wandless magic and didn't force her to use her wand like Snape had, so the rest of the day went fine. Fine, that is, until in the last class of the day where the extremely simple base of the Polyjuice potion that she had brewed alone, in a girl's bathroom in her Second Year, kept coming out wrong! It was a Double Potions class, and she should have been able to finish the base within the first third of it.

She had called Professor Slughorn over, telling him she had brewed it before and had never had this issue. He had simply looked at the base and frowned. "Well, my dear, I suppose you'll just need to start again. It's alright you know, it takes a month to brew, after all. I'm sure you'll manage to create one."

He left her alone with the distinct impression that he was disappointed, which frustrated her to no end. so she tried again, measuring everything out perfectly and timing to the millisecond the stirs. She tried to recreate the base TWICE with her full and complete attention, sure she'd done better than in second year, and she had still failed. Slughorn was entirely unhelpful, and when she asked Draco he went over all her steps and told her he couldn't tell what was wrong. Frustrated, Hermione left the second the bell sounded to find Professor Snape. Slughorn was an idiot, and she needed a Potions Master.

She found him fixing his desks and the target dummies against the walls in his Defense class.
"To what do I owe the privilege of your company more than an hour before detention, Miss Granger?" Severus smirked at her. "Not an apology for class, surely?"

"Hardly," Hermione scoffed. Immediately, she rescinded. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to be disrespectful."

"I doubt that highly, as your display in class spoke volumes," he chuckled. He motioned her to join him at his desk, and she approached happily. "Tell me, was it the Dark Lord who ordered your insubordination?"

She nodded. "He told me, in no uncertain terms, to accept detention rather than use a wand in class. I thought it was cutting close today."

Severus shook his head humorously. "I suppose it's forgivable. I had planned on finding a reason to keep you later this evening at any rate, just in case the Dark Lord wanted to know where you'd been. You provided an excellent opportunity."

Hermione grinned sheepishly. "That's fair."

"Now, what is the issue?"

"Please tell me I'm not losing it," Hermione pleaded, pulling out her sheet of paper. "I followed these instructions explicitly for polyjuice, and it's not exactly a recipe I'm unfamiliar with. But the base keeps coming out as just a liquid, with no pin-straight white smoke streams and unable to dissolve the boomslang skin! All Professor Slughorn told me was to try again. I tried three times in class today, but it kept coming out the exact same! That man couldn't tell me anything!"

Snape glanced at the parchment fleetingly before placing it on his desk with a nod. "Tell me, does your wand feel … compliant?"

Hermione grimaced. "No, sir." And she certainly wasn't proud of it.

"Not since the bonding, or even the ritual, correct?" Severus guessed. Again, she nodded. "This is a surprisingly common problem to fix, Miss Granger, but it does necessitate a new wand."

"The simple way to explain it is that each potion where you use wands to stir is a form of unconscious magic," Snape said in full lecture-mode. "As potions is a delicate art, it is nearly impossible for the unconscious magic to be pulled from you if your wand is not compatible. I believe you are aware that Messers Weasley and Longbottom both had inherited wands and both performed poorly in my class, correct?"

"It was because of their wands?" Hermione gasped. "Then, why did you never …?"

"State in no uncertain terms that they would fail if they continued to use their second-hand wands for my class?" he finished. "I did, many times, but no Gryffindor heeds my advice. They assumed I was diverting blame for my teaching onto them or trying to rile them up about their parentage instead of taking my words as the law they are."

He rifled through his desk for a moment and grabbed a small sack of Galleons. "I will advise the Headmaster that we will be leaving the school. I presume you can apparate us to my home at Spinner's End? From there, I can take us to a French wandmaker's shop known as L'Autre Main. Not Ollivanders, obviously, but should the wands they carry not speak to you, they do custom work that may very well be more appropriate for your unique situation."

"You don't need to, sir" Hermione quickly asserted. "I'm sure if I told the Dark Lord, he'll insist on
it. He insisted I would receive anything I wanted last night."

Before a horrible conversation about politics that would have left even the best optimist angry and depressed, but Snape didn't need to know that. Hermione only hoped the discomfort at her own suggestion didn't show.

"I will inform him of our trip myself, stipulating what an honour it was to serve his objectives, then," Severus sneeringly told her. "In the meantime, I'd rather not have him attempt to kidnap another wandmaker, wouldn't you? If you're taken care of, he will hopefully let it be and the populace will be all the safer."

When it looked like she was still going to protest, he gave her a look. "Hermione, I told you I'd look after you, and I intend to keep my word. Now, can you apparate us directly to my home?"

She hesitated, but threw her magic out in search of one that matched his own magical signature. She found the building far from any of the others, seemingly in the middle of nowhere with no other magical signatures nearby.

She withdrew, and nodded. "I found it."

"Good." Withdrawing his own wand, Severus conjured a raven patronus and relayed the message. "Shall we?"

Despite her friendship with him, it seemed strange to be close to him enough to side-along. Still, he extended his arm and she took it. After a few deep breaths to ensure she didn't splinch her Professor, she threw them through the wards around the school and off to Spinner's End.

Hermione had wanted to look around the Snape home, but the second she landed on the property the pull of side-along informed her that Severus wasn't wasting any time pulling her off across the Chanel. She let herself be pulled through the tiny point in space, and the tunnel deposited both her and her professor on a cobbled drive. Wizards and witches passed them by with a cursory look at her uniform, but said nothing.

"Follow me."

She kept at the heels of the billowing robes, moving with him down the cobbled path. It was clear to everyone around them that they were English, so some sneers were directed at her and hers. They kept moving.

Severus finally led the to a wonderfully antique-looking shop that felt more like an old German home rather than a store, with its exposed wooden beams and plaster exterior. Just a simply post out front with a picture of a wand, and underneath in freshly painted green the name L'Autre Main, depuis 514 BC. It looked very homey, if less mystical than Ollivanders had appeared to her eleven-year-old self.

Severus led her through the front door. Compared to Ollivander's, this room was sparsely populated with wands. Ollivanders had shelves and shelves and shelves with wands, but this room was nicely decorated in pictures of creatures and trees, with only three sets of shelves with the blue-boxed wands. One right behind the counter, and two on the walls before two hallways. The ring of the bell overhead was clearly to call the wandmaker, who took a moment before appearing in the hallways to the right, wiping her hands on a cloth and greeting them both with a cheerful smile.

"Bonjour monsieur, mademoiselle," the woman greeted. "Bienvenue. Tu peux m'appeler Mme.
DuBois, et je suis à votre service. Puis-je t'aider aujourd'hui?"

"Pardon, Madame, mais parlez-vous Anglais?" Herimione asked.

"Ah, British?" The woman guessed, putting her rag down on the counter. "But of course, I speak English, even if it was learned from Americans. Can't get some of ze rarer wand cores from zose silly people without ze language. Now, vat vas it you need, sweet?"

Hermione pulled out her wand and placed it on the woman's desk with a sad look. "I seem to have outgrown my wand. It's not working for me anymore."

"Terrible, dear," Mme. Dubois picked up the wand carefully, assessing the quality and make. "Any chance it iz unicorn hair? Zose do die sometimes, and it would be a simple matter to replace."

"Dragon heartstring," Hermione informed her. "The wood is vine."

"Hmmm, and it really doesn't answer to you anymore," the woman was lifting the wand carefully, turning it one way and another, as if she could see the bond "Yes, vine vas never fickle, but it tends towards zose whose magic is linked vith nature and life, zose who zould preserve it but also zose vith hidden strengths. I zould guess zat your strength is no longer hidden, hmm?"

She placed the wood down on the desk and went over to one of the shelves. "We're not like Ollivanders here, vith all his sure-fire recipe wands. He only uses ze three cores, you know? Phoenix feazzer, unicorn hair, and dragon heartstring. Zey make good wands, excellent wands, to be sure, but zey are safe, so don't be surprised if your pair is cored vith a kneazle whisker or a fairy wing."

She pulled a box from the shelf and pulled from it a beautiful red wand, holding it out to her.

"Bloodwood and phoenix feazzer," the lady announced. "Powerful combination, but a little fiery. It has the ability for the earth magic zat your old wand had, but zis one tends to be more balanced between ze elements."

Hermione took it into her hand carefully, then pointed it at the rag the proprietor had left on the table. "Wingardium Leviosa."

The rag promptly shot up in the air and, upon falling back to the desk, began to smoke. Mme. DuBois took the wand immediately and boxed it.

"A bit too fiery, I think," the woman announced. "Not quite your balance, hmm?" She sorted through the shelves a little. "What does your magic lean towards? Do you have a favourite subject?"

Hermione bit her lip. Normally, she would have said charms. But remembering the ritual circles … "Healing, Madame. It tends to power and healing."

"Zat's a better answer zan I normally get," the woman told her, a grin on her face. "You have a knowledgeable mind zen, with some honest introspection, a good quality. Power and healing as well, one indistinguishing of ze friend or ze foe, and ze other impartial but kind, but both can be served by passion. Hmm… an aspen wand next, I zink."

She pulled one out from the stacks, revealing a beautifully polished wand. "Aspen and unicorn hair, thirteen inches."

It looked fine, but when Hermione reached out for it, her magic recoiled from it as if it was the
opposite of what it wanted.

"That's not for me," Hermione told the woman, whose eyebrows shot up. "My magic doesn't like it."

Hermione really didn't want to get into her new magic with the woman, but she clearly didn't need to. Mme. DuBois was sizing her up and she saw a flash of excitement in the shopkeep's eyes as she regarded her. As if she knew.

"Fascinating," the woman looked Hermione up and down. "Hmm . . . Let's try anozzer with a similar core to your old vand, et peut-être …"

She turned to the bookshelf on Hermione's right, poking at various packages. "You mentioned healing, but is zere any gift for divination?"

Hermione snorted loudly at that. "Not in this life, Madame. I quit after a few weeks of class."

That elicited a chuckle from the owner, but seemed to help with the search. Within a few moments, she'd pulled another box. "I vould like you to try a laurel wand, if you wouldn't mind."

"Why would I mind?"

She seemed hesitant. Professor Snape rumbled from the back of the shop, "Laurel woods are highly sought after by politicians and the like because of some ridiculous notion that a laurel wand – and therefore its owner – cannot perform a dishonourable act. Some view the rejection from such a wand as a judgement on their character. If you are sensitive to the opinions of a piece of wood, you might be devastated."

"Is that all?" Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, then."

She picked up the laurel wand and pointed it at the rag. "Flipendo." The wand refused to cooperate, and the rag moved a little and then stilled, as if it was only a breeze. She returned the wand.

"Zat was a kinder reaction zan most get with laurel," the wandmaker attempted to praise her. "And it shows a better balance, but not quite ze right combination. Hmm . . . Let's see . . . similar balance to ze laurel and dragon, but perhaps vith more of an overt oomph? Something vith more character, I think."

She leaned over the stacks, examining the options. "Vat is it you vant to do vith your life, ma petite?"

Each question seemed to narrow down the wand, so Hermione wished desperately she had an answer, but the collar on her neck mocked her and the question she was posed. She teetered uncomfortably between answering honestly or just lying her way around it.

"No lies," Mme. Dubois called over her shoulder, as if reading her mind. "I don't care if you vant to end up begging on a street corner, but it helps to know vat kind of person the vand vill attach itself to."

Hermione relented. "I don't see me lasting to the end of this conflict, Madame. And even if I do, I may not have the freedom to choose what I do want. I'm sorry I don't have a better answer."

The lighthearted shopkeeper froze briefly in her pursuit before turning to observe her customer. She had seen the war with Grindelwald and heard of the troubles with Britain over the past thirty years. Yet, for one so young to seem so certain she would die . . . A revelation occurred. This girl
was the front lines; whether for real or in her own mind, it made no difference. This changed the wand woods she was looking at. She was looking for a warrior's wand.

Changing gears, Mme. Dubois pulled an older box, a wand she'd made all those years ago for Grindelwald's war.

"Zis might be closer, zen, to vat you'll need," she told Hermione. "Ironwood and phoenix feazzer. One of ze strongest voods and ze most passionate of cores."

Again, it failed to interact properly, but at least with this wand Hermione could hold the rag in the air for more than a moment.

The woman took a moment searching for another wand before coming back with a gorgeous looking brown wand, rich and understated, nestled in its satin-lined box.

"Kingwood and dragon heartstring, an unyielding and stubborn little thing, but loyal," Mme. DuBois described fondly. "I do like carving ze kingwood. It al-vays makes any journey feel like a privilege, as if it is gracing you vith a view of vat you could be at ze end of it all. Much like ze laurel, but less innocent and more wizened, I find."

Hermione reached for it, feeling her magic move over the wand. The magic of the item felt good … but it was off. Like the magic was a wave washing over her, encompassing her, and then, all of sudden, she got a fish to the face. She waved it at the rag and felt the issue immediately – the core. Her magic went to course through it, but ended up erratic and changed.

"The kingwood feels good, but the dragon heartstring messes with my magic," Hermione told the woman, handing it back. "Do you have any other kingwood wands?"

"Not at the moment," she told her. "But ve can custom it. Let me fetch ze cores I have on hand, un moment."

The stately woman moved from the room in an unhurried yet strong gait. Within a few seconds, she'd returned with a large metal box, dropping it onto the counter with a bang.

"Zese are my strange cores," the woman told Hermione as she opened the various locks on the box. "Zere are ze three most common and most popular, but I tend to zink zat ze core zat chooses you will be right no matter vat, even if it comes from a lowly kelpie or a high and mighty nundu. Sorry for being presumptuous, but you don't seem ze phoenix feather or unicorn hair type, so I thought we'd begin ze search with ze beauties."

She lifted the lid, showing a strange collection of feathers, claws, vegetation . . . it seemed like there were pieces of everything in there.

"Not all of zese species are native to Europe," the witch explained, pulling out the top part and dividing it so Hermione could see even more cores underneath. "Zere are quite a few here from Asia and North America, as vell as a few from Africa. If you're looking to find ze perfect match, it might very vell be here."

Hermione was hardly paying attention. Her magic was reaching over the cores, stroking at their magic before searching the next for the match. Two pieces seemed to call more than most, and Hermione was quick to cut of the elder witch.

"Is it normal for two cores to agree with my magic at once?" Hermione asked her.

"Oh, you're already feeling ze bond?" Mme. Dubois' eyes lit up. "Show me vich."
Hermione pointed to the lone brown hair, and then one of the three black claws crowding the upper shelving of her box.

"What are they?"

Mme. Dubois carefully handled both cores, placing them apart from the others. Their mingling magics were more potent, and Hermione found she liked them.

"Zis hair vas one of around thirty I was given by a centaur herd," Mme. DuBois told her fondly. "Zey know ze forests and trees quite vell, and so zey know about the magic of the woods. Zey helped me beaucoup when I was feeling too confined in my vandmaking. Zey're veaker cores, as ze centaur has only ze most mild of magic, so zey nearly always paired with another. Centaurs are exceptionnaly good at healing, I see why it chose you.

"Let's see, ze length, ze brown colour . . ." Mme. DuBois sized up the hair, as if trying to remember something. Then, a spark of recognition. "Zis core was probably from Lena, mate to the herd leader. Didn't see much of her during my time with zem, but zen again, she vas in ze foaling camp. I vas surprised when she offered a hair."

"I can't believe I never knew you could use their tail-hairs for wands." Hermione was awestruck. "What's the other core? Is it just as strange?"

"Ah," Mme. Dubois lifted the claw between two fingers, presenting it artistically for Hermione. "Manticore claw. A rare core, but also a rare item anyways. Zere are not many manticores around, and it's not like zey shed claws like ze thunderbird does feazzers. Zis one I got from a creature who died in Crete. A manticore is fierce, and vands vith zeir claws are used for powerful curses but also ze most amazing charms."

Mme. Dubois looked at the claw, and then at her. "You know, ze manticore iz part lion, ma petite. Zere are many who vould say wands vith zis core bring out bravery in people. Perhaps zis can be a comfort for you in ze war."

The sincerity of her comment had Hermione a little choked up. The idea that despite everything she was still part lion was more comfort than the woman would have guessed in her current Slytherin robes. She cleared her throat, trying to keep the tightness from making her voice creaky.

"I highly doubt Miss Granger needs to be more lionhearted than she currently is," Snape cut emphatically from the sidelines.

Hermione shot him a look before turning to the comforting lady. "Thank you. I can't imagine two cores that would be more perfect."

"Yes, zey do interact vell for you, don't zey?" Mme. DuBois looked at the cores fondly. "Centaur tail hair appeals to the healing magic in you, but both ze cores indicate a certain intelligence and passion, as well as a fighting nature. Avec Kingwood . . . yes, it should be balanced. Manticore claw is certainly powerful enough, je pense, to suit ze wood. It vill be fit for a varrior-queen. Let me just fetch some I have on hand to be sure . . ."

The kindly matron went through to the back, leaving Hermione alone again with Severus.

"I wish there were books on this sort of thing," Hermione told him seriously. That earned a derisive snort. "What? Nobody who crafts magical items talks about it. Not wands, or tents, not cursed items, not goblin-made anythings . . . Imagine reading about the process that went into making the Sword of Godric Gryffindor! Or time-turners! Imagine if you could learn about someone just by
knowing their wand wood and core?"

Severus gave her a quirked brow, his eyes gleaming in amusement. She was glad she could see more into the infamous potion master's facade now, or she would have taken it for an indication to shut up her babbling. Instead, she goaded him. "What do you think, Professor?"

"As always, you rely on books when you should ask those who have the applied knowledge," he drawled. "In intricate arts like crafting magic, the plethora of variables precludes them from being learnt through a text. It is something you learn by feeling what is correct, as opposed to knowing."

"Well, zat is true," the matron returned then with a few different cylinders of wood in her arms, depositing them on the desk. "It took years for me to feel ven a core vas happy with a wood, and to acquire the correct wood to be used anyways. Papa once let me oversee ze purchase of some cedar zat turned out vas as magical as firewood."

The wandmaker touched each cylinder of wood and then brought it closer to Hermione's chosen cores. Finally, she selected the wood and offered it to Hermione, who took it in her hand. It felt nice, but like it could stand on its own where her other wand could not. She nodded, and handed it back.

"Yes, I thought so too," Mme. DuBois told her happily.

As she packaged everything up to move to her back room once again, Severus came behind her in silent financial and personal support. Hermione was grateful to the man, sending him a small smile that he returned with a bob of his head.

"Oh, and before vee settle it . . ." Mme. DuBois picked up her old vine wand from the desk and held it up. "I'm a-vare that wands can have, er – comment-dit-on? Ah, oui – sentimental value, however, if you'd be villing to part vith it for a few galleons zere may be anozzer vitch or vizard who may find it compatible."

"Oh, sure, I'll sell it," Hermione agreed awkwardly. "I hadn't even thought about it."

"Oh, zat's vonderful!" Mme. DuBois thanked the girl. "Don't fret, I vill inform ze future owner that it is an Ollivander wand – I certainly won't take credit for anozzer vizard's work – but I do so hate to see wands go to vaste in family cabinets or ze like."

With that all set, Mme. Dubois set away her things and the component from Hermione's new wand. "Normally ze custom wand is fifteen galleons. Ze manticore claw is a rare component, zo it vill be more expensive. But we can give you a price of five galleons for ze old wand-

"Tell us the total, Madame," Snape snapped.

"Ze price for your vand vill be twenty-five galleons."

If Professor Snape was staggered by the amount, he didn't show it even as he took the amount from his little leather sac and placed them in the matron's hand. With her assurances to them that the wand would be ready by the same time tomorrow, Severus carted Hermione away and back to the apparition point.

"I'll pay you back," Hermione reassured him once they'd left the shop.

Severus rolled his eyes. "I assure you, that is unnecessary and inconvenient if you do. I am a paid Professor with no living expenses and no family to drain on my income. A meager twenty-five galleons for a necessity is not going to injure my vault."
"But…"

"Merlin, you're going to make me say it out loud, aren't you?" Severus accused. "Miss Granger, you are aware that I am an unlikeable spy with very few people who I care for and even fewer who I can trust?"

Hermione said nothing, merely wondered where this would end.

"Now, think of whether I would regularly go out of my way for a student, even one who was in my house," Severus prompted. "I assure you, I do not welcome opportunities to accompany anyone anywhere. What does that tell you of how I perceive you?"

Hermione thought on what she supposed to be their friendship, although she rarely allowed herself to think of it as one. She had always assumed he felt responsible for her, and as such allowed her more liberties than he had before. Now, he was saying . . . "I'm one of the people you care for? And trust?"

With a brief falter in his step, the dour Potions Master nodded, his expression pinched. "Just so."

"But my Occlumency-"

"I can trust someone without giving them all of my incriminating information, Miss Granger," Professor Snape nearly growled. "Do not insult my intelligence and assume my trust comes with a foolhardy and suicidal degree of optimism. No matter my regard, I will still deduct points once we return to the school."

That made Hermione laugh. "Only you could have an insulting yet academic discussion about feelings. You know, you could just come out and say what you mean. You like me."

"Gryffindor," was his response.

Hermione grinned. "I'm an honourary Slytherin now."

Severus Snape's eyes went wide in mock horror. "Heaven help us."
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Dubcon in this chapter. You have been warned.

Voldemort was not a happy man. He had left the previous night, only returning so the witches oath wouldn't wake her in the agony of an unfulfilled vow. Still, he was irate with the little hellion. Rather than confronting her then and there, he had paced for hours on end in the old Riddle house, taking in the scene of his first intentional murders. Certainly the weak such as his father would have been weeded in his new world. His mother, so weak to give a man love potion, would also have been eliminated by the old magics. How could Granger not see that weeding was necessary to ensure the health of the magical population? How could she argue that he was callous with life, when he left it to old magic to decide? It was survival.

But there was more to it than the argument itself. He knew she would never agree with him in that fact, no matter what he tried, but he expected her to at least stay and enjoy her evening. She had infuriated him with her Dumbledore-esque moral lesson, her proclamation of him being the 'victor' intentionally spoiled by her leaving. He wanted her by his side, how many times did he need to make himself clear? She would also be the victor. She would win a victory over the wizarding world, over those who decried her heritage, and just like him would rise to become the most powerful. What more could he offer?

He decided to restore the Malfoy patriarch's memory of the previous day and discuss it with him further. He needed a confidant in this issue, and Malfoys were known to not only be very charming but very self-serving. Nothing served Lucius more right now than to appease the Master who had the life of his boy in his hands, so he could be sure of his discretion on the matter.

So, around midday he went and found Lucius. When he restored the memories, he waited a moment for Lucius to gather himself again. Finally, the Malfoy patriarch's eyes regained focus and moved to eye the Master sitting across from him. "I did not expect to be taken into confidence again, my Lord."

Voldemort nodded curtly. "I didn't expect to need you again, old friend. But the girl is troublesome."

"One day and you're already at your wit's end, hmm?" Lucius said with a smirk. "Seems like Miss Granger is the best kind of woman. The kind that makes your blood boil at every turn, who aren't at all afraid to show exactly what they think of you. Passionate and unreserved."

"She is illogical and infuriating," Voldemort hissed, lacking his regular venom. "She refuses to see the benefit of my care, and insists on being so deplorably Gryffindor. I gave her flowers, a romantic evening together, and still it degraded into an argument over muggles and the old magics she herself has used."

"And yet, you still want her?" Lucius inquired, knowing full well the answer.

"Unfortunately," Voldemort grumbled in agreement. "She is infuriating, and it should annoy me into hexing her. Still, having been in her mind, she is every bit what she always was and what drew
me in. She simply isn't cowed by anything. She walked away from me, Lucius! Midway through
the evening, she just picked up with a contemptuous comment and walked away! It was as if she
knew I wouldn't hex her while her back was turned, or she was unafraid of the possibility in light of
her own anger. She is a Valkyrie when she wishes to be."

"Well suited to accompany a Dark Lord, then, hmm?" Lucius said knowingly. "I imagine your
attraction to the girl only seems greater when she's a full-on fury. You can picture her using that
passion in bed, or on your enemies."

"You speak from experience?" Voldemort smirked. "Narcissa is unstoppable when she wishes, I
recall."

Lucius chuckled at that. "While not as Gryffindor as your Miss Granger, Narcissa's vengeful
passion has turned me on more times than I can count. I believe she carries impotence potion in her
brassier should anyone less than gentlemanly earn her ire at a social function. She had become
quite adept at slipping potions to the unsuspecting."

"And how do you appease Narcissa when her ire is pointed at you?" Voldemort asked, his smirk
growing.

Lucius shared his smirk. "I share it. Nothing is better than letting a witch know she is right."

"She isn't!" Voldemort hissed.

"Best trick of the trade, my Lord," Lucius shared. "The woman is always right. Perhaps, if you're
lucky, you both can be. But she is never wrong. For example," Lucius put up his hand before his
lord could intervene, "you said your arguments were regarding old magic?"

"She does not believe that everyone should enact the rituals," Voldemort admitted. "As
Dumbledore does, she believes every life should be their own. No force."

"So, you agree with her," Lucius took him through it, "but you argue that it is currently illegal at
any rate, and that the first step would be to allow people the choice that she did. Not only do you
refuse to promise on future legislation, but you agree with both her opinion and the action that
brought her to you. You see?"

Voldemort nodded. "So, in essence, we will always argue if I insist on winning. I will need to
swallow my pride with the girl."

"Not too much, but yes," Lucius affirmed. "Yet, never forget, a healthy dose of cock is very good
for a woman too."

Voldemort grimaced. "Eloquent as ever, Lucius."

"I'm saying that you don't want to undersell yourself," Lucius said with faked innocence.

"I'm sure that's all you wanted to say on the matter," Voldemort sighed. "Still, your argument has
merit. Why, though, did the gestures I made last night mean nothing to the witch?"

Lucius raised a brow. "You know, Narcissa never appreciates having dinner together anymore. At
first, it was the act that most endeared her to me. Now, she is more impressed if I bring home a
colleague to meet her, or if I show affection to Draco."

"Your point?"
"Not all women have the same standards for romance," Lucius explained. "Perhaps the stereotypical romantic gestures would endear Miss Granger to another man, but perhaps for you she expects something more or simply different to show your regard. As Narcissa puts it, it must be something that shows you consider her not only attractive, but equal to your desires for her."

"An equal..." Voldemort murmured, suddenly putting the pieces together. Treats for pets were different than for wives, and they should be just as differently used. He had dangled the evening in front of her as if it were contingent on her good behavior. He had presumed upon her, instead of doing it properly.

"I see you understand," Lucius nodded. "All women wish to be valued, but pets are not as valued as what is irreplaceable."

"She is not replaceable, surely she knows this?" Voldemort huffed.

Lucius shook his head. "You refer to her as a pet, and so she believes she is to you. An entertainment, a companion perhaps, but not irreplaceable. I'm sure if another girl enacted the old magic rituals and was a virgin, she'd believe her to be in her place right now."

"Although a greater irritant," Voldemort agreed.

Lucius nodded, but simply sipped at his wine. "Shall I expect this conversation to be shortly removed?"

Voldemort shook his head. "She requires too much for me to discount your future assistance, Lucius. I trust this shall be kept from even your wife? It would not do well for me to have the others question my strength."

"They would understand the attempt to corrupt Potter's pal," Lucius comforted, "but yes, this shall be private. My thanks for trusting my discretion. Obliviation is ... uncomfortable."

"Think nothing of it."

After his confession to Hermione about his care for her, Severus left her alone to her own devices. Hermione wanted to ask him about the Occlumency lessons, but a single look from him told her not to ask. He obviously had not allowed anyone to be close to him – or to know they were – for a while before this, and Hermione saw that he needed time to come to terms with his perceived faux pas. So, instead of pushing, she hugged the dour man and let him retreat to his lab.

She, instead of following, went back to the delinquent chambers. Try as she might to focus on the Voldemort-gifted magic text, she found her thoughts wandering.

The last week had been full of ups and downs. Since the torture at the New Year's ball, Voldemort had done nothing to her but treat her with a sort of fond regard. He had treated her like a favoured pet, and she had nearly come to grips with it. Pets could bite their masters, after all. Last night he'd called her wife. Not pet, like he had, but wife: a woman who was regarded as an equal and a partner.

Once she sat and thought about it, her stomach clenched. To be called "wife" by the man who had caused so much pain was more grief-inducing than she'd expected. She didn't want to be an equal to the man who had killed so many but she also didn't want to tell herself she was better.
So where did that leave her? She had taken every day at Hogwarts as a challenge to prove herself equal to nearly everything – spells, people, situations – and now she didn't want to be.

In the midst of her musing, there was a knock on her door.

"Come in."

She expected black hair and stern features, but Draco Malfoy’s soft elven features and platinum hair popped through the doorway.

"Granger?" he asked. "Got a minute?"

"Sure."

He entered, but stood there with the ramrod-straight back that was the aristocratic way of dealing with awkwardness. With a roll of her eyes, she motioned for him to sit on her bed. He raised his brow, but sat nonetheless. The casual position did nothing for the awkward silence.

"So . . ." Hermione trailed off.

"Yes, um, I came to speak to you." Malfoy coughed uncomfortably.

Hermione chuckled. "That you did. And?"

He pulled a letter from his coat and clutched it in his hand tightly. "Did you read what father wrote?"

"No."

"Do you want to know?" Malfoy asked, his face tense. "I'll share it with you, you know. Just tell me exactly how my father seemed as he handed you this letter."

Hermione shook her head as if clearing her thoughts. "Malfoy, I don't know your father as well as you do. When he gave me the letter he seemed happy to write to you. He was polite, stiff, and, well, normal for what I thought of you Malfoys."

Malfoy didn't take offense to her words, but instead became thoughtful and more discontented. Hermione watched him grip the letter tighter in his hand, his face growing darker.

"I thought I was done," he finally murmured, his voice softer than his eyes seemed to convey. "I thought I was free."

"What did he say?" Hermione whispered.

He seemed to struggle with the words. "I refused the Dark Mark. He wanted me to do something I wouldn't do, and I-I thought by refusing the Mark, it wouldn't happen. Now, the Dark Lord is offering me my life, my way, i-if I help his men finish what I refused to do. I could go home."

His face crumbled in front of her and filled with pain, and all she could do was what she did with the other boys; she hugged him.

"You're fine," she murmured. "You are free."

"But my parents," Draco's voice shook from repressing his tears. "Granger, what if he kills them?" Everything I've done, everything I will do, it's for them. They're all I have!"
"He won't," Hermione promised. "I can stop him, and I can watch them for you."

"Nobody can reason with him!" Draco resisted. "He doesn't listen to reason, he only listens to what benefits him! You're not a Death Eater, Granger."

"Then we go to Severus," Hermione concluded. "He can protect them in every way I can't. You can refuse, and you can be sure that we will defend them. You aren't his anymore, Malfoy."

"You don't get it, Granger!" Malfoy exclaimed desperately. "The task he gave me, he wants it so badly that if anyone gets in his way, he will kill. And it'll be my parents that are the first targets."

"What does he want?" she asked. He refused to reply. "Are... are you still considering helping him?"

"No-yes-Maybe!" He raked his hand through his hair so roughly she was sure he was trying to pull it out.

She put a hand on his arm. "All problems can be fixed with enough people. Enough good people. Just tell me."

Draco was tensed and scared, and Hermione could clearly see how terrible whatever his task had been. She wanted to have him trust her. Trust takes two, her mother always said.

"For years I tried to learn everything I could about magic," she started to say, diverting Draco from his reservations and terror. "When I learned I hadn't learned everything, that I wasn't everything I could be, I tried to fix it. I stole a book from the restricted section that had an old ritual to unbind my magic from my body, to let it be free."

"Granger..."

She kept going, not looking him in the eye. "I did it alone, with no one else around and no protection. I thought, before, that the Hogwarts wards might interfere so I did it in a forest I knew, near my hometown. Voldemort felt the power of the ritual, and came to me. I was weak and could barely raise my wand - not that it would have done any good, I realize now. But he took me, and fed me, and healed me, and then, when my magic was strong enough, he bound it to him."

She waved off the darkness of that memory, keeping her emotions hidden and under the surface like Severus had taught her. "I justified the risk as something I would do for Harry, but I knew perfectly well that I just didn't want to let anyone have the chance to stop me. I wanted to be able to do the same magic that Dumbledore could. If I wasn't able to do it, I wasn't a good enough witch."

Hermione looked up at Draco's face. He was looking at her with a foreign look, one she never had associated with him. "So, now you know."

"Granger..." Draco murmured, his eyes roving over her manically. "You-Know-Who tasked me with killing Dumbledore."

Suddenly, it occurred to her why he didn't want to tell her. "The necklace, with Katie."

"For him," Draco confirmed, his fists tense. "I knew my curse wasn't strong enough to hold, but I didn't think she'd touch the necklace when she got free. I thought..."

"The curse would wear off, or she'd fight it off, and then she'd bring it to a teacher," Hermione finished, her voice low. "You were trying to buy time."
He gave a curt nod.

"We should tell him."

He looked up and glared at her. "So, what? You set me free just so Dumbledore can send me to Azkaban?"

"No!" Hermione exclaimed. "Dumbledore would never do that. He'd want to know, but only so he can help fix this. This can all work out, Draco. Trust me."

He regarded her levelly. "You just called my Draco."

Hermione flushed. "Sorry."

"No-No, don't be, I liked it," he confessed. "Can I call you Hermione?"

She pretended to think about it before sending him a brilliant smile. "You think you can?"

"You may revert to Granger every now and again," Draco chuckled lightly. "Would you mind?"

"It's your nickname for me, of course I don't mind," Hermione answered with an eye roll. "You're going to be Malfoy forever, in my book. You'll just be Draco when you're human."

"Touching. . ."

The familiar drawl alerted them to the dark presence in the doorway, and the stern black eyes looking in on them. She felt Malfoy tense next to her.

"You both need more practice in hiding your secrets," Snape advised gravely. "Moreso in deciding what situation are safe from prying ears. What did you think, that the delinquent chambers didn't have a way of monitoring the occupants? Or that I wouldn't know the moment Draco entered female quarters?"

Draco had turned white next to her so Hermione covered his hand with hers comfortingly. "And this is the part where you tell Draco that you and Dumbledore already had a plan for his mission, right?"

"Of course," Snape tipped his head at her in mild deference. "We've known since the beginning."

"You HAVE?" Daco looked sick. "And you still…?"

"Pretended to be loyal to the Dark Lord?" Snape finished for him, his expression snarky. "Yes, that is necessary when one is a spy, Draco, and when the youth I'm speaking to has unclear loyalties. Please do take a moment to use that lauded intellect your father boasts about and just think."

Draco nodded jerkily, obviously going through his encounters with Snape in his mind. "Dumbledore knows?"

"Yes."

"And you just heard everything I told Granger?"

"Correct."

Draco just kept nodding, as if everything made sense. "So, what should I do?"
"I believe," Severus enunciated poignantly, "that the Headmaster will wish to speak with you regarding the letter you received. It is, of course, your choice whether to inform him of the contents, however, so your information may be forfeit regardless."

"I'm done hiding things," Draco informed him fiercely, reminding Hermione every bit of a determined Gryffindor. "Let's go to Dumbledore."

Just then, Hermione's collar began to burn. She flinched. "You'll need to go without me."

"Remember, he wants your favour," Severus reminded her. "Play anything he uses against him."

Hermione nodded and placed her hand on the warm collar.

Draco just looked at them both confusedly. "Wait, what's happening?"

Before Hermione could answer, she was swept up into her magic and pulled along the invisible threads of the bond to stand in front of the blue-eyed recreation of Tom Riddle, known as Lord Voldemort. She recognized immediately the ballroom of the Sayre Mansion, and the glowing, runed circles on the floor. It was a lesson. Immediately, her walls went up and she worried about exactly what kind of lesson she would have.

"You kept me waiting." It wasn't a question.

"Forgive me for not wanting to come back," Hermione snapped instinctively, before she realized the terrible idea it was. "I mean-what I should say-"

"You were afraid." Again, a statement of fact. His face betrayed nothing as he observed her, his cool eyes taking in everything.

Hermione shook her head automatically. "No, but your note. . ."

He nodded and summoned two chairs, putting them in the center of the ritual circles. "Sit, Miss Granger."

The magic of the circles was whole and kind, and Voldemort's was wrapped around her as she sat next to him. She didn't want to admit it, but being next to him in any capacity felt good. She hated being on edge when everything in her felt like being comforted by his presence.

Voldemort looked at her steadily. "Miss Granger, perhaps it is better with you to be forthright. I find myself disconcerted by my change back into what is human. As I told you last night, I have been given a great gift in you. I can taste again, I can interact with others as I haven't done since my return, and I can . . . feel. That is, perhaps, the most infuriating change.

"I'm unaware the proper lengths to take to beg for your forgiveness, but I hope you will accept the apology for my words last night," Voldemort offered carefully. She could see that his jaw was tense as he spoke, though his words held none of that tension. "I offended you, and it was not my intention."

"What was your intention?" Hermione asked, now curious at what he was leaving unsaid.

Voldemort sighed. "I wanted only to show you how I had begun to care for you, and give you the opportunity to ask me for whatever you wished to prove it. Instead, I belittled the values you had been raised with. For that, I-er, I offer my sincere apologies."

It was strange, watching this man who had brought a nation to a halt through fear, stumble over his
words to apologize for his callous words. It was so . . . humanizing. Hermione once again had fallen into the trap of seeing only Tom Riddle, and not Voldemort. And this man, this human one, was admitting he cared for her.

"Is it difficult?" She asked sincerely. "Apologizing?"

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. "It is not comfortable, no. But I was informed that swallowing your pride shouldn't be."

"I appreciate it. Thank you."

Those words charged the atmosphere between them. What had been uncomfortable was now heady with tension, as if each were waiting to see what happened next. Voldemort leaned forward, his face getting closer to hers. Her eyes flickered to his lips.

"Miss Granger, perhaps . . ." Voldemort shook his head and his eyes hardened. "Let us move on to your lessons."

He pulled back to both her relief and disappointment. His dismissal of the moment did nothing to alleviate the tension was ever-present, but it lessened the desire to act on it as they moved to the ritual circles. They returned to the lesson on the life/death ritual circle.

He seemed to be observing her for some cue throughout her process. He had her meditate, initiated a push and pull on their mutual life force, and drew the rune, eihwaz, on the back of her hands with a yew berry paste of some sort. Still, during the entire learning process, his eyes were observing her and burning her with heat. She was unable to get the thought of him kissing her - 'wooing her' as Severus had said - out of her mind. Still, she tried to get through the teachings he was running her through.

After an hour of little progress, for the second time with that circle, Voldemort was clearly unhappy with her. His scowl had deepened and his eyes were glaring. Still, she tried.

"Do you often reject your nature so entirely?" Voldemort hissed after a failed attempt.

"I'm not!" Hermione denied.

Voldemort rounded on her. "Then tell me why, when you recite the ritual spell, you produce only the life magics? When you incant the ritual, you must have internalized every aspect of the circle - you reject death completely!"

"I'm sorry I'm not a murderer like you!" Hermione shot back.

Voldemort's eyes darkened as he observed her. "Can you see thestrals, Miss Granger?"

She shook her head, suddenly extremely aware of who she was in front of. This was a Dark Lord, a man so well-versed in death he came back from it.

"You have never observed death," Voldemort said with a sneer. "It is no wonder you fail to internalize the subtleties of death when you are inexperienced in its artistry. We will rectify this."

"No!"

He ignored her, walking over to the door.

She wasn't being ignored, not on this. "You can't just kill people whenever you want! I can do this!
Even if you just showed me in a pensieve-

"Antonin!" He called, ignoring her completely.

A figure drew into the room, and Hermione's body went into overload. A face that had haunted her
nightmares was now in the same room. He bowed his head to his master, not having seen her yet.
Her eyes were fixed on his long burly figure, and his name involuntarily left her lips.

"Dolohov," Hermione breathed, immediately shrinking.

At her whisper, the man looked to her. His dark hair was longer than it once was, waved around his
twisted, scarred, and pale face. His blue eyes zeroed in on her like a predator on prey, and
Hermione lost the ability to breath. She could feel her body go into shock at seeing him again.

"We meet again, mishka," Dolohov greeted, his voice dangerous and low. "I spent much time in
Azkaban because of you."

"I-I…" Hermione's voice failed her. Later, she'd think of a retort – Well, I spent lots of time in the
hospital because of you! – but for this moment she was a ball of adrenaline and fear. From his
words and his eyes, she had the disturbing thought that he'd spent too often in Azkaban prison
pictureing what he'd do when he saw her again. Her hand flew to her collarbone automatically, even
if her scare was now gone. His eyes flashed to her hand's movement, and his lips curled into a
sinister grin.

"Antonin," his lord greeted. "I require your assistance in training Miss Granger."

Dolohov's lips curved upwards. "It would be a pleasure, my Lord."

"Then I have an errand for you …"

Voldemort and Dolohov consulted for a moment, quiet and whispering so Hermione could hear
nothing. With a curt nod, Dolohov flashed away, presumably to fetch something. Hermione could
guess what. With him gone Hermione found her tongue. She left her ritual circle and approached
the man who had made himself her owner.

"Don't do this," Hermione pleaded. "You promised you wouldn't use people against me."

"I gave you my oath not to use anyone to discipline you," Voldemort reminded her darkly.
"However, this is not about forcing you to behave … this is about educating you in an area you
clearly have no respect for."

"Respect?" Hermione hissed. "I have no respect? You're planning on killing people in front of me!"

"No," Voldemort smirked.

Hermione glared. "No? Just no?"

"No," Voldemort drawled, "you are mistaken. I plan on doing nothing."

"Really?"

His blue eyes laughed at her. "Antonin will kill them."

Hermione's heart was beating violently in her chest. She couldn't let this happen, but Voldemort
was here. This wasn't the man who tried to woo her, who apologized not an hour ago. This wasn't
Tom Riddle, this was the Dark Lord Voldemort.
She reached out, hoping that with her touch she could unlock some humanity in him. When her hand touched his arm, he stiffened under her.

"Please, please don't do this," Hermione begged.

Voldemort's face was stony. "I will not stop Antonin from following my orders."

"You're the only one who can!" she insisted. "You gave him the order, you can take it back!"

His demeanor shifted at her insistence. His stiff posture melted and he stepped towards her, a dangerous look in his eyes. She moved back, even more wary.

"You seem to underestimate your own power, little witch," Voldemort purred at her. He walked forward, following her as she retreated from him. He grabbed her forcibly, twirling her around and pressing her against the wall. The face he gained from their bonding was in her face, his eyes dark and fierce, his face in a determined set. Hermione's breath caught, and her mind froze in fear. "You are one of only three beings in Britain with old magic flooding through their veins. Am I truly the only one who can stop Antonin?"

Suddenly, she knew what he was doing. She hated Dolohov, hated how much he made her afraid. And Voldemort had seen in her head enough to know it. He wanted her to kill him.

"I can't kill him," Hermione begged. "I won't."

"Then you'll watch a family of muggles die," Voldemort hissed. "If he does not die, they do. If they live, he doesn't. This is the balance you lack, Miss Granger. Death is necessary."

"It wouldn't be if you didn't-"

"And if he was killing on his own?" he prompted harshly. "He is my assassin, Miss Granger. He enjoys the hunt, the thrill of taking down an opponent using his wits and his strength. If I hadn't recruited him, he would still be killing. Now tell me – would your idea of a perfect world include him?"

Hermione couldn't say that.

Voldemort leaned forward then, his breath fanning across her face. "Then you know what to do, don't you?"

"You don't even know if I can," Hermione pleaded. "The bond …"

"Antonin does not bear the mark," Voldemort told her with a pleased look. "My assassin must be more discreet than any, and a mark of mine would neutralize him. You will not be kept from harming him by the bond."

"But …" Hermione struggled to find anything to sway him. "He must have a family. A lineage you want to extend."

"He has heirs," Voldemort smirked.

"He'll suffer," Hermione insisted. "You can't want that."

Voldemort's smirk grew to a malicious smile. "You know the incantation, Miss Granger. You only need to mean it."

She shook her head instantly. "No, I can't. I won't use the Killing Curse. Dark magic has so many
Suddenly, the wards shifted and Hermione could see Voldemort's reaction to it. He straightened up and away from her, a glint in his eyes. The chance for negotiation was gone. With a high-and-mighty air, he extended her his black wand.

"He has come back through the wards," Voldemort informed her. "You have your choice, Miss Granger. Is his life worth more than the muggles he brings with him? Are they worth anything to you?"

"Stop this," Hermione begged.

"No."

Still, his wand was extended before her. She had no other option but to take it and hold the strangely compatible wand in her hand. Even as her magic encircled it, she refused to hold it tight in her hand. She held it gingerly as she would a loaded gun.

Antonin marched into the ballroom with captives in tow, bound and gagged. It was a family much like her own, with two parents and a young child with them. The woman was crying and her tears were soaking into the rag around her mouth.

Dolohov had a satisfied smirk on his face.

"Excellent hunting?"

"Take a child and the parents do what you want," Dolohov chuckled happily. "Begging the whole while."

"Remove their gags," Voldemort ordered. "Show Miss Granger what we do to our … guests."

He was playing her. Their gags had been a mercy for her, and now their screams, begging, pleading, and bargaining were all ringing throughout the ballroom. She knew what would stop it, and yet the thought of casting the Killing Curse made her stomach curl in revulsion. Her light grip on her owner's wand became increasingly tight.

Dolohov was enjoying torturing the muggles. Every second of their screams increased the chances of them losing their minds before she could save them. Every scream was becoming more unbearable, knowing she could stop this.

She felt a presence behind her, and a hand on her own, helping her grip the wand. His magic was comforting and warm, reassuring her. She didn't want to be reassured.

"Open your eyes," Voldemort purred into her ear. "See what happens when you refuse to kill those who deserve it."

Hermione's eyes flickered open and zeroed in on the mother, writhing on the ground. Her tears and pleading. Her husband was begging to take her place, her child was inconsolable. Dolohov looked just as Dark Magic users did in her texts, addicted to the power brought on by the curse. His eyes bright, his sneer gleeful.

"You know the curse, Miss Granger," he murmured. "Think of how you felt in the Department of Mysteries, of every time the girls in your dorm stared at your scars with revulsion, of every nightmare he induced. Then point your wand him and take him from the world you want to have. He does not deserve to be in it."
"That's not my choice," Hermione whimpered.

"You kill him, or I will order them dead this second," Voldemort hissed, his impatience showing. "Kill him, or he kills them."

The screaming stopped for a moment, drawing her eyes back into focus on the mother's brown-haired form. She whimpered and shook, her body looking as if it were in a seizure. Dolohov pointed his wand at the child then. The look of fear on the child's face was the final stroke on the canvas of her choice.

She raised Voldemort's wand at Dolohov and yelled, "Avada Kedavra!"

The green light that shot from her wand streaked in one straight line for Dolohov. She saw the moment of shock and fear of Dolohov, and then the light left his eyes. His body crumpled to the ground. But the worst part was her magic.

The power of the dark curse shot through her veins like liquid ice, a strange numbness and euphoria that screamed of absolute control. And when the curse connected with Dolohov, she could feel the magic of his body released from it and running wild through her. That was what the books meant when they said it was addictive, that it increased power – with her curse, she'd severed the man from life and was actually rewarded for the darkness with a small influx of magic. Her victim's.

The stillness afterwards was the most disturbing bit. There were soft sobs from the family, but Dolohov's corpse lay there, still and peaceful. Every bit of dark euphoria in her veins was all the more disturbing in contrast to the peace of the moment. Like the world had halted.

She unlocked her joints slowly, learning how to move again.

She didn't even realize when Voldemort obliviated the muggles and waved them away. She almost didn't care. Then a simple touch from the Dark Lord who had done this to her, and Hermione's magic jumped and took over her body.

"Wha-?"

The peace had broken into chaotic fire. Her body lurched her towards Voldemort, and she found her nerves craving the man. She turned from him, leaning against the nearest thing.

"What's happening to me?" Hermione croaked.

Voldemort touched at her arm, and her bond surged. "Your magic has been changed. As it is shared with me, we must renew the bond."

"Renew…?" Hermione murmured. Her body was high on the magic and her brain addled. "How…?"

"You'll enjoy it this time, Miss Granger," she heard the man purr behind her.

Her magic-addled brain took that comment and spun it. The seductive voice behind her made her shiver, her magic wanted to give in, and she had an excuse – if anyone asked, it was the dark magic. For once, she could just give up. So with a groan she turned, grabbed the man's robes in tight fists, and drew her mouth to his.

There was not a second of hesitation before he kissed her back, passionate tongue dancing and setting fires through her body. She expected to feel terrified, terrified of him. But since she initiated
it, her consent made all the difference and now she wanted it. She had succumbed.

She could feel his magic pull and whisk her in a side-along into their shared room. She didn't want to think about it. If she stopped, she would feel the guilt for her actions. She was rushing, she wanted it and was impatient to get it. She didn't want to fiddle with the robes, so a wandless *divesto* was sent on both of them. Both naked, both pressed together, both slaves to their shared magic, Hermione felt the aggression from that dark curse manifest in sheer forceful lust. There was no more time to wait for him to move. She pushed him onto the bed.

He cocked a brow as he observed her naked body standing by the bed. "Coming?"

"Shut up," she growled climbing on top.

He pulled her town, meeting her lips in a demanding kiss. His fantasies of having her, willing, around him again were coming true. She was a glorious magical being, her magic surrounding them and increasing the intimacy of the act. He had been so turned by the wave of darkness he'd felt shudder through their magic at her curse, he would sacrifice many more to have her desperately moving against her again. "Anything … anything you wish … my beautiful … commanding … Dark Lady."

His words hummed through her and her mind caught a respect in his tone that turned her on. Finally. Finally he saw her as more than a small girl, a little, tiny house-elf. She was a powerful witch, a force of nature, and he now saw it. She ground against his erection, the pleasure overwhelming her.

"Tell me … you want me," Hermione hissed.

"As no one else," Voldemort growled into her neck, kissing down the sensitive side and pulling a moan from her lips. "You are perfection."

She felt desired. He rolled her over, pinning her to the mattress. A brief moment of panic before he ground against her now, replacing her panic with pleasure.

When he slid inside her, there were no more words. Their coupling was quick and furious, fueled by dark magic and lust. Hermione's high was added upon by the ministrations of the man on top of her, making her feel like a dark goddess with the power to level nations. She felt invincible and beautiful.

When the magic around her settled and she was wrapped in Voldemort's arms, she realized what she'd done in her dark magic haze. She'd slept with public enemy number one, and enjoyed it. Practically begged for it.

"You are glorious," Voldemort murmured against her neck, more sleepy than seductive.

Did he know they'd need to renew the bond? Had he taken her will away a second time in order to have her here, once again?

"What do you want from me?" Hermione asked.

His arms tensed around her. "In what way?"

"Do you just want a … a bed warmer?" Hermione hesitantly forced out through her teeth. "You spent last night trying to woo me, and today you … you forced me to kill. What do you want?"

"You want to determine this while my come is drying between your legs?" Voldemort chuckled
"Tell me, do you think I expend the same effort with the others? Do you think, for a moment, I've indulged as I have tonight with anyone else since my return? I have not wanted a witch for such a long time, and never to the degree I want you."

Hermione grimaced.

"Rest, Miss Granger," Voldemort sighed. "Your mind overcomplicates the simplest of matters."

She scoffed. "Still Miss Granger? After tonight, I think perhaps we're on a first-name basis."

"Hermione," Voldemort drawled, "rest."

"Just tell me what you want," Hermione hissed into the darkness. "Tell me what you expect from me."

There was a pause, a moment of reflection. Voldemort was inwardly contemplating the words of Miss Granger, and he found himself putting her into various facets of his life. An ally, dangerous and powerful. A lover, passionate and warm. A counselor, intelligent and analytical. He wanted all of them. He wanted her. And this was his chance to use the understanding he'd gotten from Lucius to tell her she was more than a simple pet.

"I want you," he repeated, his voice low. "I want you as mine, in every way. You've been bonded to me as a wife, and I want you by my side in that capacity."

Hermione's thoughts were running a million kilometers an hour, but it kept coming back to what she knew of the little boy, of Tom Riddle who could feel no love. Could he be starting, with her? Not a week ago he had told her she needed to remove the delusion of him being her husband, and now he was acknowledging it as fact. What had changed?

He turned, shifting her in his arms so her face was pressed against his chest. "Now rest."

Her head loaded with thoughts and conjecture, she accepted his direction and fell asleep against the current Dark Lord.
Chapter 25

For the first time since she'd been taken two weeks ago, she woke up with Voldemort still in her room. She was groggy and shaky, probably from her dark magic use the previous night, and he actually woke her with a sensual kiss. It was as if they were lovers.

"I want to teach you something before I leave," Voldemort murmured against her lips. "Get dressed."

He was perched on the bed – fully dressed and unmoving – as he made the request. She became aware of her extremely naked state in his bed.

"Don't suppose you'll turn around?" Hermione said. He shook his head with a devilish smirk. "Thought not."

Despite her confident words, she was hypersensitive of each piece of her skin being watched by him as she slipped from the sheets. Being fully exposed in front of him had her scampering to the dresser with a full-body blush. And from the way he chuckled, she knew she was red as a tomato.

Her body had clearly crashed from the high of the previous night, and it shook and trembled as she got herself together. She could feel the craving inside her for the invigoration of dark magic, since her own magic felt sluggish and incomplete. She hoped Voldemort had no more temptations for her.

"How do you feel?"

She tried to still the trembling in her arms as she pulled her oxford on. She would not admit weakness. "Fine."

"You are a stubborn witch," Voldemort laughed. "If you ask me nicely, I may be able to help with your side-effects."

"I'm not doing more dark magic," she objected.

Voldemort glided over to her and moved her shaking hands out of the way to help her fasten the buttons on her shirt. "Did I say anything about dark magic, little witch? With as powerful a substance as dark magic, it will only worsen the crash later when your body must readjust. No, I have other ways to help you. Ask me." With a look and a kiss, he demanded her compliance. "Nicely."

"Kisses don't mean obedience," Hermione pointed out as he took the corner of her lips, then her cheeks, then trailed down her neck.

He chuckled. "I'm giving you an incentive."

"Such a prize," Hermione sassed even as she silently melted into his ministration. "Fine."

"What was that?" he pressed another kiss against the column of her neck, earning a soft gasp.

Hermione groaned. "Will you help me, oh Dark One?"

"Impertinent," Voldemort growled jokingly. "But let it not be said I don't take care of my Lady."

He pulled Hermione away from the dresser and over to the bed, where he had a vial of potion
waiting for her. He handed it to her with a smile and a glint in his eyes that told her that if she questioned the contents of the vial, she'd be refused an answer. So she accepted it and downed it in one shot.

It tasted like a muscle relaxant.

"You're beginning to trust me, I see," he teased.

"I trust you not to kill me."

There was no need for him to say anything, and no reason for her to comment again. There was merely an acknowledgement between their gazes that said 'We may be intimate, but we are still enemies', and Voldemort did not push her to be anything else. Opposite sides of the war did not belong in their bed.

So they moved on, and Voldemort taught her. The muscle relaxant stilled the shaking moderately well and woke up her groggy limbs. As for her magic, it was reinvigorated when Voldemort taught her the new spell that she could use on the bloodstone collar around her neck.

"Use this and you will be transported to wherever I am," Voldemort promised her. "I cannot be brought to you, but if anything should happen to you that makes you afraid – if you need me – I want you to be able to come to me."

She was touched. He was giving her back some of the control over herself, and it was a gesture of trust. And with him looking so much like the pitiable Tom Riddle of Dumbledore's penseive, Hermione wanted to further nudge him towards a life of goodness. So she leaned forward and kissed his cheek tenderly.

"Thank you."

She was shocked by her own tenderness, but it appeared that Voldemort was even more shocked. He rounded on her and pinned her to one of the bed posts, barely making eye contact before he pressed his mouth against hers in a fiery, searing kiss. It was passionate like it hadn't been before, absent of seduction and instead focused on possessing her inside and out. She gasped for breath between his kisses. The onslaught was terrifying and heady at the same time, and she had no idea how she'd caused it. It was minutes before he broke away, only to place his forehead to hers and show her the intense lust in his eyes.

"You had better leave, witch," he growled. "Leave, before I lose control and confine you to the bed for the rest of the day."

His words made her blush, but she knew she needed to go. When Voldemort makes a threat he means it. She pushed away from him and turned, apparating away to Hogwarts and to her chambers therein. She'd left her robe at Sayre Mansion, so she needed to pull open the trunk Snape had brought her, pull out her old Gryffindor robes, and change the colour so she could use them for the day.

She was pulling on her old school tights when Snape knocked on her open door, regarding her carefully.

"You're not in your usual state of readiness," he noted, taking in her disheveled hair and her crease lines in her robes. "What happened?"

Her immediate thoughts were of the sex, the kisses, and the way he'd insisted on her being at his side from now on. But then, looking into Severus' face, she remembered the previous night and her
magic flinched in want of that dark power.

"Dolohov is dead," she said aloud, testing the words. It made her glad in a strange way to say it out loud. She was disgusted at her own reaction.

"Are you sure?"

Hermione connected her eyes with his and steeled herself for the first of many appalled reactions.

"Sure enough. I'm the one who killed him." Snape's eyes narrowed, and he looked over her body for the shaking. For the second time, she felt glad that Voldemort had helped to eliminate that physical sign. "I need to see Dumbledore."

"No," moved next to her and tried to hand her a vial, "you need to be still. Take this, and tell me everything that needs to be relayed to Dumbledore. Today you are a student. Nothing more."

"I'm fine." I pulled on my loafers with minimal shaking. "Your lord took care of me afterwards."

"He provided the potion?"

Hermione nodded. "He did."

"And how did he manage the emotional upheaval?"

Hermione remained silent, but met his eyes. He knew what that meant.

Without ceremony, Severus pushed himself into her mind, exactly as she wanted him to. She didn't try to keep him out. It was easier for him to see anything in her head than to tell him what happened last night out loud. She relived Dolohov's death, their intimacy, and then the withdrawals. When he removed himself from her mind, he came and sat by her. She knew him well enough to see that the stiff posture meant he had no idea what to say to her.

"It just happened," she tried to defend herself.

"So it did," Severus sighed. He looked so . . . worn. "The Dark Lord is charismatic and experienced, and he knew exactly what dark magic would do to a young woman like yourself. If it makes a difference, you handled it well."

Hermione bit her lip. "I slept with him."

"That was his plan when he first brought in Dolohov," Severus told her. "It could have been much worse, Miss Granger; I've seen new recruits lose themselves to bloodlust after performing the Killing Curse and do unspeakable things. To succumb to the pleasures of your body is hardly the worst thing you could have done. I told you he wanted you, Miss Granger, and he played his hand last night. He got you. And from the looks of this morning, he'll have you from this point on."

"No!"

He raised a hand. "There's a difference between sex and allegiance, Miss Granger. I will not discourage you from finding some pleasure in the arrangement if you need it."

His face said otherwise, and Hermione could see it. Shame filled her.

"You're disgusted by me."

He hesitated. "The idea of a student of mine being bedded by my seventy-year-old dark master is
not a pleasant thought, no matter his young appearance. But it is not you who I'm disgusted by."

Hearing him say it like that had Hermione looking down, humiliated. "He looks thirty, at most."

"That's why I don't blame you," Severus emphasized. "He is charismatic, intelligent, physically in his prime, and the only lover you have ever known. It isn't too extreme to think that you want his attention, Miss Granger, and it's not something to be ashamed of."

Hermione felt a little teary. "So I'm a silly, gullible, desperate little girl."

"Not silly," Severus corrected. "And the fact that you remain loyal to Mister Potter proves that you are far from gullible."

So I'm just desperate, Hermione thought. "Are you going to tell Dumbledore?"

Silence. With anyone else, the silence would have been a confirmation. With Severus, silence meant he hadn't decided.

"Please," Hermione pleaded in whisper, "please, don't."

Snape looked so old as he regarded her. "Miss Granger ... the Dark Lord's emotional state may be important, as well as his attachment to you. Especially if -- as you evidently believe -- he has been restored to feeling. I understand it is a very ... private matter. Yet, if you shared it with me, surely it is not as much of a leap to have it shared with the Headmaster?"

"He's not you," Hermione insisted, nearly tearful. "You... you're my friend, my mentor. And you know how hard he is to resist. Dumbledore ... he won't understand, he'll never look at me the same way again."

Severus regarded her levelly. Of course the girl would remind him of his developing feeling for her, the protective and loving feelings that seemed to always override his mind when the girl was concerned. Yet those feelings were very much in conflict. Watching a young woman who he felt so protective of being taken into the bed of his Dark Lord had sparked an intense need to protect her from the next encounter with him, hence his desire to inform Dumbledore. But the same need to protect wanted to preserve what little dignity the girl had left was opposing the same thought.

Finally, he sighed. He could not protect her from something she wanted, and it was clear that, whatever fear and hatred Hermione associated with the Dark Lord, she was intrigued by him. She wanted to be special, to be the person who could make the Dark Lord love again. All he could do was keep her grounded in the light so she didn't become another Bellatrix Lestrange.

"For now, I will leave out your ... intimacy with the Dark Lord," Severus allowed. "However, if it becomes relevant, my hand will be forced."

He expected a Gryffindor-type stuttering of gratitude even as he was becoming more accustomed to Hermione's completely unreserved nature. Still, her hug caught him off-guard. He was completely stripped bare of his barriers when she gave her teary, murmured, and hurried thanks into his shoulder and he wrapped his arms around her.

"Shhh," he whispered, tucking the young girl into his embrace. "Shhh, it's alright."

They stayed like that for the longest time, teacher and student, friends. Hermione needed this. She couldn't feel anything, but she wanted to feel ashamed. She wanted to be guilty. Was it the dark magic, or her? Was she really not feeling guilty for sleeping with the Dark Lord, or was the dark magic preventing her from feeling, the same way a love potion had prevented Voldemort from
feeling before? How could she trust herself ever again.

She spent the day in a shaky haze, expecting to feel but unable to. She'd gone from hateful to horny to crying into Professor Snape's cloak within 12 hours, coupled with the emotional unbalance brought on by the black magic she'd used the night before. If she was able to think rationally, she would have known that the black magic was working its way through her. But instead, she was hazy, only able to feel in extremes.

Her classes were mostly ignored that day. She made it to Transfiguration fine, but after trying to climb the staircase with her classmates and ending up collapsing in a shaky pile, she elected to apparate back to her rooms for a much-needed rest, where she stayed for most of the day. Or she did, until Professor Snape had come personally to escort her to defense class.

Defense was only with Slytherins, and none of them had been a part of Harry's defense group to learn the patronus. That injustice didn't stand by Professor Snape, and he was going to fix it. Unfortunately, as the only one who'd been in the DA, she was called on to produce hers.

"Miss Granger," Professor Snape called from the front of class, "come forward."

She walked to the front of the class and stood before her friend and professor. The class didn't titter as Gryffindor would do, and for that Hermione was grateful. It provided some dignity to the experience.

"I believe this is yours, Miss Granger," he extended his hand, which held a beautiful Kingwood wand. The handle was etched in a Celtic design that looked so much like the ritual circles that she was learning from. When it met her hand, she felt the harmony of all the components she'd selected before her voyage into dark magic, but the wand responded to her just the same as it had before. It was reassuring.

"I don't believe you are so competent that you can produce a Patronus wandlessly, Miss Granger," Snape bit without his usual malice. "Please, demonstrate for the class."

"Can I?" she asked timidly, looking at him with tears in her eyes. "Within a day of-?"

Snape knew what she was saying. He nodded sharply. "Demonstrate."

So she turned to face the class, a degree of confidence given to her by Severus and her new wand, before she raised it to the class. She focused on the thought of her friends, the ones she no longer was allowed, and now she included Snape in there. "Expecto Patronum!"

She expected the turtle again, the reassuring feeling it would bring. Instead, a huge form moved languidly from her wand. It was an orca.

"Merlin, not again," she groaned aloud, earning a look from her classmates. Why can't I just be normal?

Her patronus was large enough that many of the Slytherins in her class were completely overtaken by the form until she sent it towards the ceiling of the room. It moved around a bit before coming face to face with her, reminding her of her otter patronus. This… this was different though. Not happy and carefree like her otter, and not as reassuring as the turtle, it was … a predator. Where the turtle was reassuring and resigned, this was an apex predator that reacted with power and fury. The feeling was … empowering? Strengthening? The symbolism of the black and white colouring was not lost on her – the dark magic had done this.

She had changed. Again.
But even if the dark magic had changed her Patronus, it still revitalized her to cast the happy charm. The orca gave her that sense of empowerment, and she could feel how the Patronus had cast from her most of her haze from the day. Pure light magic, in its highest form, could not abide the dark.

She glanced at Snape, who was observing her carefully. The look she gave him in question was answered with a sharp nod. She broke the enchantment and let her new patronus vanish without a trace.

"Well?" Snape snapped at the class. "You've seen it performed, now practice!"

The Professor motioned for her to come to the desk and he put up a privacy charm or two while the rest of the class practised.

"Do you understand yet why you needed to come to this class, Miss Granger?" Severus asked, his eyes cautiously on her.

She smiled, genuinely, for the first time that day. "Yes. Thank you. I feel better now. But I could have stayed in my rooms and performed it there, you know."

That earned a smirk from the Professor. "True, but I do not permit anyone but those in my strictest confidence to see my Patronus."

"So I was your way out of it?" Hermione chuckled. "The measures you go to for your mystery."

Severus chuckled and reached into his desk and placed a dark potion on his desk in front of her. "Take this when you reach your rooms. It should take care of the last residuals of the curse. I will excuse you from your final hour."

"I don't need-"

He cut her off. "Miss Granger, I insist. Go and rest."

She saluted diligently. "Yes, sir!"
Chapter 26

She was in a whirlwind of emotions from that point on. Voldemort never asked her to use Dark Magic again, but their intimacy continued. She would return in the evenings and learn in the ritual circle, then they'd move to the bedroom to read by the fire. Hermione was still expected to make the tea and then rest in her inferior place, perched on the ground by his feet.

It would build slowly. His hands were in her hair, teasing her and petting and coaxing her responses. From there, something in him would snap. He'd take the book from her hand and snap it shut before he moved in. He would pull her up on his lap and ravage her mouth before lifting her and bringing her to the bed. It became a near-daily occurrence, sex with him, and Hermione craved it. She craved his hands all over her, she craved the way he made her feel.

The guilt she hadn't felt that first day had returned with a vengeance though. After a second dose of the Nocturnus Potion the next day to counteract the dark magic effects, she had been gripped with guilt every time she saw Harry, Dumbledore, or any Order Member. She had cried so much when she had seen Harry that she had run away from class and hid herself in the Room of Requirement.

Draco was the one who found her. He didn't ask why she was crying, and she didn't volunteer the information, but she found a side of Draco that she hadn't seen before – he was genuinely kind. Sarcastic – yes, condescending – yes, but ultimately kind and understanding. He had comforted her without conditions, and he made her heart warm.

"I still think it's weird seeing you cry," Draco joked softly, pulling Hermione into his arms. She sobbed into his shoulder, desperate for comfort. "Why is it always because of Potter?"

She had run into their shared living space when she saw Harry after a particularly bad night, where an argument between her and Voldemort had ended in angry, passionate sex that just left her feeling dirty. Seeing Harry after that, after being so angrily taken by the enemy, it felt so wrong. So she had felt the tears well up.

Hermione sobbed a laugh. "It's not him. I just … I miss him."

Draco said nothing else, just rocked her until she calmed and murmured assurances and small jokes that always brought a sad chuckle to her lips. They were still Malfoy and Granger, but it was comforting that even a hated enemy could be a friend to her.

For a month, the cycle continued. Voldemort would seduce her, romance her, and wine and dine her. Inevitably, no matter her guilt from the day, she would give in and they would end up in bed. It had happened more than once, so she justified it that one more time, one more romp wouldn’t damn her any further. She'd return to the school the following morning to be comforted by either Severus or Draco, depending on what comfort she needed. Her position wasn't used by the Order, Voldemort didn't try to bring her into his fold, and she felt like she’d been pinned into limbo.

The change occurred at the end of February. She apparated to Hogwarts for her classes as normal and made her way to Transfiguration. Before she got there, though, she ducked into the girl's lavatory and vomited into the nearest toilet. Thinking it must have been from the apparation, she didn't pay it much mind. It happened again the next day, and she started worrying.

After a third morning with her head in the toilet, she went to see Madame Pomphrey. Hermione was ushered into a hospital bed and the kindly matron ran a diagnostic of her system. She turned white as she read the results.
"Miss Granger, wait here."

Madame Pompfrey never ran, but she hastened to her office faster than Hermione had ever seen her move before. She went through the possible diagnoses for regular vomiting that might cause that reaction – proximity to dark magic, excessive use of potions, etc – before she returned. What she hadn't expected was to see Professor Snape in tow, looking just as peaky as the matron.

"Miss Granger," Professor Snape greeted stiffly, without his regular warmth.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked timidly.

Madame Pompfrey hesitated, then sat at the end of Hermione's bed. "Miss Granger, when was your last menstrual cycle?"

Everything slid into place.

"No, no," Hermione stuttered out. "I can't be- not with him."

Madame Pompfrey looked on her compassionately. "You are. Seven weeks along."

"Seven weeks . . ." Hermione murmured. Eight weeks. She counted backwards, then froze. That was back the beginning. "The bonding."

"Miss Granger," Madame Pompfrey drew back her attention, "I understand how distressing this must be for you. No one blames you for becoming pregnant from a situation you had no control over. However, you do have . . . options."

"Options?" I looked at her, uncomprehending.

"I can brew you an effective Abortis potion within the day," Professor Snape announced. "Or, if you prefer, Madame Pompfrey can get the same results with a spell to induce an early labour. It is more painful that way, but fewer potential side-effects."

Involuntarily, she moved her hand to her stomach. She understood now; they wanted her to get rid of it. A baby. The baby that was growing inside of her. She knew Severus was probably right, at least about what she should do. She should abort it. Who knew what Voldemort would do if he found out she was with child, or what he would do with the child if he wanted it?

But the thought made her sick. Her parents had never been religious people, but she'd been raised with church every Christmas and Easter. She believed – to an extent – in the values she'd been taught through that tradition, including the sanctity of the life she was carrying in her. It wasn't so much that it was sacred, but that it had a purpose, a significance. Every person did. That belief had never been put to the test before.

She had thought the same when she was fighting at the Department of Mysteries with Harry. Is it right to kill someone who was trying to kill you, if murder was wrong? Surely it wasn't for any man or woman to judge someone's life worth it or not, and if no one could judge, how could she take someone's life? Even a person reduced to a vegetative state had a purpose, like Neville’s parents – their purpose was to inspire Neville, to be a part of his life. It would bring its own challenges, but she could see just how kind-hearted their state had made the brunet Gryffindor. How could anyone, then, play judge, jury, and executioner? She had been thinking it through since Dolohov, nearly every day. The temptation to kill would be too strong if she hadn't.

And even if she did kill a full-sized Death Eater, would she be able to do that to a baby? A baby who'd know no different? It would be so easy to give in, to accept the induced abortion and end it.
She would never need to tell Voldemort, she would not be the subject of ridicule for the school, and she would still be in control of her life. But what about the baby?

It deserved a chance to live. She couldn't be selfish with life.

"No," Hermione finally croaked, tears spilling over. "I can't."

"Miss Granger, I understand that it is a difficult decision," Madame Pomphrey said carefully, "but you must understand, Hogwarts is ill-equipped to handle this. We've never had a pregnant student thanks to the Founders' wards, and so I don't even know if the Headmaster would allow you to continue your studies. There is no precedent."

At the threat to her studies, she started to genuinely think about aborting the baby. The thought had her magic swirling violently around her, and she could now feel it; the baby had Voldemort's blood, and as such was part of the bond's protection. She would be forced to protect it the same as its father. The choice had been taken from her with the bond.

"I can't let you," Hermione said now, utterly fatigued. "Even if I wanted to, it's his blood. I'm bound to protect it."

That effectively silenced Madame Pomphrey.

"There are ways to circumvent the bond," Snape interjected in a low voice. "You would be compelled to protect your sprog, however if you were incapacitated or in some way rendered unconscious . . . There are ways."

"Don't call it a sprog," Hermione hissed. "And, just so you know, you're not exactly helping right now."

Severus tipped his head stiffly. "As you wish. Shall I call it the Dark Fetus?"

"Shut up!" Hermione shrieked, tears pouring.

"Severus!" Pomphrey admonished sharply. "Don't distress the girl!"

"The Headmaster will be along soon, Miss Granger," Severus said with a sneer. "He will encourage its removal. You had better decide if you truly want the child of the man most hated in the entire Wizarding World before he arrives."

"It's a baby," Hermione argued, "not the next Dark Lord."

"It will be if your captor had his way," Severus pointed out in a low voice. "You must consider what will become of your offspring should we be unsuccessful in this fight."

His voice painted a grim picture in her mind. Her child ripped from her the moment it was born, raised by the likes of Bellatrix Lestrange. Even if she was allowed to keep her baby, it would grow up surrounded by Death Eaters who worshipped it's every step because of its father. A father who would relish in bringing the child up in the traditions of his followers, if he wanted it at all.

Did Voldemort want a child? If she was to tell him when he didn't want it, would he try to kill it himself? Would he view the child as a threat to his regime? Or an asset?

Hermione shook the disturbing thoughts away. Even if she needed to consider the thoughtless man who'd gotten her pregnant at their bonding, she couldn't act against her own conscious unless she wanted to live to regret it for the rest of her life.
"I can't, Professor, I just can't," she murmured, looking up at Severus again. "But I don't want to tell him."

There was a moment of consideration on his face before nodding. "It would reassure him of my loyalties to hear of it from me. But you may be setting yourself up for a fall; by not telling him yourself, he may assume you aren't planning on keeping the child or are simply planning on hiding it. He may be angered."

"I can handle him angry," Hermione reassured him. "Would you be safe, telling him?"

"As safe as I ever am, Miss Granger," he replied stiffly.

Dumbledore chose that moment to walk through the entry of the Hospital Wing, dressed in a flamboyant purple outfit with bright blue, sparkly stars all over that looked every bit a Halloween costume for the sorcerer he was.

He greeted them cheerfully. "Good morning, everyone! What can I do for you this morning?"

Madame Pomphrey stood and whispered into the Headmaster's ear, and when his eyes flashed to hers in concern she was forced to look down in humiliating shame.

"I see," Dumbledore nodded to the nurse. "Thank you for your attention, Poppy. May Severus and I speak with Miss Granger alone, if you please?"

Madame Pomphrey pursed her lips at the Headmaster, eyes flashing to Hermione. "Miss Granger, if you're more comfortable with me staying-"

"I'm fine," she cut the nurse off hastily. It had been a month since she'd last seen herself as a rape victim in someone's eyes, and Madame Pomphrey wasn't helping. "I'll be fine."

Madame Pomphrey hesitantly nodded in acceptance and moved to close the privacy screen around the two authority figures and Hermione herself. They were finally in private. That didn't mean that Severus didn't raise his wand and put additional privacy charms around them.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore greeted. "Before we jump to conclusions, would you like to tell me what has happened?"

Her eyes widened. "Are you really asking how babies are made?"

Snape snorted loudly, but Dumbledore just sighed.

"I suppose I am unused to this situation," Dumbledore admitted. "Are you alright?"

"I'm pregnant."

Dumbledore averted his gaze at that. "Yes. Yes, you are … and I must presume that Tom doesn't know?"

"Miss Granger wishes for me to inform him," Snape said emotionlessly. "We are of the impression that hearing from me will put value on my position in the school."

"Only if she keeps the child," Dumbledore pointed out.

"I am."

Dumbledore observed her after the soft declaration. "That is not wise, Miss Granger."
"Why?" she demanded. "It is not the next Dark Lord, it's a baby!"

"That was not what I meant," Dumbledore raised his hands in surrender. "I simply meant that, no matter what course you take with the child, there will be those who know of his parentage. Should we win against Tom, he will be raised fatherless, and any living Death Eaters would seek to take him – or her – from you. Should we lose … I fear whatever choices you may have in his upbringing would not be enough."

"If I didn't keep it, I'd regret it for the rest of my life," Hermione told him firmly, only the faintest waiver in her voice showing how emotional she was. "Whatever happens will not be because I was not strong enough or brave enough to protect the life I'm growing."

"No one doubts your strength or bravery, Miss Granger," Dumbledore insisted. "I simply mean that you may not have a choice in anything regarding the child once Tom knows. He may take it from you the moment it leaves the womb. Or he may decide he does not want a child and forcibly remove it for you. We simply don't know."

"If he forces me to get rid of it, then it wasn't me who did it," Hermione insisted, her mind running a thousand miles an hour. "And if he tries to take it from me … We hide the baby from him, as long as we can. I give birth here, then we place it with an Order member or a muggle family. Somewhere he can't reach."

"He may just kill you if you do," Severus pointed out sternly.

Hermione met his eyes. "I thought he'd kill me two months ago. I've been ready for that outcome for a long time, Professor."

Anger flashed in Snape's eyes, darker than any that had been pointed at her before. He was raging mad, in a way she'd only ever seen directed at Harry or Sirius Black. She recoiled instinctively.

"This has gone far enough!" Snape roared. "It is too much of a risk! You must get rid of it!"

"No!"

"Severus!" Dumbledore addressed the man sternly. "It is not your decision. Sit!"

"No," Severus shook his head. "If Miss Granger is adamant in her irresponsible decision, perhaps it would be better if I went to the Dark Lord now."

He was angry with her for keeping it, so he was leaving. Hermione couldn't take him looking at her with such fury, so she simply agreed, "Perhaps it would be."

Severus apparated to Sayre Mansion, still seething. Granger had no idea that Dumbledore was going to die long before her child was born, no idea that soon after the Ministry would fall, and no clue that all of it meant she would be alone when she most needed aid. She was going to want to rely on him, he knew, and he would disappoint her. The Order would hate him. Her only ties to them would be whatever she could find for herself, and if Moody had his way she would be isolated. Her and her child would be in the Dark Lord's clutches without a lick of help. She would grow to hate him like everyone else.

Rookwood greeted him cautiously, as any guard should that was protecting the Dark Lord.
"Snape, what're you doing here?" he asked. "It's a school day, innit?"

"I need to speak with the Dark Lord, urgently and before I'm missed," Severus ordered quickly. "It's news concerning his pet."

Rookwood nodded and motioned towards the throne room.

His Occlumency was shaky with his angry outburst, so before he pushed open the doors he made sure to calm himself. Loathe as he was to honour Miss Granger's choice, he would not be doing her any favours if he went into the meeting angry at her. A few Occlumency breaths and he pushed open the double doors, banging them with a loud thud.

Voldemort was counselling with one of his followers, the young Rowle heir. Severus approached hastily.

"Forgive the intrusion," he sneered at the young Rowle. "My Lord, I have urgent news form Hogwarts. It's Miss Granger."

The previously apprehensive look he was receiving from Voldemort turned to one of urgency. He waved Rowle away quickly. "Thorfinn, leave us."

Thorfinn obeyed without the hesitation Severus often saw among the older supporters. At least the boy was arrogant enough to think he deserved to hear everything spoken to the Dark Lord like Bellatrix.

"Well?" Voldemort demanded the moment the doors closed.

Severus strengthened his barriers. "Miss Granger presented herself to the Hospital Wing this morning, my Lord. She is with child."

Pregnant. With child. PREGNANT. With a child. His child.

"Are you certain?" his voice came out weak to his own ears, but Severus picked up on his question.

He bowed. "Yes, my Lord. Madame Pomphrey checked her over and the girl is seven weeks along. What's more, Dumbledore has been informed and is with her now."

Voldemort clenched his fists. Meddling old man. The child was HIS. The girl was HIS. The situation was his to control, not that old codger. He would not take his heir from him.

"If you wish, I could provide the girl with a potion to remove it," Severus continued. If Granger wouldn't listen to him, perhaps the Dark Lord would. "Surely-"

"You will do no such thing!" Voldemort hissed.

Severus raised a brow. "My Lord … surely you do not wish for a child?"

Did he? Voldemort barely had to ponder the question before he had resolved that yes, he did indeed want a child. The possibility had been written off long before the girl entered his life, and when it had he had resolved to not let it bother him. Yet, as he remembered, the idea had saddened him. His desire for immortality came about from a fear of death and the sadness of being the last heir of Slytherin, only to be impotent. Now, with the possibility of a child on the horizon, he felt that burden lift. There would be another heir of Slytherin. He would have an heir.

"Would even you reject the product of two old magic beings?" Voldemort defended his decision
swiftly. It would not do to be soft in front of his followers on matters such as this. "An heir of the Slytherin bloodlines? The child will undoubtedly be powerful, useful. Tell me, Severus, how do you believe my followers would react to the news?"

"They will accept whatever your wishes are," Severus reassured him quickly. "But would the Granger girl raise your child?"

"Miss Granger is coming along in my teachings," Voldemort told the Potions Master. "I'm certain she will be an able mother, at least for the first few years. Narcissa and Bellatrix would be overjoyed to offer their assistance as well, don't you think?"

Severus hesitated, then bowed. "Narcissa, perhaps. But what of the girl, my Lord? When it is uncovered that she is with child, I fear what may happen to her."

Severus didn't want the girl to keep the child, but not for the child's sake. It was Hermione that worried him. She would be ostracized and possibly assaulted if people knew she was carrying the Dark Lord's child. There would be those who would attempt to force her to miscarry, potentially hurting or killing her. The thought of his student and … friend bent over in agony, bloodied and hurt from an assault on her person was distressing. As rarely occurred, he cared for someone. Not romantically, like Lily, but he yet again, a child his friend was carrying could destroy her future. Even if she wasn't assaulted, even if they won the war and the Dark Lord was vanquished, she would always be the mother of his child. It was a stain no one could remove.

"Perhaps she must be kept away from Hogwarts," Voldemort murmured, thoughtful. "It would not do for harm to come to my offspring. Thank you, Severus, for bringing this to my attention."

Snape bowed low. "Of course, my Lord."

Dumbledore had left her in the Hospital Wing soon after Professor Snape had left. Since she was keeping the child, Madame Pomphrey needed to take some blood and use it to craft her nausea and vitamin potions for the next few months. Once she'd done that, she'd be scanned and a moving, magical image of her child would be shown to her. She was waiting for Mme Pomphrey to return with the results of her blood tests when a familiar blonde head entered the Hospital Wing.

"Malfouy?" Hermione greeted cautiously.

The blonde came to her side, looking more concerned than she'd seen him.

"Granger," Draco said, his eyes moving over her, "are you alright?"

Hermione gave him a hard smile that probably looked more like a grimace. "Fine, I guess. Are you OK?"

Draco looked confused for a second, then shook his head. "Granger, I heard you were in the Hospital Wing and came to check on you. I'm not here for me."

"Oh," Hermione averted her eyes. "You should be in class."

Draco scoffed. "Please, Granger, like I'd let you get rid of me."

Hermione's heart warmed at his insistence, but the anxiety of her situation was enough that she didn't think she could tell him what was going on. Even with all his help the past month, she
worried about his reaction to the news. She could lose his friendship through this.

"I…Thank you for checking on me," Hermione murmured, looking down.

Draco saw her humiliated gaze fall and frowned. "Granger, what's going on? What's wrong?"

She didn't want to lie, but she didn't want to tell him either. So she was silent, opening and closing her mouth to try and find words, a word, to tell him. Malfoy wasn't having it.

"Have I done anything to make you not trust me?" he demanded.

Granger looked at him, wide-eyed. "Of course not!"

She couldn't lie to save her life, and Draco knew it. "Then tell me what's so bad that you can't tell me, when I've been one of the only people you've cried to since the start of term. So, come on. Let's hear it."

He was right, and she knew it. Hermione felt tears coming to her eyes.

"Bloody hell."

Draco sat down next to her bedside and took her hand in his. Her teary eyes focused on his silver ones and finally saw the compassion that she'd seen in Malfoy for the past month. It was the side of him she wanted out when she told him.

"Don't cry, Hermione," Malfoy murmured, holding her hand tightly. "Look, you can tell me anything, you know that, right? I owe you my life, you understand? I would never, ever, hurt you again."

"You can't tell anyone yet, OK?" she pleaded with him, interrupting his promise. "Only Madame Pomphrey, the Headmaster, and Professor Snape know about this."

"I promise," he vowed to her solemnly.

She took a calming breath before confessing. "I'm pregnant."

His eyes widened in shock and Hermione waited for the disgust. It showed up, predictably enough, and Draco swallowed making his adam's apple bob. She waited for his reaction, aware that he probably couldn't speak.

"He-?" Draco couldn't finish the sentence.

Hermione nodded, tears coming to her eyes. "It's Voldemort's."

Malfoy looked green at the news, and he seemed to be trying very hard not to flinch away from her.

"Please, please, Draco," Hermione pleaded, clutching his hand tightly, "whatever you're thinking, stop. Ask me anything, but please don't be disgusted by me."

"Never," he said, clutching her hand just as tightly. "Sorry, Granger, but that was the last thing I expected. You … you never told me what he was doing to you. He-?" Draco swallowed harshly. "I'd seen it happen before, but the girls never lived afterwards. Was it – you don't have to tell me, but – was it at a revel? Did-?"

"No," Hermione murmured. "No, it was in our-his chambers."
Draco froze at that, but managed a terse nod. After a moment of silence, he gave her a grim smirk. "At least my father didn't see you naked before I did, right?"

Hermione gave him a disgusted shiver in response, making his smile a little less sad.

"How did godfather take it?" Draco asked.

Hermione grimaced. "He's angry at me. He said I was carrying the Dark Fetus, and that I should get rid of it."

Draco looked at her carefully. "And you won't?"

"Please, not you too," she begged. "I don't want to be pregnant, but now that I am I can't just end a child's life."

"It may be more than one, Miss Granger," Madame Pomphrey announced, coming towards her.

"What?" Hermione gasped.

Madame Pomphrey nodded, pulling up a chair next to her bed. She glanced at Draco, seeing if he was truly helping her patient, before giving Hermione the full attention. "Your blood has a very high hormone level for just one child. Now, it could just be you are irregular, but we need to check to see if you truly are pregnant with more than just one child."

Draco looked at her nervously and tried to stand up. "Granger, maybe I should-?"

Hermione gripped his hand tightly. "No, don't go. Please, I need someone here."

She watched as his expression softened, and Draco sat back down and cupped her hand in both of his. "If you need me, I'll be here for every visit," he promised her. "Can I expect to be Uncle Draco?"

Hermione chuckled but nodded. Madame Pomphrey was moving her wand in precise motions over her stomach. Finally, with a flick, and image appeared on her belly. She could see straight through to her womb, as if it were the most precise ultrasound. It was a full colour image, but Hermione definitely hadn't seen an image like it before. She couldn't even see where she was supposed to look for the tiny human – or humans – inside of her.

"Granger, don't take this the wrong way, but that's just freaky," Draco grimaced.

Madame Pomphrey was observing the image carefully. "Miss Granger, you're having twins," she announced. She traced her finger over the image and motioned for Hermione to look. "Can you see these two tiny shapes here, the size of a blueberry?"

She did. They looked so small. "I'm really pregnant. I'm having twins."

"Congratulations, Granger," Malfoy said with a smirk. She anticipated a sassy remark, and was not disappointed. "You're having a pair of blobs."

"Really, Mr. Malfoy," Madame Pomphrey tutted, even though Hermione laughed. She turned her gaze to Hermione's face. "Unfortunately, Miss Granger, with twins there's less we can do about the nausea and such. It won't harm you to take an anti-nausea potion, but it will be less effective. Prepare yourself for a few months of sickness."

She cancelled the spell on Hermione's womb, and, with a hesitant glance at Draco, she leaned
closer to Hermione with a gentle expression on her face. "Miss Granger, if you ever need anything, please come see me. And if you're worried about Severus preparing your potions, don't. It's clear that he has an invested interest in this, and so I'll prepare your potions myself."

Hermione nodded in gratitude at the older woman. She took that as dismissal and bustled away to her back room.

"You'll really be there?" Hermione asked Draco now they were alone. "You'll come to my appointments with me?"

"I promised, didn't I?" Malfoy smiled. "A Malfoy always keeps his promises, even to a couple of blueberries."

Hermione smacked him on the arm, but then drew her arms around him and hugged him tight. Without Harry, without Ron, without Molly or her mother or Severus, she had one person. She had Draco Malfoy. When did that become a comforting thought?
Chapter 27

She had been summoned soon after leaving the Hospital Wing. It wasn't a surprise since she knew Professor Snape had gone to Voldemort, but it filled her with mortification and dread. Mortification, because she was walking to class with Malfoy and had needed to let him know what was happening. She hated doing that to him – he always looked at her with the most profound pity. Dread, however, came because at the end of the sudden sucking journey by her collar, she would be facing the Dark Lord who was fathering her first children.

She had been summoned to their rooms again. He in his usual evening chair, looking at where she'd appeared with a decidedly impassive look on his face. He knew. She knew he knew. So why he wouldn't speak and simply looked at her, up and down until it unnerved her completely, was inexplicable.

"Professor Snape spoke with you?" she asked timidly.

Voldemort did not answer as she hoped and motioned to the silver tea service, anticipating her making tea as she had many nights in the past. The distraction was welcome, and Hermione set to her task with happiness instead of her usual glare. He had expected it of her since a few nights into their ritual, and at first she had fought it. But when she saw the look of pleasure on his face when he sipped the aromatic blend, she'd relented. As much as she enjoyed making tea for her family, it wasn't something she thought made her any more an equal in his eyes.

Today it was welcome. She touched the goblin silver with her magic, warming it all over carefully before adding the measure of the elegant white tea and jasmine peach blend. She'd learned over the last month that Voldemort didn't care about caffeine because he didn't need it, but preferred to drink the blend for taste and warmth. White tea, flavoured with this or that, was his favourite. She then pulled out her wand and carefully spelled hot water into the silver tea service, making sure it rolled in waves over every side of the expensive teapot.

There was silence as she let the tea steep. Brave enough to face her boggart, but not enough to turn around and face Voldemort, she sat on the ground by the tea service to wait. Not once did she look back at the man behind her.

Finally, once the charmed teapot let out a low hiss telling her it was finished, she set the strainer over the mixed goblin silver and glass teacups and served it. She could not avoid looking at him as she handed him his cup, but she kept her gaze fixed on his hands.

When she turned to collect her own cup, the long slim fingers of Voldemort snatched her wrist, keeping her from her course. She swallowed nervously.

"Look at me, my little witch," he murmured, just loud enough for her to hear.

That was the terrifying part. She upped her Occlumency shields, in case he was tempted to peek, and lifted her gaze slowly to meet his icy blue one. He seemed pleased at her actions and released her.

"Sit with me," he ordered now.

She assumed it was by his feet and nodded, well used to the protocol. She grabbed her teacup and went to sit by his feet, but her placed was occupied by a stool the same height as the seat. It must have, at one point, been a matching footstool. He patted it reassuringly, indicating exactly what she
could believe. She was going to be sitting on something beside the floor in his chambers.

Answering her unanswered question, he replied, "I would provide you with your own chair, however I enjoy our nightly ritual too much to allow such distance."

She nodded, not trusting her voice, and sat on the comfortable stool by his knee.

"Does it please you?" he murmured in her ear, now that he had her close. "Would you prefer your own chair?"

Hermione shivered. "No. I … this is very nice."

"Then we have some things to discuss," he asserted, sitting back in his seat. Hermione turned to look at him, feeling bereft of his proximity. His eyes glittered in delight at her, and she cursed herself for being so easy to read. "Are you able to tell me, yourself, what has occurred?"

"You already know," Hermione murmured.

He looked at her with an amused shake of his head. "I do, but that does not mean I do not want to hear it from your lips in greater detail. Tell me, my witch. I will not be upset."

"I know that, now," she admitted hesitantly. "But … it's not … I-I'm still afraid."

She looked down, ashamed, until she felt his cool hands lifting her face to his gaze. He looked . . . kind. Maybe not, it was not the right word for him. Draco was kind, Voldemort was more . . . feeling benevolent.

"Are you with child?" Voldemort asked.

Hermione nodded, teary at the words. "Two."

His face finally broke from its prepared façade, now rippling with shock. He gaped.

"They're twins," Hermione admitted, wrapping a hand around her abdomen as if she could feel them. As if they could strengthen her. "Madame Pomphrey could tell me that much, although it's still way too early to tell the gender. I'm only seven weeks along. If I had to guess-"

"That would make it the day of the bonding," Voldemort interjected, now able to speak, eyes focusing on her. "It is magic. That is the only explanation, for the conception, for the twins. . . Old magic has gifted us with a most precious reward."

Those words he said reverently, moving his hands from her face to travel down her body, coming to rest with her hand on her abdomen. Hermione could not believe the tenderness in his movements, the happiness that was expressed on his normally passive or angry face. He'd said it was for us. Them. Did that mean…?

"Is it acceptable to you to carry my heirs, little witch?" Voldemort murmured, caressing her abdomen in a nearly intimate gesture. "I cannot allow you to harm them. They are mine."

"I want them," Hermione insisted, placing her hand over Voldemort's on her abdomen. "I do."

"Excellent."

He continued to look at her stomach, as if he couldn't believe they were in there. Hermione saw a tenderness to him she could learn to enjoy, but … she needed more reassurance.
"You'll let me keep them, won't you?" Hermione choked out, unable to suppress her fears. "You won't take them away from me?"

She said him stiffen before looking back up to her face from her abdomen.

"I would not take them from you unless you gave me no other choice," he promised, simultaneously warning her. "Do not try to take them from me, and I will not take them from you. Agreed?"

She sank into his touch, gripping his upper arms in relief and stress now replaced with a heady gratitude. "Yes, yes, thank you."

Voldemort lifted her into his arms further, the tea now abandoned on the side table in favour of holding her curled form against his chest. She sighed into his neck, breathing in the scents that told her exactly who was holding her. She loved the way he smelt.

"I will be a father," he murmured in her ear, sharing it with her. "A father of twins. It surprises me how much pleasure that simple phrase brings me."

Hermione was happy. Happy to sit here, to have him murmur assurances and feelings into her ear. But it was marred by a horrible thought, and one she could not get rid of.

"Will you love them?" Voldemort stiffened under her words, suddenly off-kilter and inapproachable. She grabbed at the front of his robes, burying her face into them as if she could hide from how uncertain he seemed at such a necessary, normal thing – loving one's children. "Can you?"

Maybe he could. Hermione knew, if his soul could have been repaired with his body, he should be able to love them. If he could only try . . . Maybe, maybe everything could be alright. The war would end, she would raise her children free of pureblood prejudice, and . . . maybe, just maybe, she could be happy being bound to him.

"You know my feelings on love, Miss Granger," he said stiffly. "It is useless and distracting. Our children will want for nothing, and that is all that matters."

"They'll want their father to love them," Hermione pushed, fixing her eyes on his. "It's so important to children that they feel loved, wanted."

"They will undoubtedly have their mother and her Gryffindor sensibilities for that," he said stiffly. "I have no use for the sentiment."

She recoiled from his as if she'd been hit. Her heart pounded and hammered, and for a moment she felt like she'd be sick.

"I-I need to . . ." She left his lap quickly and ran to the lavatory, ignoring his shouts of 'Miss Granger?!' and warding the door so he wouldn't come in. He'd taught her that much.

Alone, in the security of the restroom, she paused. What had brought on such an intense reaction? It wasn't for the children, because she already planned on being the one providing the love in raising them. So why did she feel as if she'd been punched in the stomach?

The realization hit her hard. It was the same feeling she'd had watching Ron snog Lavender in the common room days only after she'd learned he liked her; it was the realization that he'd never love her, only much, much more intense, more real. And now, she realized with terror, she'd done the unthinkable.
She'd fallen in love with the Dark Lord.

Tears came unbidden and she shed them over the vanity unrestrainedly. All the guilt she felt with Harry, Dumbledore, the Order … she thought it was because she was simply attracted to the enemy. Now, she realized it was because she'd been falling for him. Caring for him. Trying to get him to love her.

"Miss Granger!" he knocked on the door. "Are you ill?"

"Leave me alone!"

The knocking stopped, and Hermione strained to hear his reaction. Would she throw him into one of his violent moods, the ones that ended in her killing Dolohov, or tortured at the hands of Bellatrix? Or would he stay as benevolent as he had been so far that night and leave her be?

Finally, she heard his voice come low through the door. "Miss Granger, please, come out."

She couldn't reply. For once, he'd asked kindly instead of bashing through the door. Did he know, already, what she had only just figured out? Did he know she was in love with him? Did he laugh about it, did it bring him glee to think he'd pulled one over on the publicly dubbed Gryffindor princess?

"I don't understand what upset you," he called through the door, "but I swear, I will care for them with everything I can, as I care for you. Up to my own life, I will spare nothing. I can give you my word that they are most certainly wanted."

It was foolish how reassured she was by the simple knowledge that he had admitted, for only the second time, that he cared for her. And reassured as she was that he'd repeated the sentiment he expressed nearly every night while inside her, that he wanted her, and them. It was enough to calm her raging heart so she could face him. She moved to the door and let down her wards before opening the door.

The second she'd opened it, Voldemort grabbed her and pinned her to the nearest wall, his face rife with restraint. "Do not hide from me again, little witch."

"As if I could," she quipped bitterly. "You can still get through all of my shields and wards, not matter what I do."

He smirked down at her. "I believe this is an excellent position for the remainder of our … negotiations? We have a few more things to address."

Hermione disagreed. She could barely focus with his hips against hers, and it would mean unfair advantage for him.

"What else is there?" Hermione asked, instead of protesting.

"Your schooling," he said. "You will not return to Hogwarts."

"What?!" Hermione shrieked. "No, no, no. I love Hogwarts, I don't want to leave it."

She needed her time at the school; it was the only thing that kept her sane! It was the part of her life that felt almost normal, with friends and homework to distract her from her situation in the war and the uncertainty of her future.

Speaking of her future, he leaned closer to her so his mouth was inches from hers, tantalizingly and
distractingly close. "I can provide you with tutors and instructors for the subjects that matter, like Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. You will need comfort, though, and rest. Birthing two children is no easy task."

"I can manage," she said, her voice sounding less strong and more like a whimper at his closeness. "I'll only be six months along when school ends."

"Six months along with twins," he reminded her. "I will not have you, and thus them, vulnerable. I have too many enemies for you to leave my presence thus debilitated."

The challenge to her skill was a swipe to her Gryffindor spirit. She raised her chin defiantly, but it only served to give him access to her neck. She whimpered. "I am far from weak."

"I never said you were," he said graciously, although there was a glint in his eye that said he was placating her. "However, after a few months, you will be larger and less … agile. I would not expect you to take on multiple opponents while heavily pregnant."

"I don't see a problem," she moaned as he ground against her. "P-Professor Snape, he's at the school."

He pulled away from her, his face scowling. "You certainly can ruin the mood. Please refrain from mentioning another man's name while I'm seducing you."

"He can protect me while I'm at school, that's all," Hermione defended hastily. "You know he's a friend of mine."

His scowl didn't diminish. "Only because you believe him a spy for your side."

"And you believe he's a spy for yours," Hermione noted calmly.

"Which he is," Voldemort finished.

Hermione grinned. "Then trust that he will protect me." Before he could protest, Hermione quickly switched gears. "What else did you want me to foolishly agree to?"

He smirked. "Are you proposing to buy your return to Hogwarts by giving me something else I want, dear witch? It would be very Slytherin of you. However, I have a better idea."

He pulled out his wand and summoned Nagini from wherever he had been before bending down and stroking the snake that had become a pet to Hermione. "If you insist on returning to Hogwarts, you will take Nagini with you."

Hermione gaped. "You want _me_ to take a giant snake to a school that was terrorized by basilisk only a few years ago? Are you insane? What if she causes a panic, what if she bites someone?"

"Nagini will be tasked with defending you," Voldemort hushed her concerns. "And, while venomous, I'm certain Madame Pomphrey can create an anti-venom if you deem fit to order Nagini to provide a sample of her own. Not that your attackers would deserve that mercy."

Hermione could see how determined he was. "What if someone attacks her?"

"It won't be an issue," Voldemort waved away her concern. "I've been rubbing potions in her scales and feeding them to her since she was a hatchling, and she is, now, mostly resistant to any offensive magic. Now, do you agree?"
Hermione hesitated. "Nagini is kind of big to be coming to classes with me."

Voldemort grinned devilishly. With a wave of his wand, Nagini was the size of a regular rattlesnake, not a giant anaconda. "How's this? You could carry my familiar on your shoulders now without a problem."

Nagini hissed at her master, presumably over being reduced to a small snake. Voldemort hissed in reply, pointing at Hermione as he did. Nagini tilted her head towards her, before giving a hiss in reply.

Voldemort laughed. "He wanted to make sure you know that if anything happens, just cast finite on her and she'll be full-sized again.

Nagini hissed happily and with a nod, Voldemort turned her back to full-sized.

"Do you agree, pet?" Voldemort asked her, motioning to Nagini. "She is a wonderful nurse-maid as well, after they are born."

Hermione bit her lip nervously. "I-I oh! Fine, but I'm telling Professor Snape about her, and I'm having him extract venom before anyone gets bit."

That made Voldemort happy. He pulled Hermione flush against his body and, with a kiss, apparated her up higher into the Sayre estate, one of the top floors. It was a larger room, much bigger than the one he had put her in previously. Hermione looked around, disoriented.

"Why are we here?" she asked.

Voldemort motioned to it, grandly. "Our new quarters, my Lady."

"Did we need new ones?" Hermione asked, confused.

Voldemort only smiled and led her to a door with a smile. "Let me show you."

He pulled her out into a hallway that led to a giant, spacious area with couches, and the like, and then into the side room. What greeted her was a room with one large, antique-looking crib, colourful walls, and a fully matching set of furniture. He'd created a nursery.

"I had the elves get the family wing together the moment Severus told me," he whispered in her ear, and Hermione let herself believe it was lovingly. "I want them close-by."

"Then can we?" Hermione asked. "Can we put the crib in the bedroom, at least until they can sleep through the night?"

Voldemort smiled down at her and pulled her into a passionate kiss. It stole Hermione's breath away. When he let his lips leave hers, he murmured, "I am so glad you are not a pureblood witch."

Hermione frowned. "What does that mean?"

He chuckled at her indignation. "Nothing unseemly, sweetling. Only that those born with status were often raised by house-elves, and would rather keep that tradition for their children. But you … you want them close-by. You intend to raise them yourself."

"Of course I do," Hermione defended needlessly. "They need more than a nurse, they need a-"

Hermione stopped. She couldn't bring herself to call them a family, even if that is what she wanted. What she felt they needed.
"A mother?" Voldemort guessed, completely off-base. "Do not worry, little witch. Young as you are, you have more power and sense than many I could name; you will be a wonderful mother to our children."

He kissed her, soothing and soft against her lips. Try as she might to resist the intimact, Hermione broke and pulled him to her passionately, desperate to take advantage of the little affection the Dark Lord had for her, desperate to feel that little bit he could provide. He was the father of the children inside of her, and she needed to feel him care for her like he would them.

They'd break in the new bed another day, for now the floor would have to do.

After a love-making session, Hermione convinced Voldemort to let her return to the school. He shrunk Nagini down and placed her along Hermione's shoulders. With a passionate kiss that probably left her mouth red and puffy for all to see, he let her go.

She apparated directly to the maintenance closet just inside the Gryffindor common room. She needed to tell Harry what had happened, and before he heard it from either Dumbledore or a random Death Eater. Straightening up and trying not to look thoroughly snogged, she opened the closet and stepped into the common room.

The few people who were in there froze as they saw her, and Nagini around her neck, step into their domain. She wasn't in Slytherin clothes anymore, but she could feel it on her as if it were tattooed across her chest. Harry was on the couch with Ron and Ginny, and she walked up to them with determination and a raised chin.

"'Mione, what?" Harry looked at the snake around her neck and hissed. Nagini hissed back, stretching out its fangs. They engaged like that for a long time, until, finally, Nagini hissed and slithered around Hermione's neck protectively. Harry looked disturbed.

Before he could comment, she attacked first. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't have something important, Harry. I need to speak with you."

"What am I?" Ron huffed jokingly. "We'll come, 'Mione."

Ginny looked slightly ill. "You'll keep it away from us, right?"

"Sorry about her," Hermione apologized, leading the group towards the Portrait hole. "She's my, er, babysitter, I guess."

"'Mione, is that . . . Nagini?" Harry croaked, obviously still unnerved.

Hermione grimaced. "Voldemort trusts her to protect me, even shrunk."

"THAT is the snake that attacked our dad?" Ron gasped. "What's it doing around your neck?"

"I didn't have much of a choice," Hermione told them, pulling them from the portrait. "Come on, this is something I can't have spread around. To the Room?"

They followed her up to the Room on Requirement with little discussion, although Ron and Ginny kept a little away from her because of Nagini. Harry was broody, obviously worried about what was coming. She paced outside the Room carefully. 'I need a private place to share secrets.' The Room provided her with a cozy replica of the Gryffindor Common Room, but with a cushion in
front of the fire for Nagini. She took the snake from around her neck and placed her on the pillow before sitting down with her friends.

They all stared at her as if she'd grown three heads.

"I'm fairly confident I can keep Voldemort out of my head now," she started, seeing the worry on everyone's faces. "Just in case, please don't tell me anything about the Order or anything relating to it. I'm sorry for disobeying Dumbledore, but I-I had to talk to you guys. I need to tell you something before it comes out."

She was suddenly more worried about this than anything else. She looked pleadingly at Harry. "Please, please, tell me I can count on you to help me."

"Always," Ginny promised, coming close and grabbing her hands. "Hey, we never gave up on being your friends, 'Mione. Right guys?"

"Right!" Ron cheered.

"Absolutely," Harry said intensely.

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded, willing the lump to stay instead of turning into tears. "Thank you."

It was a hard thing to do, to admit to her friends what had happened. It was easier with Malfoy. It was easier without worrying about the judgement her state would bring. It was easier than wondering if she'd changed so much that she really was a monster for being alright and – dare she say – excited to have children. She decided to get it out quickly so the words didn't get caught.

"I'm pregnant."

There was silence. They stared at her in disbelief. Finally, Ron broke the silence with a short, disbelieving snort. "Sorry, 'Mione, I must have heard wrong. I thought you said you were pregnant. Ha!"

He laughed, but no one joined him. Harry looked at her with the darkest look she'd ever seen. Ginny looked sick.

"I'm having twins," Hermione announced feebly, as if that made her news better. "Dumbledore knows. I'm due at end of August, but with twins they'll probably come early."

Ron's laughing grin faded into a, "Merlin, you're serious."

Hermione just nodded, tears now streaming. She couldn't look away from Harry, who had averted his gaze to the snake just by the fire.

"Harry, I'm so sorry," were the only words Hermione could say. "I'm so, so sorry."

"It-It wasn't your fault," Ginny reassured her haltingly, looking between her and Harry rapidly. "Right Harry? We know it wasn't 'Mione's fault, yeah?"

Harry was quiet. Then, with a dark voice, he only whispered, "I'll kill him."

Hermione's heart sank. "Harry, please, look at me."

He looked at her, but his eyes were focused on his hatred for Voldemort. She flinched.
"I'm your friend Harry," she promised, her own words feeling guilt-laden. "I'm not some victim for you to avenge."

"You're really pregnant?" Ron gaped.

Ginny smacked him. "Yes, she is, Ron! Keep up!"

Harry just swallowed, finally losing the dark look in his eyes and just looking at her sadly. She rose from her seat and knelt in front of Harry to grab his hands. "Harry, really, it's okay. I'm not-I can't be too upset about this."

He grabbed her hands tightly, his green eyes burrowing into hers.

"'Mione, you are carrying Voldemort's children!" he cried out. "And you're okay with this?"

She frowned at her friend. "I'm not … I didn't want to be, but … I guess, this is how it is. I'm not going to change it, so I have to accept it."

"Does he know?" Ron asked from the sidelines.

Hermione nodded, lost in the agony of her green-eyed friend before her.

"Well?" Ginny asked. "How did he take it? Or did he do it on purpose?"

"It wasn't planned," Hermione told them carefully. "But he … seemed pleased."

He'd been ecstatic, but they didn't need to know that. Harry's fisted clenched around hers.

"Of course he was," Harry spat, his anger rolling off him in waves. "How much more could he claim you? First he kidnapped you, then bound you, then he collared you, and now ... I didn't think I could hate him any more."

"Harry, please, I-I don't want you guys to think they'll be just like him," she pleaded. "I'll be raising them, he promised me that. He won't try to take them away from me. If he does, I'll give them to the Order, hide them until the end of the war. But my children are not going to be dark."

"Of course not," Ginny sank to her knees next to Hermione, clasping her friend tight in her grasp. "And we'll support you. Right guys?"

Ron shook himself out of his haze. "Yeah, yeah, of course. If You-Know-Who's pleased, we'll just have to stop it. I'm sure we can convince Professor Snape-"

"No!" Hermione stopped him, her eyes flicking over to Nagini. The snake wasn't coiled to strike, but it's eyes were fixed on Ron. "I'm not getting rid of them, Ron. I'm having the twins."

"Have the Twins?" Ginny joked, trying to lift the mood. "The world can only handle one Fred and George, you know."

"This isn't funny!" Harry roared at her.

Silence.

"Ginny-" Harry whispered penitently.

She waved her hand. "No, Harry. You're right, it isn't funny. But it's Hermione, so we have to buck up and look out for her. So stop looking like you'll murder her and comfort you friend!"
He looked ashamed, but obediently turned to Hermione and gave her a small smile. "We're here for you. I promise, 'Mione, you don't have to do this alone."

She felt her eyes water. "I don't know when I'll spend time with you again, but hopefully I'll master my Occlumency soon. I want my best friends back."

They parted ways after that. Hermione knew, as they did, that if she stayed they would start talking about what was happening in their lives, and they couldn't risk it. Hermione made her way down to the dungeons with Nagini.

Snape was scowling at the papers on his desk when she entered. Probably grading, she surmised. When he looked up at her, his scowl lightened and he gave her his nod of greeting before he focused his gaze on the snake around her neck.

"Something you wish to share, Miss Granger?" he asked firmly.

"I believe you already know Nagini," she introduced the snake around her neck. "Apparently, I'm going to become slow and sluggish in pregnancy and Nagini is supposed to protect me. I wanted to make sure you had the chance to extract some of her venom in case she bites anyone."

Snape put down his quill deliberately, slowly pushing himself out from his desk. He refused to meet her gaze.

"So," he drawled, "you're being allowed to return."

"I guess so."

She could feel the tension between them. She wanted to talk to him as the mentor/friend she'd come to rely on, but she knew he was angry at her. Angry at the children in her stomach. And the talk they were going to have couldn't be in front of Nagini.

She took the snake gently from her neck where she was coil and moved to the lab. "Nagini, I need a private word with my Potions Professor." At her his, Hermione looked sternly down at the snake. "If you don't behave, I won't return you to your normal for the venom extraction." Then, gentler, she set Nagini down on the table and stroked her. "I promise, Professor Snape would never hurt me. Besides, he works for your Master; you should be able to trust him."

Nagini hissed but coiled deferentially into her resting pose. Hermione took that as acceptance and thanked the snake familiar before heading back into Snape's office where her mentor was waiting, leaning against the desk. He threw his wand around in a large arc, obviously to silence the room from Nagini. Then he stared. Just stared.

"You know we need to talk," Hermione started uncertainly.

Snape sneered. "Oh really, Miss Granger? I don't recall."

"Professor, I know I disappointed you, but I need you," Hermione pleaded.

"If you're looking for advice, I'm afraid you've made it clear you don't value mine," he snarled. "I have nothing more to say."

Hermione glared. "Severus Tobias Snape, I care about you! One disagreement doesn't change that!"

"Doesn't it?" he hissed, eyes glowing with suppressed emotion. "Everyone around you has told you
to get rid of your child, and you are ignoring them – ignoring me – and in so doing, putting yourself in harm's way! Don't you see, you stupid girl? Don't you see I'm trying to protect you?"

Hermione didn't want to yell anymore. She launched herself at Professor Snape and fastened her arms around his back and held him in a tight hug. His angry rant turned frozen, and he stopped moving entirely with her wrapped around him.

"Miss Granger, what are you doing?" he snipped roughly.

She squeezed tightly. "Hugging you, Professor. I-I know you're trying to protect me. I know I'm being foolish by keeping them. Please, please don't turn me away."

There was a pause. "Them?"

Hermione looked up at his face, assessing the stiff expression.

"You didn't stay for the tests," she murmured as gently as she could, terrified of angering him again. "I'm having twins."

If possible, he grew even more stiff. Hermione's eyes watched as his face became stony, pale, and drawn in shock. After a few moment of silence, he looked down at her, something indiscernible in his eyes.

"I suppose there's even less chance of you taking the potion now?" he asked lightly, his dark words not reaching his tone. Hermione shook her head. At that, Snape gave her the briefest of smiles.

"Then I suppose you will need my help, Miss Granger."

The teacher and student embraced in what could only be called a comforting embrace. He rested his head on hers just like her father did, making her feel at small and at the same time profoundly secure.

"Now," Snape cleared his throat, "why did you bring the Dark Lord's familiar to Hogwarts?"

After explaining the situation, the worked to extract as much venom as Nagini would allow before separating. Severus went to Dumbledore to receive approval for her unusual situation. Hermione apparated back to Sayre Mansion and promptly fell into bed, exhausted from the emotional, busy day she'd had.
Chapter 28

No amount of mental shields, no rationalization had prepared Severus Snape for this day. Granger was pregnant with the Dark Lord's brood. Twins. He had personally taught her the charm to use after that first encounter, trying to avoid this with her. But it seemed he was already too late, because at the moment he taught her she was already with child.

He had denied it for months now, his attraction to Granger, and he'd succeeded. He'd told himself she was a student, he her mentor. He had kept it professional and had provided her with the comfort she needed in the face of her affections for his Master. He had dismissed his affections for the natural caring that came from pity to anyone who'd been through her ordeal.

But now, knowing what had befallen her, he was angry. Angry that she'd been defiled by one of his masters, angry that those children existed, and angry … angry that they couldn't be his. He'd wanted her to get rid of them so he could one day pursue her, when the Dark Lord was vanquished and he was free to do as he wanted. Yet with the swell of her stomach, she would become more and more the Dark Lord's and less and less his own. Not that she was his at all.

But worse, she would be swelling with the Dark Lord's children well after he was meant to kill the Headmaster. Her trust in him would be compromised, and she would be alone with her children. Maybe Draco would be allowed near her, but most likely she would be completely reliant on the Dark Lord during her most vulnerable time.

With that horrible image of Hermione, heavily pregnant and alone with his master, he found himself in the Headmaster's office.

"We need to move up our timeframe," Snape urged the Headmaster. "You said it yourself, the Dark Lord is once again mortal. This entire war could be done by first month of Summer, if not earlier."

Severus had come to the Headmaster to – as far as Miss Granger was concerned – inform him that Nagini would be guarding her. What he truly wanted from him was a confirmation that he would not be forced to abandon Miss Granger by killing the Headmaster. Dumbledore, however, was being a stubborn man.

"We cannot risk everything simply because of Miss Granger's unfortunate circumstances," the Headmaster informed him sadly. "We do not have the numbers."

"We do," Severus assured him. "More accurately, we will on the day. We need to mount a defensive at the Ministry; only then can we be sure to have the aurors come to our side, and most of the Ministry at that. I will convince the Dark Lord not to wait for the offensive."

"Tom will never change his plans solely at your directive," Dumbledore said pointedly.

"If we were to fake your death," Severus asserted carefully, "then, perhaps, we could finish this within a couple of days. He would believe I was leading his forces in a Blitzkrieg; first Hogwarts, then the Ministry before anyone can prepare."

"You are forgetting your Vow, my boy," Dumbledore asserted. "In the end, you or Draco must kill me if you are to live. And should I fight Tom after the fact, and lose, you would have failed. I fear that, if we fake my death, you with be signing the certificate on your own."

Severus stiffened at the reminder, but kept his face impassive. "Then so be it."
Dumbledore now looked at him closely, scrutinizing his features. "This, coming from the man who told me not two months ago that I asked too much of him? That he was at his breaking point?"

He remained silent under Dumbledore's inquisitorial gaze, only giving him a stiff nod to show his comprehension. There was nothing he could say that would change what he had expressed not long ago.

"Severus," Dumbledore said gently, "don't think I am oblivious to what's going on within my own walls. As of now, you've kept your regard for Miss Granger within the bounds of propriety. However, should you be-

"I am not involved with Miss Granger," he denied quickly and mercilessly, suddenly very self-conscious. "I care for her well-being, nothing more."

Dumbledore's eyes were sad. "And yet you're willing to die for her?"

"As I would make a vow for Draco, I would break that vow for Hermione," her first name slid from his tongue effortlessly. "She is … dear to me, Headmaster, and I will not deny that we have become close. However I will not involve myself with a student."

At his declaration, a knock came at the Headmaster's door. When it opened, a gaunt-looking Draco Malfoy stepped into the room.

"Ah, Draco, my boy!" Dumbledore greeted. "What can I do for you today?"

"I've changed my mind," he said confidently, only the slight slump of his shoulders giving his reticence away to Severus' eyes. "I'll do it. I'll accept the Dark Lord's offer."

Dumbledore leaned forward eagerly in his seat. "I'm pleased to hear that, my boy. And how did you come to this decision?"

Draco was trained to lie from birth, so Severus could see his training coming in. He didn't avert his eyes from the Headmaster, he stiffened his shoulders, and used his hand when speaking. "I want to protect my family. If I go back, I can keep an eye on them and give me support."

Severus glared at him. "Draco, while Miss Granger's condition is sympathetic, she cannot be the basis for this decision."

"As she was not the basis for your own, Severus?" Dumbledore said simply from his desk, eyes twinkling.

Severus glared at them both. "This is irrelevant. Miss Granger's predicament is a tool we should use to our advantage! The Dark Lord wants the children she's intent on bearing, and we can use his investment to lure him out!"

Severus saw the look Draco gave to both him and the Headmaster, but for once he didn't care what his godson perceived of his words. He neede Albus to agree to move up the timeline of the war.

"I agree that Miss Granger's pregnancy presents unforeseen problems as well as opportunities, Severus," Dumbledore said. "However, until we can remove the bloodstone collar that keeps returning her to his side, there is nothing we can do,"

Severus owed Draco his life for the next words the blonde boy spoke. "That's it?"
"You know how to remove it?" Severus demanded.

Draco nodded, now faltering under the intense gaze of his godfather. "It's the Malfoy family collar. My mother gave it to him before he tossed me in the dungeons."

Dumbledore was now onboard. With the knowledge that her collar could be removed, plans started to fall into place. The Dark Lord would not live to see the birth of his children.

Hermione had a hard time sleeping that night. Her magic kept waking her, throbbing and humming. She blamed the pregnancy. Without thinking, she leaned across the bed and grabbed at Voldemort. When he stirred, immediately she began to panic.

"Something the matter?" Voldemort murmured, turning to her. His blue eyes found her panicked face and were suddenly wide open. "Are you alright?"

Hermione shook her head. "But... you're not upset, that I woke you?"

Voldemort suddenly saw what the problem was. She still believed, even with the time he'd spent with her, that he would one day become the pale monster that haunted her dreams.

"Oh, my witch," he whispered, drawing his hand up her legs, earning a shiver in trailed it higher, higher, earning a gasp as he moved passed her core and took to stroking her pregnant stomach. "Do you not know how precious you are to me? I would never harm you, a most assuredly not while you carry my heirs."

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered.

He only nodded at that, dipping his hand under the elastic of her pajama pant and playing with the hairs there. He heard he take a quick breath, and he continued. "Now, what's wrong?"

"My magic, I-I couldn't sleep," she looked down, ashamed. "Sorry, that's such a poor reason. You can go back to sleep."

Only Voldemort would understand how that could be. As much of a blessing as their magic was, it made it a sentient being with a will of its own. If it wanted to wake you, it would. So, instead of questioning further, he reached out and pulled the young witch into his arms.

"Little witch, you are giving me the greatest gift I could imagine," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Children, born of magic and binding, and heirs to my house. I believe that entitles you to my attention in the night, don't you?"

He watched her blush brilliantly at his double entendre and grinned. His little witch.

"I-I suppose," she stuttered out, still blushing. "But it's not like you can fix it."

He leaned down and captured those ill-prepared lips in his, reveling in the pure bliss the act brought. This little witch was more precious to him than all his death eaters for that sole reason. No matter the circumstance, he always wanted her. She could make the dull meetings interesting, the painfully lonely nights warm and full of her, her comfort and the bliss her body could bring. Already he was hardening because of the many nights he'd spent inside of her supple sheath.

"Perhaps, if I can't stop your magic from misbehaving," he breathed, "I can take your mind off of
He heard her breath catch and knew she wanted him too. Capturing her lips again, this time more forcefully and passionately, the way that would bring her to gasp and respond for more, he tilted her until she was against the mattress with him pressed firmly into her.

Hermione was already gasping when he detached his lips from hers and moved them down her neck, suckling and bringing a warm coil of heat to her abdomen, reminding her of how aroused she could be by this man. His hips were securely against hers, an fact she was glad for as she ground into his budding erection with her wet core.

It escalated quickly. Voldemort wandlessly divested them both and their naked bodies revelled for a short while in just the feeling of skin on skin. Hermione was in love with the hard planes of his body, brushing up and down his taut stomach and right down to his pubes. Voldemort spent his attention on her breasts, enjoying their bouncing and taste in his mouth.

It wasn't long before the Dark Lord decided he need to have his witch, and right that second. Without a single word of warning he slid into the witch, loving her gasps of pleasure as he took her. His pace was slow, not wanting to jostle the children forming in her lovely center, but it was unforgiving. He went all the way in until his pelvis pressed into her hipbones and did that every time. It was common for him. He wanted nothing more than to live in the witch's tight sheath, and being fully ensconced in it was his idea of perfection.

"More, love, please," Hermione begged, grabbing his hips in return and pulling him in tighter, the angle subtly changing to match her pleasure. "Oh."

"Love. The girl said love. The word seemed to pang in his chest, making the movements inside her more pleasurable than they'd been before. He rode her until she came apart, clenching and trembling around him to prompt his own dive off the deep end. He said her name the whole while - not witch, not sweet - Hermione. It was the first time he'd used her name so intimately.

His witch was exhausted enough to sleep against his side, but he was now awake. His mind working furiously as he thought of the witch to his side. Hermione had called him love, and he had enjoyed it. He had reveled in it and let the word bring him pleasure. But more than that, he had wanted to say it back. Had he fallen for the witch? For all his railings against love, could he have unintentionally fallen for the girl?

The answer, the cursed answer came as he looked at her resting face on his chest. She looked so peaceful, so innocent. His heart warmed. No. He flinched at the thought. The Dark Lord does not fall in love.

After meeting with the Headmaster, both Slytherins met up in Professor Snape's office for a much needed drink. Draco was watching the dour Potions Master, wondering just what his feelings were for the Gryffindor.

"So..."

Snape shot him a glare. "If another person indicates I am enamored with a Gryffindor child, I will not be responsible for my actions."

Draco nodded, hiding his smirk in his glass. "Can't blame people for being curious, can you? I've never seen you so affectionate."
"Miss Granger is in a difficult position," Snape said slowly. "As I know the full extent of her torment, I'm in a unique position to provide comfort. Unlike you, Draco."

Draco stiffened. "Oh?"

"Do not play dumb," Snape admonished him. "Rarely have I seen one of my Slytherins willingly approach the Headmaster, and even then it was with deference and veiled scorn. You acted like a Gryffindor, charging in ready to demand action. And all for Miss Granger."

He should have known godfather would get jealous of his supposed interference, but Draco was not the kind to go for the curly haired Gryffindor. Still, that didn't mean he couldn't use the assumption to prove his godfather's interest in his friend.

"She is hard not to care for," Draco replied cautiously, feeling the terrain. "I, er, she promised that I'd be Uncle Draco to the kids."

Snape glared down at him, making Draco squirm. "Indeed? Not daddy?"

"With Granger?" Draco grinned. He had him. That glare was enough to show that Snape was angry at him for his closeness to the Gryffindor. "No offense to you, but she's not my type."

"Feelings like that can change," he warned him, almost hoping the boy would change his mind. If he had someone like Draco to bow out of the way for, he wouldn't need to be so close to her. "I once viewed her as almost an apprentice, someone under my care. Now we are friends."

"Only you wish you were more, don't you?" Draco smirked at him, making him feel unnerved by the boy's perceptive capabilities. "You like Granger."

"If there wasn't a Dark Lord and she were ten years older, perhaps," Snape grunted non-committally, not letting himself feel the lecher he knew he was. "Try not to look so smug, Draco. I thought you were enamored with the girl."

"Not a chance, Uncle," Draco replied cheerfully. "She's a friend, but I don't think I could get past her hair. Though for you I think she works. Smart, a bit of a dark streak..."

"Too young for me," he pointed out sternly. "How do you think Miss Granger would react if she thought her Professor and friend regarded her amorously?"

Draco shrugged. "Probably flattered. You know how girls like the dark, brooding older man thing. It's the challenge."

"Jealous, boy?" Snape smirked. "Your father never could get some girls to fall over him. They preferred the anti-hero look to the pretty boy."

"Some girls," Draco huffed. "But you're avoiding the question, godfather, and that tells me everything I need to know. You like Granger. You want her."

Snape didn't deign to reply.

"And she's pregnant."

He narrowed his eyes at the Malfoy heir, his previous anger being rekindled. "Tread carefully."

There was a lull in conversation for a moment, sips of whiskey being the only sound. Draco thought better of poking Snape for a reaction, which soothed his temper marginally, but the
question he didn't ask hung in the air. He had, when he'd loved Lily, thought he would care for Potter as his own if she came to him. When she died, he would have raised the boy if Dumbledore hadn't insisted on him going to his Aunts and Uncles. Could he, when this was over and the Dark Lord died, help her raise his Master's children? Would he still want her when she had them attached to her?

The thought of Hermione breastfeeding a dark-haired boy snapped him from his reverie. He wouldn't think of it. He wouldn't let his thoughts get that far.

"I needn't tell you that if there is any chance you will reveal my regard for Miss Granger to the Dark Lord, I would _obliviate_ you without a moment's hesitation," Snape stated calmly, which he knew would unnerve the boy even more. "He must not know."

"Why would he care?" Draco asked.

Snape took a sip of the whiskey. "He is taken with her. I believe if anyone were to encroach on her they would find themselves dead without a moment to pray. Moreso now that she carries his child."

"He likes Granger?" Malfoy's eyes were bugging out of his head. "Are you serious?"

"Undoubtedly," he sighed. "Miss Granger has become quite the obsession of his from what I gather, both from her mind and from him. He is pleased with the idea of her bearing his children."

"I don't understand it," Draco grimaced. "The idea of the Dark Lord … liking her … _touching_ her … _him_ being the father … the idea of him having that much power over Granger …"

"The indestructible Hermione Granger," Snape nodded, understanding. "She is often put on a pedestal, both by her peers and her professors as an unassailable representation of good behaviour, but the truth is she is that it is a façade. She is human, Draco, as much as you. She has her own fears and vulnerabilities, and the Dark Lord is well aware of this and has used it to exploit her."

"How did it happen?" Draco asked him, now intent on getting an answer. Snape stiffened in his gaze, and he knew the Potions Master was going to avoid answering. "Don't lie to me, Uncle."

"I never lie."

Draco sneered. "No, but you tell half-truths better than anyone I know. Tell me the truth."

"Some of it is not mine to tell," Severus said slowly, seemingly contemplating his glass of whiskey. "What have you been told so far?"

Draco narrowed his gaze at his pseudo-father-figure, intent on understanding every gesture of the composed man. The way he was being observed over the roman nose was unnerving, like his godfather expected some declaration of love for Granger. Draco knew better, and it wasn't him who cared for Granger. He knew his godfather would care for Granger no matter what happened in the war, to the point where he was convinced that with some time together they'd fall for one another. So he spoke slowly, hoping to draw out his godfather's most minute reactions to confirm it.

"Granger was, somehow, captured," Draco started. "She was, _somehow_, bound to him in some kind of ritual. She _somehow_ has all this power and can apparate through the school wards. And the Dark Lord is, _somehow_, the father of her children."

Snape smirked at his petulant repetition. "Yes, those are the bare bones of it. I'm to presume you want details beyond that, then?"
"Yes."

Snape sighed and reached for the liquor. "Should Miss Granger grow angry at my indiscretion, I will present her with the excuse that I was inebriated beyond reason. Another?"
Chapter 29

After she had announced her pregnancy to everyone that mattered, everyone treated her differently. She'd gotten various looks from her friends in concern, but since they weren't allowed to approach they kept themselves to comforting touches in the hallway or concerned looks in Potions class.

Malfoy had been with her every day, suffocating her with care. She had to growl at him when he tried to force-feed her at breakfast. Still, even though he was smothering her, he treated her like a sister. They squabbled a bit, they teased each other, and when she first vomited on his shoes any flirty tension between them quickly dissipated.

The most frustrating one to deal with was Severus. They'd been friends, colleagues in a sense regarding their roles in the war, but now he kept her at arm's length. She hated the fact that they were distant. Even after they made up. She tried to talk to him after class, but he would remind her of things she needed to do and effectively dismiss her.

However, even thought Severus wasn't teaching her or talking to her anymore, she might have been able to deal with it if Voldemort had been there to fill the void. That wasn't going to happen.

For the days immediately following the announcement, he was attentive in … different ways than Malfoy. He'd ensure she ate at night when she returned from school, making sure there were always sandwiches ready to take with their tea. He'd gotten them additional pillows for her to use to be completely comfortable on her side instead of her back or front. But he also started disappearing. He'd stay long enough to make her comfortable, make her eat, make her take her potions in the moring, and then he'd leave. Gone were the nights spent by the fire reading, gone was the sex that she had become addicted to, and gone was any semblance of caring.

Then, a week after the announcement, she stopped seeing him. She came home from Hogwarts to an empty bedroom, a plate of sandwiches, and a house elf eagerly setting out a single cup of tea. One cup.

"Mammsy?" she called, alerting the elf to her presence. "Where's your Master?"

Mammsy snapped her fingers and stirred the milk into the cup for her. "Master is not being here."

Hermione knew she wouldn't get anything else from the elf, and so sat down with her sandwich and tea. Wherever Voldemort was, he clearly had left instructions for Mammsy to ensure her health because the elf was in the room, monitoring her for the rest of the night. She needed to force Mammsy to leave when she went to bed so she didn't have eyes on her when she went to rest.

There was nothing for it to do that night, but she thought she'd see him the next day. That didn't happen, and she was once again under the watchful eye of Mammsy well into the evening.

The next morning, she woke to find Voldemort in her bed, but he slept through her preparations for school and the opportunity to talk to him went by unused. Still, he was with her now and surely he would be back to their nightly routine, or at least back to him taking care of her.

When she returned again to find Mammsy there, she sighed and just hoped he would be back soon. She felt from his core he wasn't at any estate. But the night went the same as several before, with nobody to talk to and nobody to be with. She was lonely, and she knew it. The Slytherins were fine, Draco was fine, but Severus and Voldemort were the two who understood what was happening with her. Voldemort was the one who she spent the most time alone with, at least before. She found
herself immeasurably depressed

It happened again the next day. And the next.

Voldemort was ignoring her. At the beginning of their association, it would have been a blessing to only have him nearby to sleep or to bring Nagini back from her evening jaunts in the garden. Now, it made her mind whirl. Was he reconsidering the children? Would she find her tea spiked with abortis potion one day? Was he tiring of her now that she was pregnant with his children, and going elsewhere for sex? That thought had her magic shudder violently, and, in a jealous rage, she let it out on the unsuspecting vases in the room. She blamed it on her pregnancy when asked by Mammsy; Hermione Granger would never admit to being jealous.

At least he was always in bed by morning, sleeping in and not speaking to her even if he was awake. He'd wish her a good day, or leave quickly, never taking more than a moment to see her. It was hell.

There was an opportunity to escape one day. A shift and a ripple through her magic, a set of old wards, barely there before that moment, had been linked to Severus. Voldemort wasn't home, and there was nothing to stop her from going there.

Still, she hesitated. Her Occlumency practice had ended the previous week with her announcement, and Severus hadn't really spoken to her since. Showing up at some newly activated ward, clearly designed to hide someone from the world, without the assurance of regular Occlumency practice could have been a horrible idea.

The deciding factor was the thought that Dumbledore wouldn't have made Severus responsible for the wards if he didn't want her to show up at ... wherever it was. She couldn't see the house through her magic, which told her it was Fidelius protected. So she popped out of the Sayre Mansion and landed herself on the doorstep of a large almost barn-like home.

The door was ajar, so she walked in with great trepidation. "Hello?"

Two heads turned to her, and she was blown aback. "Ollivander?"

"Miss Granger, what are you doing here?" Severus snarled at her.

She looked down. "If you didn't want me here, you shouldn't have set the wards."

"You presumptuous-"

Ollivander saved her though. He moved past Severus, blocking him from view and greeting her.

"Ah, Hermione Granger," the old man extended his arm to greet her. Hermione accepted it happily, expecting him to shake it, but Ollivander simply cupped her hand between both of his in an earnest gesture. "Vine and dragon heartstring, 10¾ inches. Excellent for the potentially great charms master. And my savior, so I hear."

Hermione flushed. "I suppose you weren't really awake at the time."

"Too true, too true," he hummed. "Has your wand served you well?"

There was a moment of hesitation. "Well, you see, my wand actually needed to be replaced."

He surveyed her form, assessing. "Yes, I suppose so. Well then, will you begrudge an old man the knowledge of what new wand has chosen you?"
She took it out of her holster and presented it to him, not even thinking about it. The demeanor of Ollivander was just so grandfatherly and such an authority that there never seemed to be anything you could hold back from him. It was the same trust you put in someone like Luna Lovegood, minus the exasperating disbelief.

"Kingwood, good," he agreed to himself. "Seems to be a custom, as well. Very detailed carving work. What is the core?"

"Manticore claw and centaur tail hair," she informed him quickly.

"I admit, your energy reminds me of many oak users as much as kingwood," Ollivander said distantly. "Perhaps like Severus."

That was enough for the Potions Master. Severus pulled her off to the side roughly as Ollivander looked at her wand, glaring at her harshly.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed. "You are supposed to be at the Dark Lord's side."

"Well, I guess no one wants me around now, do they?" Hermione said primly, yanking her arm from his hold. Severus showed little emotion, but she could see the tense in his jaw that came from her accusation. She sighed, tired of being angry. "He's gone. So since I have nowhere I need to be and no one who wants to see me, I decided to come see the new ward you set up. Is there a problem with that?"

His eyes narrowed into slits as he glared at her.

"No problem at all, no problem at all," Ollivander interjected, returning Hermione's wand to her hand. "I was all set to have no company here unless Albus could get away, you know. Miss Granger, you may visit any time you like. Between the two of us, I'm sure we can have some interesting discussions."

With his invitation and Snape's refusal to speak to her again for the remainder of the trip, her decision was finalized. She started popping in every day, meeting with the Order-protected Garrick Ollivander right before bedtime. He was as alone as she was, locked in the safe-house with no other occupants, and they found a lot to talk about … provided it was about wands. Ollivander spoke of three things exclusively – his family, wandmaking, and the previous wands he'd created and/or sold. So wands was the safest bet. His discourses on wand practice and creation were fascinating to her. He even offered her a chance to hold his wand, to see what she could sense from the little piece of wood.

He had told her it was hornbeam and dragon heartstring, but everything else she would be responsible for finding on her own. His shrewd eyes observing her in assessment, she let her magic encircle the wand and tell her everything about the piece of essential magical-wear.

It was strange, trying to read the wand like a person, but it seemed as though she could. A swish and a simple levitation charm told her that it was going to be impossible for her to control, but not only from incompatibility. Her magic deflected from the wand instead of going inside of it, and instead was pushed towards Ollivander. It was intensely loyal to its master. She got the sense that this wand was like a woodpecker, pecking away at one spot in its magic until it got its bugs.

After sharing this observation, Ollivander had taken it upon him to teach her in the art of wandmaking. It was a fascinating, something that she could use to distract her from the way Voldemort had been ignoring her, but also to help distract Ollivander from his boredom. She went through the floo to get to Diagon Alley and managed to retrieve a few dozen wands that he'd
hidden away and bring them back to him, along with the wood rounds and some cores that remained in his broken shop. He taught her everything he knew, and she absorbed it with vigor.

More than that, she hadn't had a single reason to pursue art since she'd come to school. She always enjoyed drawing and painting, and the creative nature of carving the wands into an appealing shape that spoke to its personality was simple and yet creative enough to make her feel happy, a feeling she'd been ignorant to the last little while.

"I had been thinking of retiring, you know," Ollivander told her one day. He was teaching her the wood treatments used for long-lasting wands, including some amazing rituals used on the resin-based lacquers for longevity. She continued her application of the lacquer but nodded to indicate she was listening. "But I could never bear to take the time away from my wands to find an apprentice."

"It won't be the same in the alley without you," Hermione told him.

He gave her a weary smile. "Yes, yes, always an Ollivander's wand shop, always the mystical old man sharing a secret with the new generations. No, I should go to America and spend time with my daughter, not stay where I have outlived my time. Perhaps, when the war comes to an end, you would consider taking over Ollivander's for me, Hermione Granger."

She gaped at him in shock. Never had she considered doing this permanently. A year ago, even a few months ago, she always had wanted to work at the Ministry. Now, though, she didn't know. The Ministry seemed such a dark place to her, with people vying for power and handing over their dignity to the man who'd taken hers. She'd wanted to be Minister of Magic, the first female Minister, but the slog to get there suddenly seemed too much like her daily life living with Voldemort. And with her children … She wanted, if she survived, to be on her own. What better way than owning her own shop?

"You'd just … hand over your shop to me?" Hermione stammered. "We've only just gotten to know each other."

"You saved my life, Miss Granger," Ollivander reminded her. "And you enjoy the art of the wand. I have no family who want the store, no apprentice to run it for me. From what I know of your new wand and your old one, you would do well running the shop."

He didn't demand an answer from her then, but told her the store was going to be there well until the end of the war, and he didn't need to decide what to do until he was free to see it again. With that, he sent her on her way with homework in carving and creating her first wand for herself before she saw him next.

"For me?" she clarified. "I already have a wand."

"Yes, the French thing," he looked at it with a curious look. "I don't disagree with the wand, but regardless of whether I did, wandmakers work with various types of magic that flow through nearly every magical being and wood. Not all wands are suited to the task, and for certain that wand is not. You will need a softer, more balanced equal to aid you in the craft. Find that partner and you are well on your way."

She had brought him pieces of wood that week, trying to find the right wand wood for a wand-working wand. The thought made her head spin. Nearly all were dismissed. Finally, a piece of English oak she'd hand-harvested from the forests behind the Sayre Mansion seemed just the ticket.
That was at her ten to eleven-week mark in her pregnancy. She was just starting to feel bloated and look a bit heavier in her front, but Voldemort hadn't noticed. Since he was avoiding their evenings together, she used that time to carve the wand from the English oak she'd selected. It spoke to her the same way the kingwood did and seemed to complement her other wand perfectly. She didn't know what core she'd use yet, but the lovely, light wood she was carving was brimming with a standalone energy, determined to have its own balance and to belong to someone whose magic was equally independent. The core would need to be perfectly harmonious to be accepted by this wood.

It was so funny that she had a dark and light wood wand, and yet she liked it. She thought Lavender Brown would have thought it unfair. There were mornings Hermione had to forgo her morning routine for wanting to strangle the irritating witch when she complained about coordinating her outfits with the yellowheart wand she carried.

Not wanting Voldemort to know of her lessons with the wandmaker, whenever she went to bed for the night she would hide the wand in the wardrobe. It was away from his view, and from his inattention the past little while she'd be shocked if he suddenly wanted to help her dress.

By the end of the week, she was finished carving the piece and was hunting for a core for the wand before sealing it. None of the cores she'd managed to salvage from Ollivander's were harmonious with the English oak, and so she kept her magic outstretched at Hogwarts and Sayre Mansion for a fit. She found a few tress across the grounds that would make for amazing wands from the woods, and made sure the elves didn't throw out any large branches until she checked for that energy and took the branches that were good for wands, but she was still coreless. Still, she was building her own collection of woods and cores for when she re-opened Ollivander's – if she did – after the war and she was proud.

It was strange that wandmaking and her bond with Voldemort were so similar. When the core met the wood it needed, it hummed in a circuit of magical transference, the same as with her and the Dark Lord. It made her wonder …

One day, while getting dressed, she spoke to him for the first time in two weeks.

"I'd like some of your blood, if I can," she asked politely, knowing it would get a strong reaction from him. Blood magic was dark, and using it against him was something he wouldn't allow. She could even use it to undo her collar.

His relaxed posture in bed was ruined the moment the words left her mouth. He sat up rigid, glaring.

"No."

"It's not for dark magic, or to take off my collar," she told him casually. "It's for an experiment with our magics."

"I take care to not let a single hair of mine fall into my followers hands," he told her. "Blood is not something I allow to be extracted."

"I could take it while you sleep," she grumbled quietly.

"And Nagini would bite you before you managed it."

She sighed. No hiding it from him, then. "It's really nothing nefarious. I've been working on wandcrafting, if you must know, and I think a wand with your blood could actually work the same way our bond does if I were to use it. If you need to, I could let you stay within sight of your blood
at all times and show you me sealing it inside if it's compatible."

That made him take a moment to think. "You wish to use my blood to create a second wand for yourself?"

"Wandmakers all have two or three wands they use depending on the wand they're making," she told him, careful not to let him know that Ollivander was tutoring her. "And it's good practice, you know, to make a wand compatible with your magic."

"I wasn't aware this was something you wanted to do," he mused from the bed. "Most wives in the inner circle take up beauty charms or cooking if they want a hobby, you know."

"Firstly, I'm not doing this for a hobby," Hermione glared back at him. "Not that you care. And secondly, that's sexist."

"Different culture," was all he offered.

She sighed. "Fine, I'll find some other core. But nothing has worked so far."

"And you have a surplus of heartstring and phoenix feather on hand, do you?" he said with a quirk of his brow. "How are you learning all this, little witch?"

The question was filled with dark intent, as if he knew exactly who was teaching her the craft. "Will you throw me in a cell?"

"As if I could," he scoffed. "Even if you weren't pregnant, you could apparate out of any of my properties in a heartbeat. Still, a good idea for the witch who releases my wandmaker and then flaunts it in front of me."

"I've simply become friends with him," she insisted, buttoning up the last of her shirt buttons and grabbing her robe. "Any friend of Ollivander's has to be interested in wandmaking. He may make exceptions for family, but he really isn't interested in very much else. Classic Hornbeam."

"If you are his prodigy, perhaps I should interrogate you, wife," he growled at her. "If I thought you would cooperate."

"If it's about Harry's wand, I don't know," Hermione glared at him over her shoulder. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to be going to school."

He didn't stop her, and they didn't talk again for another week. Hermione was going to burst.
Chapter 30

She was eleven weeks pregnant. Barely enough to restrict her from brewing love potion, and definitely not pregnant enough to keep her from brewing sleeping draughts for the infirmary.

And yet, despite this, Slughorn still began his class saying, "Alright, everyone begin your brewing."

The class moved to their workstations, and Hermione tagged along with Draco until Professor Slughorn motioned her forward, inviting her to stand before his desk. "Miss Granger, perhaps you'd prefer to simply observe today?"

She gaped and the entire class seemed to stare. Slughorn looked so pleased with his attempt at subtlety, but it was clear what he meant. Which could only have come to his attention if someone had told him, because she wasn't even properly showing yet.

"I'm perfectly fine to brew, Professor," she replied calmly, hoping her classmates would only think of it as a small illness or something.

Slughorn didn't take the hint, giving her a frown. "Are you sure, Miss Granger? Given your … condition?"

The class was rapt with attention as she blushed, her face heating up to the point where she was certain she was fire engine red. Harry and Ron looked at her pitifully from across the room, and she couldn't even look at them.

Draco tried his best to help her. "I will partner with her, sir."

"Oh, I'm sure you would, my boy," Slughorn said proudly. "Gallant young man. No, we have plenty enough for partners."

"Sir," Hermione drew his attention again, "I have no condition that inhibits me producing Dreamless Sleep."

He chuckled and shook his head, looking at her pitifully. "I admire your spirit, Miss Granger, but I must insist. Professor Snape has brought to my attention that you should sit out the more volatile brews for the time being."

Her blood became ice in her veins. Severus. Ignoring her for three weeks, grabbing her that day in Ollivander's hideaway … now he had informed Slughorn. Oh, that man was going to get the end of her wand.

"Well," Hermione brushed herself off and grabbed her bag, ignoring the stares from her classmates, "I happen to know that Professor Snape has no final class on Fridays, so I'll just go and check with him, shall I? He is, apparently, the one running your Potions class, Professor."

Most professors would have taken points off of Hermione, but not Slughorn. Not while she was pregnant. He simply chuckled at her, waggling his finger, his faked-omnicience finally revealing her secret to the class.

"No need to be upset, Miss Granger," Slughorn insisted. "I understand, you know, hormones being part of the territory and all that, however I have an excellent tonic that can help with that."
Murmurs broke out along the classroom. The first being Lavender Brown. Everyone seemed to hunch over their workstations, whispering among each other.

"She's pregnant, must be." "Oh, god, what?" "She had sex?" "Aren't the wards supposed to stop that?" "Well, she's not in the dorms anymore."

She saw red. Involuntarily, her magic surrounded her as if she were being threatened, protecting her. It shoved desks out of the way as she barreled from the room. Nagini stuck his head out of her book bag, reacting to her anger. That resulted in even more gasps as she trudged from the rooms.

Draco was following behind her, she could hear his posh, expensive shoes following behind her. "Granger! Granger, wait!"

"I'm going to kill Severus Snape, and don't you dare stop me!" She yelled. Students who weren't in class turned to stare at the girl who was threatening the most terrifying man in school. "I have had it!"

"Granger, think this through!" Draco caught up to her, gabbing her arm. She ignored him, simply yanking her arm away from his and continuing on her single-minded pursuit of revenge. "You can't just attack someone!"

"I'm a Gryffindor!" Hermione announced strongly. "He knew he would get this when he did it, he just doesn't care! He expects me to go after him so I will!"

"Granger-"

"Take my bag and put it in my room," Hermione told him sternly. "I don't want Nagini to see this."

Draco stopped moving the moment she put the bag on his shoulder, as if afraid of Nagini biting him. "You're leaving me with a snake? Granger? Granger!"

She left him behind. There's no way she wanted anyone to see what she was going to do to the man, which was humiliating and degrading but he deserved to lose his infernal self-control for this conversation.

She opened the office door and without words or warning sent her magic to him and yanked him into the air by his arms. His face went hard, knowing exactly what she was doing to him and for once she felt no shred of remorse.

"How dare you?!" she slammed the door shut behind her. "How dare you?!"

Severus glared, arms crossed and the picture of self-control. "Miss Granger, I'm about to put you in detention for the remainder of your brief time with us. Explain."

"Explain?" she shrieked. "You told Slughorn I was pregnant! That man can't keep his trap shut and now the entire class knows, you git!"

She let his fall back to the ground more gently than she was feeling and glared at him. "You ignore me for weeks, you are a prat of the highest order when we do talk … but I didn't think you would do something like this to me!"

At her own admission, she felt unbearably vulnerable. She knew tears wouldn't sway him, but she couldn't help as she started sobbing. In an effort to preserve her dignity when Severus rose, she tried to switched to margay form.
Nothing. She couldn't transform. It dawned on her that her body wasn't the one she remembered because it was pregnant. How long had it been since she'd been able to transform? She had no idea.

Pregnancy was taking her dignity, her privacy, and now, her freedom to be the animal she was. Her failed attempt was enough to make her inconsolable.

She expected anger or curtness from Severus, or at least to be dumped somewhere to calm down. Instead, he knelt by her and pressed a comforting hand to her shoulder.

"I did not think this would happen," he murmured. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

With a choked sob, she threw her arms around him and murmured her own apologies. He may not have heard a word of it, since she was buried in his neck, but she apologized for throwing him into the air, for yelling at him, for whatever it was that made him ignore her. She didn't want him to let go. She needed this comfort, something that even Voldemort didn't give her. Especially not the past few weeks. For now, she had Severus back and he was her friend again.

"Tell me what I did, because I want to be your friend again," she sobbed, clutching him desperately. "Please, Severus. Please."

She was begging him, and he couldn't deny her again. He sighed, pressed his face into the curls on the top of her head. He could believe, for this moment, that she was his. After a moment, when she began to calm herself, he offered her the handkerchief in his pocket, determined to dry the tears.

"It was nothing you did, Hermione," he murmured in assurance. "I play my role, as you know. Your snake bodyguard means I can't be sure of my surroundings any longer. The Dark Lord is a possessive man, and even this, comforting you, could mean my death. Do you understand?"

"You mean he'd be jealous?" she griped. "We're not even like that. He couldn't-"

Severus shushed her. "You're naïve to his true brutality. You've seen parts of it, but you should know that he considers you his. None of his followers should so much as touch you, let alone hold you so … intimately."

He watched as her eyes widened, as she took stock of her position in his arms. He waited for the rejection and disgust that would come from their closeness, but surprisingly, none came. She simply giggled, earning an incredulous look.

"I never knew you could be in such an informal position, Severus," her voice shook with her previous tears, but there was a lightness now. A teasing. "You're right, if anyone saw this they'd think you human."

He smirked at her, his ache abating slightly. She wasn't repulsed by him. "Well, we can't have that."

He rose to his feet and offered Hermione one of his skeletal hands and she accepted. She dabbed at her tears with the handkerchief, looking so aggravated at herself.

"I'm so sorry, Severus, I don't know why I reacted so strongly," she apologized again. "Maybe I am bloody hormonal. I never used to cry this often."

"Well, I provided a terrible catalyst." He brought her up to the DADA office, determined to not let her go until the last possible moment. "I'm sorry for what Horace did. The delicacy of the situation was impressed upon him, but I doubt he understood. We can assume the news will travel the school
by dinner?"

He watched the fear in her eyes as she nodded, shame riddling her frame until she was nearly hunched. "Miss Granger, the important people know and understand. Anyone else can sod off."

Her eyes widened at his language, but he happily noted the sparkle returning to her eyes. He sat her in the armchair by his fireplace, bringing another from the opposite side of the room so he could sit with her.

"Where is your bodyguard?" He'd realized suddenly that her bookbag was gone, as was the serpent that enjoyed wrapping itself around her graceful neck. "Don't tell me you left her for Horace."

She giggled. "No, but it would serve her right. I gave my bag to Malfoy."

Now that was hilarious. The mental image of Malfoy losing all his straight-backed decorum as he quivered in front Nagini was an image he could chuckle at.

"So, er, Severus," she bit her lip, as if identifying a hard potion's ingredient, "are we really alright? I know you said we are, but I need a friend. I can leave Nagini sometimes, and I really do miss you."

His heart was set to burst at her innocent request. She missed him, she wanted to spend time with him, and she hadn't been scared off by his rebuffs. It was a strange experience for him. Mierva was similar in her tenacity, but her presence was more motherly. What was with these Gryffindor women that they became fixtures in his life?

"If you are discreet, I have no objections."

She beamed up at him, a bright light to everyone who could see. But before their conversation could progress, Draco burst through the office door holding Hermione's book bag at arm's length and looking absolutely green at the hissing snake that was coming out of it.

"Granger!"
It was a month into their silence, and Hermione was close to snapping. Voldemort still returned to their chambers well after she was asleep and staying later in the morning with no explanation. There was no change in the Ministry, no obvious signs of his work, and nothing she could pass on to the Order. She felt useless, discarded by both sides, and as well feeling bloated and tired from being thirteen weeks pregnant.

She was dressing in her school uniform when Voldemort called, "Stop."

She turned to him and saw him looking at her abdomen, his eyes wide as he took in her little protrusion. She had been shocked to see it start to becoming obvious the week prior, but seeing him looking at her like that, like she held everything of import, was thrilling after the lengthy silence. So when he motioned her forward silently, she obeyed, moving until she was directly in front of him.

With baited breath she watched Voldemort reach out and let his fingers graze her showing pregnancy with unexpected tenderness, so softly she could hardly feel it. It made her shudder in the pleasure she'd been hoping to garner from him for the past few weeks.

"Twins show earlier," she said, as if it would help the situation. At the confusion written on his face, she continued, "If it was only one, I might not show for another few weeks."

She watched his confusion replace with amusement, but then turn to concern. He moved his hand to cover her abdomen, tenderly, as if afraid it would break under his touch. "I'm having Narcissa Malfoy over this week."

Her heart clenched uncomfortably. He was touched her children through her skin, he was clearly awed by it, and he dared to bring up another woman. Was Narcissa the one he was spending his nights with before returning to her? She worked to contain her angry magic.

"Oh?" she huffed. "Why would you do that?"

"She knows every spell, potion, habit, or enhancement that can provide a healthy child," he told her. "She and Lucius had some difficulty with producing an heir. It will be beneficial to have her check you over and provide you some assistance."

His unspoken promise, that he would do everything he could to ensure the health of their children, calmed her slightly. She forced herself to smile.

"Mrs. Malfoy would be welcome," Hermione allowed. "Is it only the one time?"

Voldemort sighed, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to the little pooch. "It would be better if you became acquainted with her now. She will be here frequently once the children are born, and I understand it may take some time for you to be amenable to the idea of having one of my followers nearby while you're vulnerable."

Hermione went through ten of the worst possible scenarios in her mind before settling on one. "Please tell me you're not giving them to Mrs. Malfoy."

His shocked look told her everything she needed to know and she sighed in relief. "I gave you my word that you will raise out children. I will not renege."
"I'm sorry, I just, I can't figure out why we'd have her here after they're born," Hermione explained haltingly. "Is she your Mistress or something?"

She had tried to make it sound like a joking inquiry, the kind you laugh at and deny easily. Instead, it came out bitterly and out of her control. She sounded just as angry as she felt, and it was obvious to any listening.

That brought Voldemort to a halt in his movements. His hands stilled on Hermione's developing belly.

"A Mistress?" he said, observing her. "Is that what you think?"

He stood to look into her eyes on equal footing. Hermione was briefly afraid when he grabbed the tops of her arms to keep her in place, but when he didn't make it a painful hold she forced herself to breathe and look at Voldemort's blue eyes.

"Well, since the bond isn't exactly a marriage, I suppose there would be another word for it," Hermione glared. "If we did have some sort of commitment, I would wonder why you all of sudden started staying in bed in the mornings. Or why you're never here in the evenings anymore. But, as you've made quite clear, we have no commitment between us."

She was aware of the shift in Voldemort's eyes. He was one moment inquiring and defensive, and the next angry.

"I have told you, you are MY wife," he bit. "I have claimed you, little witch. Do you think there's no commitment there? The bond we sealed ensures your fidelity to me until the day you die."

"You can't even call me my name," Hermione pointed out, angry. "I am Hermione, not little witch, not Miss Granger, HERMIONE. And you act like I don't know the all rules of our bond. I know that fidelity is only restricted to intercourse. I could be going around giving your Death Eaters head and you'd be none the wiser."

Though the thought made her nauseous, it had its intended effect on Voldemort. He looked livid. Enraged, he pinned her to the bedpost, his hands now on her wrists to restrain her from action. Good. No matter the pain from being shoved into the wood, it was better than feelings like he only cared about her existence because of the children in her womb. At least this way she could make him jealous too. At least he could feel a small part what it was like to have feelings for someone who would throw you aside if they could. At least he felt something for her.

"I will kill ANY man who dares touch you!" he spat. "You are MINE!"

"I'm not going to be owned by some man who will chuck me in the bin the minute I'm not good enough!" Hermione screeched. "Well, guess what, if you're not MINE, I refuse to be YOURS!"

She tried to push him off, but he held fast and furiously bent down to take his lips in hers. She moaned involuntarily, knowing it had been weeks since he'd last been intimate with her.

"I bet no other man can make you moan like that, Hermione," he growled. His shoved his hand down and grabbed her crotch, eliciting a gasp of pain and, strangely, pleasure. "This is mine." He moved the hand to her breast, twisting and pinching her tender nipples with almost violent ferocity. She yelped. "These. Are. Mine." He covered her mouth with his once more. "You. Are. Mine!"

He finally let her push him back and onto the bed, her quickly positioning herself on top of him.
She bent low, capturing his top lip with her teeth and scraping away, earning pleasured cries from her dark lover. "Then, Mr. Dark Lord," she ground into him, "You. Are. Mine."

"Jealous?" he flipped her, taking charge once again. She glared at his smug expression, and the man had the nerve to chuckle at her! "Oh, my little witch, let me tell you something."

He leaned low and captured her earlobe in his teeth, earning a gasp. He ground into her and she groaned.

"I have had no witch but you since I returned," he murmured low in her ear. "And I will have no others. You have ruined me for anyone else, little witch. So perfect, so beautiful, so passionate, so … fertile."

"Only you," Hermione gasped, her mind focused on the much needed relief.

Then, with a chuckle, Voldemort moved off her. She gasped a protest, sitting up in her intent to pull him back into the bed. At her instinctive action, she pulled herself up short. She was NOT a desperate woman, giving up any dignity for this man. She would get answers before letting him win anything.

"Yes?" Voldemort inquired, his face mocking. "Something to say, little witch? Feeling better?"

Hermione glared. "You git! It's not like my feelings matter to you, do they?"

"Of course they do," he insisted. "You carry my children!"

"Oh, really, you care because of your heirs? The day after you found out about the children, you stopped caring about me entirely!" She accused. "This is the first time you've acknowledged me, touched me, in weeks!"

Her accusations left Voldemort silent, considering. "And this – my absence – is why you worry I wander?"

Hermione nodded, her heart in her throat. It was a vulnerability she couldn't afford with him, but there was no other way that could make him see that she missed him. She hated the feeling of giving up further power to him, but … he already had it all.

He bent low and, in a show of tenderness, stroked her face. He brushed from her temple to her jaw, his eyes assessing her response. She couldn't help but lean into his hand, earning a small smile.

"Hermione," he sighed, "whatever you desire, I will give it to you. You need only tell me."

Hermione sighed as well. "And I would never ask a Dark Lord for anything. So where does that leave us?"

Her words had affected him more than he thought it would. He had been deliberately avoiding spending time with Miss Granger since he'd realized his own feelings for the girl, but he had been unable to rid the troublesome feelings from his system. Then for her to say she'd missed him too, that his avoiding her made her worry, it made him glad. Glad that maybe the girl he'd come to adore like a goddess might have come to care for him, even want him. She aggravated him, to be sure, but it merely made him want her more.

She was looking up at him with her eyes tragic. If there was something she was trying to convey, it was lost within the surge of emotions she was instilling in him. The simple look was enough to make his want to give her everything. He wanted to take her and hold her, take that look from her
eyes and replace it with lust.

"So where does that leave us?"

"Demand it of me," he ordered. "Do not ask, that is for those beneath you. You, of everyone, have the right to demand things of me. What must I do to please you?"

She gave him a mischievous smile that excited his blood and shortened his breath. It was enticing.

"So, if I demanded that you come back to bed and finish what you started?"

That sly tilt of the head, as if daring him to refuse her, brought a chuckle to his lips. He leaned down and captured her wonderful lips in his, sampling their softness for his own and devouring her like she wished. Before she could pull him on top of her, he pulled away.

"Unfortunately, sweetling, you insisted on continuing with classes," he pointed out, eyes twinkling. "And as the general public does not know you are currently living with the Dark Lord Voldemort, it would not do to draw attention to yourself by missing your first period. Unless you've reconsidered …?"

Hermione groaned, but nodded and left the bed, finishing buttoning her blouse and fixing her skirt. She looked so innocent and unassuming, but he knew she was vicious and glorious when he started with her. She would not go wanting. So, Voldemort came behind her, slipping a hand under her skirt as she moaned.

"However …" he breathed in her ear as he circled to pull her back to him, his finger finding her most sensitive and pleasurable center. "That does not mean I cannot allow you some relief. I could, selflessly, allow you to come."

"Yes," Hermione gasped, leaning against him.

He chuckled low in her ear, sending delicious shivers up her spine. "Not the word I had in mind, little witch."

She knew what he wanted, and he wouldn't give in unless she did first. He waited, slowly teasing until she couldn't resist a moment longer. "Please."

When he had finished her she was already too late to attend her first hour, but her jealousy was forgotten. He had snickered as she hurriedly dressed after their encounter, but he felt better than he had in week. It might be alright, liking the little witch. So long as she never found out.

That weekend, she was introduced to Narcissa Malfoy.

The Lady Malfoy glided into the room, different entirely from her persona around her husband that Hermione had seen in the French gardens. Her persona spoke volumes of grace, power, and danger. Her eyes were disinterested and gentle until they reached another human being, where they turned razor-sharp and analyzing, probing for weakness.

"My Lady," she bowed her head deferentially.

She gaped as the proud woman greeted her. Voldemort smirked at her from behind the strong heiress, knowing exactly what was going through her head.
"Little witch, you know Narcissa Malfoy," he introduced. "Narcissa, I don't need to tell you how vital it is that you keep secret just who is pregnant with my heirs, at least for now?"

"Of course not, my Lord," Narcissa bowed.

Voldemort nodded. "Very well then. I am concerned about Miss Granger's age and the added complications of having two to bear. I understand that first-time pregnancies can be … taxing, and unsuccessful. I hoped you would be able to help her in making the best of her condition."

"Two?" Narcissa looked her up and down, upraising Hermione with now a deep look of concern. "What have you done so far?"

She grimaced. "I've read a few books, so I know what to expect."

"Potions? Vitamins?" The Lady Malfoy demanded, circling her.

"Anti-nausea," Hermione told her. "Professor Snape puts it in my rooms every week so I can take it when I apparate to school. My vitamin potions are taken during lunch, just in case I vomit in the morning."

Narcissa Malfoy sighed audibly. "Adequate, for now. Are they crafted? Of course they are, you have Severus. I will send him the Malfoy recipe for anti-nausea, it’s far more effective. As it stands, you are terribly thin and clearly suffering for your stubbornness. Are you eating?"

Hermione nodded slowly. At Narcissa's disbelieving face, she amended the nod with a, "Well, I eat. But I throw it up nearly every morning."

"Your evening meals must be large and protein rich, then," Narcissa ordered. "If those are the times when you can keep down your food, those are the times you must eat more. Although ginger tea in the morning might help."

"Yes, sergeant," she mocked, earning a reproachful gaze from the matriarch and a gleeful smirk from Voldemort.

"Lie down," Narcissa ordered. "I'm going to teach you a few healer-specialized spells, and a few from the Black and Malfoy lines, that will help you understand your babies' needs."

She gave me a complete set of spells that I could use on the baby, many of them which could be used only for the first two terms and then a few that she would continue to use for the final trimester. This was for daily use to ensure that Hermione produced magically powerful and healthy offspring.

It was entrancing, watching her body light up specifically from her child. She was, understandably, dehydrated and in need of some good protein for the baby, but other than that was in full health. The house-elf popped back into the room with the requested protein drink before the Lady Malfoy turned from her.

"Now, my Lord, you had another request for me?" Narcissa said, not even bothering to dismiss Hermione.

"Ah, yes," Voldemort affirmed. "Firstly, a token of my thanks for helping me in this matter."

He produced a small vial for Narcissa, who looked at it as if it were the most valuable thing in the world. It might well have been, but neither of them explained its significance as the woman took the vial tenderly in her hands.
"My deepest thanks for this great gift, my lord," Narcissa bowed more deeply than she had at the start. "What additional task can I do for you to show my gratitude?"

"Lucius has often bemoaned your fate, Narcissa," the Dark Lord said gently, as if caressing a delicate thought. "He has also, quite often, sung your praises in how you raised your son."

"He is too generous with his praise," she murmured lowly, somewhat pained.

Voldemort gave her a smirk. "No doubt, my dear. However, I am loathe to leave Miss Granger alone once she resides here permanently. I fear she will deplete herself, and the two of them will cause too much trouble for her after her birth. Perhaps you would like to assist her? She may enjoy having your company for the summer."

Narcissa gave the smallest expression, that Hermione might have said was shock if she knew the woman better. "You trust me with your heirs, my Lord?"

"You could never harm a child, Narcissa," the Dark Lord remarked fondly. "I want you to remain at hand until Miss Granger feels comfortable on her own with them. It may take some healing after their birth for her to keep up with the demands of two potentially powerful magical progeny of mine, not even considering the strange powers many twins seem to exhibit early on. She could use a hand, if you would oblige me."

Narcissa looked overjoyed, even though it was muted by her stoic expression. "It would be an honour, my Lord. But Lucius and Draco …"

"You will all be my guests, of course," he waved away her concern. "I will be keeping Draco close for the summer at any rate. If Miss Granger likes, the three of you could be her company while I enact our plans."

At that they both shot her a look. Voldemort's was one of teasing and mirth, well aware that she would wonder what his plans were. Narcissa's seemed more … hopeful? She wasn't sure she was right, but maybe she was hoping for an extended invitation for her husband and son. That she could deal with a lot better than the smug look on Voldemort's."

"Draco's a friend," Hermione told the matriarch somewhat hesitantly. "If your husband behaves, I have no problem with being in your family's company."

Narcissa bowed her head gratefully. "That is kind, my Lady."

"I have no doubt I'll be kept isolated," she glared at Voldemort who just nodded as if the accusation wasn't damning, "so it will be nice to have company."

"It's settled," Voldemort interjected. "Narcissa, thank you so much for coming, but I have many things to do today that require my personal attention. May I show you out?"

They walked off together, making Hermione growl a little in jealousy. She knew it was ridiculous, but Narcissa was beautiful and regal, and a true queen in whatever room she entered. It felt wrong to let any man she was attracted to spend time with her.

So, with a sigh, she wrapped her robe around her and apparated away, once again off to Ollivander's hideaway. Why couldn't things be normal?
"You seem troubled," Ollivander told her, examining the wand she'd carved. "It shows in your work."

She sighed. She'd returned to good terms with Severus, at least whenever Nagini wasn't around, and Voldemort had been making an effort to return a few times a week for tea. But that just it – it was an effort. It didn't go unnoticed to her that everyone was becoming busier around her and it was a worrying thought. What if Voldemort was about to launch a major offensive? What if Severus and the Order were preparing for war? Neither side seemed to want her with them for any new development, and she felt more and more like a complication rather than an asset.

"You know, there is so much going on around us that sometimes it can feel like we need to be in the center of it," he expressed wisely. "Perhaps it is better for us to remain at the sidelines."

Hermione frowned. "They're my friends, though. Shouldn't I be helping? I haven't done anything but bugger things up for months now. I feel very ... antsy. I need to help somehow."

"You're still studying Occlumency, aren't you?" Ollivander asked, showing her how to sand down her imperfections in the miniscule handle carvings. "And while you're with child, I'm certain they do not want you involved."

"I'm barely pregnant!" she argued vehemently. "I'm not exactly laid up in bed! I can fight!"

Ollivander gave her a sad smile. "Have you spoken to Severus about this? He would understand."

She sighed. It had been hard to have moments away from Nagini. After the bookbag incident with Malfoy, Nagini had taken to becoming permanently fixed around her neck so she couldn't leave her behind. Severus, therefore, was off limits. She could apparate within the school like she did Ollivanders, and she had, but those were restricted by his time with Dumbledore, Voldemort, and grading. He was busier than she was, adding to her distraction.

"I can't," she sighed. "They're all so much busier, like something's about to happen. Asking Severus would only end with Occlumency exercises and him informing me, none too kindly, that I need to focus on myself."

"And a kingwood would never sit idly by while her future is decided," Ollivander expressed knowledgeably. "Far too untrusting for that."

"Untrusting?" Hermione frowned.

Ollivander chuckled. "Miss Granger, while you may not be a stereotype, you are certainly indicative of your wand wood. I've had Ministers match to kingwood wands, and it isn't because they trust anyone else to do a better job than them at something. True?"

She bit her lip in reflection but nodded. Harry and Ron couldn't do anything right without her, even if it did suit their strengths. At least in her eyes. Voldemort wasn't to be trusted with human life even if he was intelligent. Dumbledore couldn't be trusted to trust anyone else with all the information ... She could go on.

"Your oak will help to balance that side of the kingwood, but it does show your reluctance to rely on things that are intangible," he added. "Although emotions are still strongly at play with you. Surely you knew this when you selected it? I taught you to feel for the wand's little
"idiosyncrasies?"

She flushed. "Maybe it's just because it's my own wand, but I only felt it adding to my good points. Or maybe it shows a need for self-reflection more often."

Ollivander hummed in agreement and brought out the lacquer from his little crafting table that he'd designated. It was originally just a desk, but he insisted it be given a title singular to the honour it was given. He was an odd old man.

Suddenly, there was a jolt in her magic. It came on suddenly, pulling her away from Ollivander's safe-house and back through the ward magic that had sent for her, that called for her aid. She landed firmly in an unfamiliar mansion, but the magic screamed of the Notts. Her focus was otherwise distracted, though, by the group of aurors clearly breaking the wards on the gates of the property with Tonks.

Her heart froze. She knew she would be compelled, practically forced to hurt them if they stepped a foot onto the land without Nott letting them in. Nott was nowhere to be seen, though, so she needed to handle this herself. She couldn't leave the property undefended, so she couldn't apparate out and then meet them somewhere. The gates wouldn't open to her; some archaic way of keeping the wives from going anywhere without permission. She couldn't let them in, and they probably wouldn't stay out. If they didn't listen, she'd be in for a fight.

She walked up to the gates, wand firm in hand.

"Can I help you?" Hermione asked curtly, more so than she intended. The showed her a parchment, probably with a warrant. She searched through her magic, trying to find Nott. He was gone.

"You'll need to be letting us in," the auror told her. "The master here is under arrest."

"He's not here," Hermione replied calmly, "he's not anywhere. I can tell you he'd not at any of the Nott properties or other properties I'm bound to, which include all of his friends."

One auror, big looking with a bigger upper body than lower, guffawed. "How do you know that? Some kind of house-elf?"

Hermione curtseyed fakely. "House-elf Hermione Granger, at your service."

"Hermione, can you let is in?" Tonks requested kindly.

"I can't. The wards are blood-keyed."

She nodded sympathetically. "S'alright, Hermione. We're almost through."

Those words made her magic flare. "Tonks, if you or the others break through I will be forced to fight you."

The aurors stopped. "Are you threatening us, girl?"

She gripped her wand tighter in her hand, earning a look from Tonks. She turned to her fellow aurors and grimaced. "Trust me, guys, this girl can follow through."

"I'm not threatening you," Hermione denied, shaking. "I'm telling you a fact. I am bound to protect this property, and if you break through the wards I will not be able to stop my magic from attacking you. You all need to leave."
The men accused her of being an accomplice, Tonks tried to stop them, but the curse-breaker was working on the gates even without her go ahead. Tonks seemed distressed at the idea of fighting her, making Hermione wonder if Tonks knew she was pregnant.

"Hermione, you need to leave!" Tonks tried, warning her. Hermione shook her head. "'Mione, if you're not gone by the time they get through, they will arrest you."

Hermione tensed, feeling the wards ripple and groan as they were forced away from the door. "Sorry, Tonks, but I have no choice."

They broke through, and her magic took over.

She tried to restrain it, but the magic tore from her with great speed. She tried to restrain it, but all that meant was that, instead of obliterating the aurors, it sliced through them. One by one, the aurors fell until she turned to find the last one had hurled a dark curse towards her.

Her magic didn't block the attack, and instead was hurtling towards the auror to finish him off before it struck. They both fell.

Hermione screamed as the curse tore through her, trying to set her blood on fire. She felt her body seize and convulse, especially her abdomen. She yelled and cried out while grabbing her small bulge. Her children, they were going to die.

Her magic cried out and reached for its partner. Voldemort appeared next to her. One look at her was all it took for him to forget his previous coldness and hold her close against him. His hand stroked her face gently, as if he were trying to save her with his comfort.

"My little witch, are you hurt?" She whimpered at his question. His wand started running over her and murmuring several spells to discern the problem.

Within moments, he was murmuring the counter-curse. Hermione sighed in relief, but her abdomen was still in pain. Her eyes communicated her fear with the Dark Lord, and he place his own hand over her abdomen. Her magic was haywire, running between them like a current and putting every bit of extra magic into healing her children within her. She worried it would not be enough.

"Please, save them," she begged. She pulled away and her eyes filled with tears. "Please."

He took her in his arms and apparated them away.

"You'll be alright," Voldemort murmured as he laid her on the bed in their chambers. "I'll be right back. Stay as still as possible, please"

He didn't wait for her to respond, he just went to the door and yelled for one of his death eaters. She squirmed a little, trying to move the pain from her abdomen but only aggravating it. She whimpered as another pain wracked through her uterus.

Within moments, several wizards were in her room, presumably summoned by Voldemort to treat her. In moments, she was given a potion and put under. The last thing she remembered doing was handing the vial to Voldemort.

"Are they going to be alright?" She whispered.

She didn't hear the answer, but her vision swam around Voldemort's pained face as she descended into unconsciousness.
Tonks stood in front of the Headmaster and Severus Snape, her memories of the incident in the pensieve in front of them all. Severus was the first to dip his head, but they all followed him into the scene.

The three dimwitted aurors had broken through the wards on the gate. Hermione was holding her wand but when the wards broke she used it just as much as wandless. She chopped down the aurors who'd stepped over the property lines brutally. They found with shields and curses, but Hermione was adept at avoiding and blocking with her magic.

By the end of the fight between the two aurors and was on to the curse-breaking auror when a simple charm hit her in the chest. She stumbled back and screamed, tearing Snape's heart in pieces when she reached down to grab her abdomen.

The last auror was felled by Hermione just as she hit the ground. Voldemort appeared out of nowhere.

Tonks was beyond the property line, safe from the carnage. She watched as Voldemort went to Hermione, stroked her face. They were locked in a strangely intimate embrace, and at her whispered words, disapparated them both.

Severus pulled himself from the bowl with a groan. The Dark Lord was attached to her, desperately, and it seemed as if Granger was just as attached to the man. Her feelings appeared stronger than when last he was able to penetrate her mind.

"Thank you, Miss Tonks," Dumbledore said first. "I'm sorry for your colleagues, but this will go a long way in ensuring the end of this conflict."

Tonks nodded, and knew she'd been dismissed. Dumbledore waited for the young auror to leave via the floo connection before speaking.

"We will need to remove Miss Granger from the equation," Dumbledore said.

Severus rounded on him. "You will not harm her."

He raised his hands innocently. "I suggested nothing of the sort, Severus. There are alternatives to that."

"She cannot be held," he drawled.

"You forget that I have another powerful wizard detained successfully."

His blood ran cold. "You would lock Miss Granger in the same place as Grindelwald?"

"Their magic is similar," Dumbledore said simply. "It is the only way to make sure he cannot use that collar to return her to him, and to keep her away from the estates once the assault begins. It would not be for long, Severus. She'd be released before the birth of her children. Simply long enough for us to mount our offensive and ensure Tom's downfall."

"She is with child, Albus," Severus snapped. "What do you think suppressing her magic in that way will do?"

Albus waved off his concern, making Severus' rage mount. "It will be like a muggle pregnancy, that is all. There is a chance her children will become squibs, but as it is untested we will have no
idea until they are born. As a muggleborn, Miss Granger certainly won’t object to her children being non-magical."

"This is not your decision, Albus," Severus hissed. "I doubt she wants her children to be denied their birthright. She would sooner leave the magical world than do this."

"We will give her the option," Dumbledore affirmed. He sat himself at his desk with a slump. "If she does not make the right choice, we will have to make it for her."

"So no choice at all," he accused the Headmaster. "She will not agree, and you know it. How do you plan on subduing her?"

"I thought a potion," the Headmaster said easily. "You could ask her to come with you, a break from her regular life. Fetch potions ingredients, or some odd thing from the village. That way, she cannot apparate away. Then, take her to Mme. Puddifoots and slip it into her tea."

Severus clenched his fists around the seatback. "You're asking me to betray her confidence."

"I'm asking you to fulfill your vow and do everything I ask to bring Tom down," Dumbledore said softly.

He snapped up his head and observed the look of guilt on Dumbledore's face. He couldn't. No. He roared in rage and could not restrain himself, punching at the wall.

"You cannot do this to me again!" Severus roared. "Is everything you ask this year set to make me wish I'd never come to you? You use the vow so I will kill you, I have to risk my own godson, and now …. No. I will not betray her trust."

"You will," Dumbledore murmured. "I am asking it of you."

"I will die," he tried. "Die, rather than do this."

"You will not," came the knowing answer. "I know you, Severus. You will not allow your feelings for the girl to jeopardize the fall of Voldemort. You will do this, and you will help me put the girl in Nurmengard. It is the only way to draw him out."

"Then have one of the others do it," Severus pleaded hoarsely. "She trusts me, Albus. She trusts me."

"And that is why you must do it."

Severus had never felt so violated. He hissed and threatened, bargained and demanded, but nothing would sway the Headmaster from giving the order. Dejected, violated, and depressed, he sank into the chair by the Headmaster's fire.

They sat like that for sometime, neither saying anything. Finally, one final thing Severus could do came to him.

"Give me an oath," he said. "I want an oath that Granger will be safe and unharmed. We will not put her in a regular cell, and instead give her an acceptable living space. Her health will be looked after, and that of her unborn children. She is not to be treated like a prisoner more than she needs to be."

He was rambling, and it made him scowl. "Your word that she and her unborn children will be given every privilege she'd have if she were here."
"You can help me prepare a cell," Dumbledore replied genially. "I'm sure the doctor at the prison-"

"Poppy," Severus interjected firmly. "I don't know the person they have stationed there, but I would not put a glorified mortician in charge of a pregnant woman. Poppy will visit her."

"Poppy is needed here, Severus," Dumbledore reminded him. "The board could shut the school if the healer left."

"Then someone else we trust," he remained firm. "Maybe not a healer, but someone with midwife certification. I must approve them. If you want my cooperation, you will give me this."

Dumbledore sighed. "There are a few people who I could ask to check in on her. Perhaps even someone who would be advantageous in this situation."

"And I want someone from the Order, or close to the Order, as her guard," Severus demanded coldly. "I don't trust prison guards when there's a woman involved. Or even a man, when he's defenseless. Someone inscrutable not only to me, but to any guards within Nurmengard so they know not to try anything. She is going to be without magic by our own design, and she will have what protection we can offer."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Dumbledore placated him. "First things first, you have a sleeping draught to brew."
Chapter 33

She came out of the potion-induced sleep slowly. Everything was hazy, and she could find a coherent thought for the life of her. Finally, a single thought made he first thing she did was touch her abdomen. The protrusion was still there, still firm. Did that mean the twins were okay?

Her eyes blinked open, fighting the side-effects of the potent brew she'd been fed. She was on the same bed she'd remembered before her black-out, covered by the blankets beside her hands. One on her slight baby bump, the other inside the warm hands of Voldemort. She turned to find his eyes on her, waiting and pained.

"Are they alright?" she rasped.

She didn't need to elaborate, he knew. He ran his thumb over her knuckles soothingly. "Any damage done is temporary. They needed to monitor you closely and keep you under for the past few days to ensure that you will not seize again, but now … You'll need to stay in bed for the next week to make sure the placenta doesn't detach prematurely. If after the week nothing goes wrong, then they tell me you'll be safe. That blood-boiling curse did a number on you as well."

"It didn't hurt the children?" Hermione murmured, disbelieving. "It's been days?"

Voldemort kissed her knuckles tenderly, comfortingly. It was an intimate gesture that she knew was only now coming out because of her frail condition, but it didn't mean any less to her. "Just under five, actually. I'm so sorry, little witch."

"But everything's alright," Hermione said, uncomprehending.

He shook his head. "I had forgotten the danger you'd be in if any of the properties were breached. While you are carrying my children, such oversight is unforgiveable. From now on, if you get pulled to an estate I want you to use that spell I taught you to bring me to you. I want to be there from the beginning."

"I thought the whole point of, er, the binding was to have that happen," Hermione frowned. "I was just doing what you wanted."

With a sigh, Voldemort heaved himself from the chair next to her bed and sat next to her on the bed instead, using the new seat as a tactical position to hold her in his arms. She didn't stop him from curling around her, nor from taking a calming breath in her hair. She simply waited, on edge, for him to admit what they'd both been denying.

"I do not want you hurt ever again," he murmured in her hair. "I will not allow anything to happen to you, little witch, my dear Hermione."

"Why?" she prodded, hoping beyond hope that maybe he was hinting to what she felt too. "Why do you care?"

His grip on her tightened, and she knew he was conflicted by himself. She pulled herself up in his arms and looking into his tense face. "Do you love me?"

When the words left her mouth, the man's body crinkled. His face fell in pain and anguish, and he turned himself from her. For the first time, of her own volition, Hermione moved forward and pressed a gentle, tender kiss to his lips. His eyes snapped back open to her as she pulled away, and finally she got the reaction she needed from him. The fierceness in his eyes.
"I thought you would die, witch," he seemed to fight within himself to remain calm and collected. "I couldn't feel your magic, I couldn't feel anything but your heartbeat for the longest time. The healers believed you were diverting all your magic to my children, keeping them alive with your very life force. In that moment … yes, I would have given up all hope for heirs to feel you again."

Hermione put her hands on both sides of his face. "Say it. Say you love me."

"You know how I feel about declarations, witch," he warned lowly.

She glared. "It is not a bad thing. Does it feel like a bad thing?"

Voldemort regarded her with pain-filled eyes. "I have never felt as weak as I did when you were unconscious."

"It's not about feeling strong," she encouraged gently. "Tell me you'll be able to love our children like a father should. Tell me you're capable of feeling more than simple pain or pleasure. That you can feel love, even just a little. That you can be a real man, instead of a monster. Please. Do you love me?"

He took a breath, looking her in the eyes as she begged him. Finally, she watched as he closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I do not believe in the power of love, and I do not believe it is the strength Dumbledore insists it is," he said strongly. "There is nothing advantageous about it."

"It doesn't have to be," Hermione told him. "It isn't meant to be the most logical thing, but when everyone feels it it's often the very hardship that brings the greatest change, though, and without it society would stagnate."

He raised his head and glared at her. "You do not make it easy to love you, witch. Why can I not shake it?"

She grinned. He did. He loved her. And that was as much of a confession as she could get out of him. "Probably because we're compatible. It would explain why I can't shake it either."

Voldemort looked ready to burst at her words, and cupped her jaw. "Say it. Say it for me."

She hid a smirk. "You never said it, though. Why do I need to say it first?"

He growled and drew her in for a kiss. It wasn't the lustful ones from before, done simply in the heat of the moment. It was passionate, possessive. It was just for her.

"I have come to love everything about you, little witch," he murmured against her lips. "Against my previous inclinations, I find loving you to be unavoidable. Every time you open that smart mouth of yours and defy me, I think about having you in my life every day. You drive me to distraction."

"Loving you is no picnic either," Hermione said breathily, bestowing more kisses upon his lips. "I must be insane, probably with Stockholm Syndrome or something."

He detached his lips from her neck to look at her with gleaming eyes. "It was supposed to be praise only, Hermione."

She blushed. "Sorry, Tom."

He stiffened and pulled away, glaring. "Do not start using that name."
"It feels weird taking Voldemort to bed," Hermione protested. "Why can't I use Tom?"

He huffed and pulled her close. "You are lucky, witch, that I feel kind right now. I've killed people for using that name."

"Why?"

"You won't let it go, will you?" he remanded sharply. She glared back, unyielding. He rolled his shoulder's back, clearly trying to dislodge the tension that had gathered there. "I was named after my horrid muggle father. As he refused to acknowledge his own son, I do not think I should acknowledge his name. Do you?"

She shook her head. "So, you renamed yourself as a terrible incarnation of death because you'd rather have been named Richard?"

She couldn't hide her giggle. It was horrible to laugh at your own jokes, but the picture of Voldemort named something so mundane and formal was just … wrong. He didn't make it easier with his sour expression, and her giggles escalated. She just couldn't help it. When Voldemort succumbed as well, his deep laugh mixing with her side-splitting guffaws, the waves of laughter rolling through both of them made the topic seem less menacing.

Her giggles started to subside with Voldemort's.

"I'm sorry," she apologized with a bright smile. "Just, I don't think anyone could re-name you anything else now. It'd be to strange."

He let loose a final chuckle before sweeping her off her knees and setting her on the bed, her head resting in the crook of his arm. "Little witch, if it weren't for your delicate condition, I'd ravish you right this moment. I want to know the feel of you laughing while my cock is buried deeply inside you." She flushed. "For tonight, though, know that I desire you and will stay by your side."

"Will you be here every evening this week?" Hermione pleaded. "I might just die of boredom if I go without school and your conversation for that long."

He leaned down and pressed his lips softly to hers. "It would be my great pleasure."

Every night she'd sit with tea, barely moving around the room because she'd worried about her children. The swelling was accelerating now, after three months in. She had become hungrier and less nauseous before the curse got her, and she was now growing rapidly. At sixteen weeks she was now extended to the point where if she didn't hunch, it would be obvious that it wasn't a weight gain. The belly extended to the same point off her body as he breasts, which were also growing. When she returned to school, everyone would see.

Voldemort kept her another week on top of what they agreed, not convinced she was alright.

"I can go back!" she protested. "I'm already a week behind in assignments, I can't miss anymore!"

"I will have Severus collect them for you if it means you will stay here, safe, for just a week longer," he insisted. "Your exams aren't for another month and a half, witch, you will be caught up soon. But I need you to stay. I'm formally announcing your pregnancy this week."

She gaped. "What?"

"They will see it soon, regardless," he trailed his hand over her protruding stomach. "There'll be no hiding it. Does that make you nervous?"
She bit her lip. "Well, I guess they've all heard already from their kids."

His brow lifted. "The school is … aware?"

"Professor Slughorn thought he'd announce I was hormonal in the middle of potions," she huffed, glaring at him poignantly. "I'm sure the students will figure out what it means by the time I'm allowed back."

He tutted and took her face in his hands, his face kind but sharp. "Then you must stay, at least until the announcement. I want to know you and my children are out of danger."

She had melted at the show of caring and had relented to stay the whole week.

When the day of the announcement came, her magic was antsy, disturbed. Upon the third instance of zoning out in the middle of writing her essay, she gave up on it. Hermione sighed. Maybe it was pregnancy hormones. To distract herself, she readied in the form-fitting white gown that Voldemort had selected for her. He did not want to hide the belly she now sported little less than halfway through her pregnancy, and since they were announcing it he decided she should have it fully exposed. The straps crossed under her breasts and held the fabric concealing them there, but the wrapped around the back to hold up the skirt, leaving her pregnant stomach exposed. She looked like a sexed-up portrait of the virgin Mary in the dress, but it was how he wanted to portray her.

The niggling in her mind was still there after her preparations, and so she closed her eyes. She focused on her magic, on the feelings she was having. She had read that pregnant women had random magical outbursts and she was determined to use the training Voldemort had given her to ensure it didn't happen.

She felt around her magic, searching the well-rounded veil that covered her mind, probing for the issue. She was accustomed to the loud swell of magic that came with all his followers coming to the manor, but it wasn't that. It was a specific niggling in her magic. Then, she realized, it wasn't her magic having the issue, it was two of her bonds. Malfoy and Severus. They were here, and together.

She had ignored their bonds with her whenever they were near, because she had to be around him so often. But now, their bonds weren't within the Hogwarts wards. They were here. Malfoy, why was Malfoy with him? He'd abandoned Voldemort, he'd come with her. She focused; he was in the ballroom. How long had he been there!? She'd been feeling antsy for hours, so how long could he have been hurt and captured. Determinedly, she apparated to the ballroom.

Gasps and little words were exchanged at her appearance. Her pregnant form was clearly visible, and everyone could see it.

"Miss Granger, good of you to join us," Voldemort greeted as though he had planned on her being there. His eyes buried into hers and she presented him with the image of her return, her focus on his magics to justify her coming early. He smirked. "You are going to be revered, little witch. Come, join me."

He extended his hand to her and she accepted, moving forward to take it so he could use it to lead her to be stand at his side. Involuntarily, she placed a hand at her abdomen. The magic as they touched seemed to go straight to her children, more potent than it had ever been before. The motion
did not go unnoticed by him, and he smirked knowingly. He had probably done it on purpose, the smug man.

Malfoy was there, standing off to the side with Severus, but there were more Death Eaters here than just them. It was like he had summoned every follower upon Malfoy's appearance. What was Severus planning with him? What was he doing here?

"I have an announcement of my own to make with regards to our plans. As you know, I take the concerns of my followers very seriously," he told the room. "It would not do for you to serve a cause you do not believe in, or to have a leader you do not trust. So when followers of mine expressed a concern for my continued legacy, for the line of Slytherin, I did not dismiss them.

"However, there were no women I could use for such an endeavor," he looked around at his followers, resting his eyes on Bellatrix, willing her in place. The embarrassment at his comment was evident to Hermione, making her flush. Voldemort had been propositioned by Bellatrix, to the point of her offering him children. The thought made her sick. "I needed a witch who also embraced the old magics to ensure the power of my offspring. And who should appear but a little witch, loved by my enemies, fertile, fresh from the aftermath of her own ritual, virginal, and who I needed to take in order to bind her to me."

Voldemort looked over his followers before turning to look at Hermione. "I wish to announce that in less than five months time, I am to be blessed with progeny of Slytherin blood, conceived on the eve of Miss Granger's binding and blessed by her virginal blood. And I vow to you, in honour of this momentous occurrence, that before they are born we will have Dumbledore in a grave and the Ministry under our command!"

A loud chorus of cheers. Hermione saw Draco and Severus clapping, but she didn't miss their disgust at Voldemort's description of impregnating her. It wasn't something she'd want any of her friends to hear, but she knew her lover well enough to know he was doing it specifically for his followers. He was emphasizing why she was the most powerful vessel for him children, not mentioning their continued intercourse past her binding or how unplanned it was. He was using it as a rally.

"Draco, come forward," Voldemort called. Malfoy moved to the center, just in front of the dais. Hermione noticed he was doing everything he could not to look at her. "You have proven yourself an ally of my Death Eaters, even though you did not wish to take my mark. Still, even after given the chance to betray your family you returned and have presented me with a plan to complete your tasks. When your task is complete, I should like to reward you."

Draco bowed. "Whatever you deem fit will be a generous gift, my Lord."

"Hmmm," Voldemort looked at him curiously. "Then, our agreed upon reward?"

He upraised the boy. Hermione didn't see a violent look in his eyes, but she needed to be sure. She couldn't touch him or entreat him in front of his followers, but she sent her magic as a message for him. Voldemort's eyes flashed to hers as she begged with her eyes. "Very well."

Her eyes widened in shock as he called Lucius forward. "Friend, your son has requested that I allow him a reprieve from Death Eater duties so he can start learning more about your family's business ventures after his graduation. It pleases me that someone so young knows the value of properly funding our little endeavor, do you agree?"

Hermione looked at Draco in surprise. Voldemort was lying to his followers in order to give Draco his wish. He was being … kind.
Lucius bowed his head. "I'm pleased my lessons have taken, my Lord."

"Draco, you shall have your wish," Voldemort promised, eyes flashing. "The moment he dies, you will be given time to pursue your own interests. Just know, your family is loyal to me. If I call on you, I expect to be answered."

Draco gave him a small smile, clearly containing himself from the sheer relief of being free. "Of course, my Lord."

Hermione barely restrained herself from hugging Draco. As it was, she stayed by Voldemort's side until he finished the meeting, but learned nothing useful. He simply went over the guard placements around the palace, who would be involved in Draco's quest (which remained unnamed in her presence), and then gave only one additional assignment in whisper beyond her hearing. Her feet ached. When the end came, she was escorted out of the room by the Dark Lord and taken back to their room. It seemed like their new set of rooms was on the top floor.

"Did you know I'd pop up?" she asked him. "You didn't seem surprised."

"You always surprise me," he smirked. "In this case, however, I thought you'd be by Draco the instant he stepped onto the estate. I'm surprised at your restraint."

"I was working on homework," Hermione defended herself. "The wards were not my focus at the time."

He shook his head. "I forget how young you are, sometimes. It never occurred to me there would be other things occupying your mind but me."

"Narcissist."

He chuckled, but otherwise let her accusation rest. He knew she was completely correct, and he kind of had to be a narcissist in order to be a Dark Lord. But with that knowledge, it was remarkable that he had given up his grip on Draco.

"I appreciate what you did," she murmured seriously. He gave her an appraising look. "For Malfoy. He really is my friend, and I am very glad you didn't hurt him."

"Maybe that's why," Voldemort admitted. "I will keep my hooks in the young Malfoy heir, if only for finances, but I couldn't treat him like a follower while you divide his loyalties. He'll be spending the summer with you as you prepare for motherhood, and I will not have him be hostile or manipulative during that time."

She gave him a soft kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

"My help was not just for you, love," he told her, a gleam in his eyes. "I have a task for you."

Her defenses were up automatically. "No."

"It's nothing offensive, little witch," he chided with a chuckle. "You don't even want to hear the way you can show your thanks?"

She glared. "You'll make Malfoy keep his Dark Mark if I don't, won't you?"

"I gave him my promise," Voldemort said self-importantly. "Really, little witch, there is nothing about this task that you will not enjoy. All I want is a new wand."
"A wand?" She asked, shocked. "Why do you need a new wand?"

Voldemort upraised her. "They haven't told you? Surely Ollivander, with all the time he spends with you, told you why I had him locked in my dungeons?"

She shook her head, shamed.

"They don't trust me with information," she admitted softly, bowing her head in shame. "I'm too close to you, and they don't like it."

His cold hand came to cup her cheek and raise her face to gaze into her eyes. She didn't see sympathy, or rage. She saw glee, glee that they knew she was his. He knew she cared for him, loved him, and her admitting that others thought the same made him happy. He was pleased to see her ties breaking around her. The thought made her angry, and she turned her head to avoid glaring at him.

"It doesn't matter," Voldemort told her. "You don't need to know why I need a wand, little witch, but I want you to create one for me."

"You'd help Malfoy regardless," she reminded him confrontationally. "I don't have to do this."

He encircled her, pinning her to him by the waist. His face was close to hers, his lips dangerously close. Her walls were falling and she wanted to press herself to him, to connect to him in the intimacy of a stolen kiss.

"No, you don't," he promised softly. He leaned closer, teasing her with his breath. "But you will. What if young Malfoy fails his task? I have no obligation to the young heir if his task is not finished to my specifications. I could pick apart anything, from how he manages it to his competence, even if his task weren't nearly impossible. You could help him, even if he fails. You could ensure his release."

"No," she insisted, melting against him. "I can't help you, you know that. Not even for Malfoy."

He brushed his lips over her ear. "You will. Because I'm offering you something. Anything you want. Tell me your price, and I will give it to you."

Her mind raced at the implications, but she knew immediately what she wanted. "Take off the collar."

His eyes darkened. "No."

"That's what I want," she insisted fiercely, pushing against his constraining chest. She wasn't being let go. "If you want this, I won't be your collared slave."

"It saved you and my children just a few weeks ago," he reminded her severely. "I will not risk you."

She bit her lip anxiously. That was true; the collar had channeled her hurt energy to the person who had activated the blood bond, had brought him to her. How could she ask him to get rid of the one way he can monitor his children?
She nodded, mostly to herself. "Then release me from our wand oath."

He stiffened. "You know just how much this is worth, don't you? You insist on the things I'm most reluctant to give."

"It won't change anything," she pleaded. "I'll just have a bit more freedom. I'll get to say what I want in front of your followers, spend the night with my friends occasionally."

"I want to have you here," he brushed his lips against her ear, earning a shiver. "Every night."

"I won't stay away without a reason," she promised. "I just want some freedom. Please."

She tried hard not to beg around Voldemort, but she wanted this. She wanted to be able to be herself around everyone else. She didn't want to be forced to return at a specific time, or to respect him in front of his followers. Still, he looked at her like her request was the height of stupidity.

"We made that oath to keep the peace," he reminded her. "Without it, I have no guarantee you will behave and not interfere with my prisoners."

"If you treated them decently, I wouldn't interfere," Hermione argued angrily. Then, seeing the angry look on Voldemort's face at her tone, she took a calming breath. "We can retake a different oath when I'm released, then. I'll vow not to interfere with the prisoners, you can vow not to use them against me, and that's it."

He observed her, calculating. Finally, he sighed and stepped back. "I suppose if I refuse you will also refuse to produce a new wand for me?"

Hermione nodded stiffly, standing her ground.

"Even if I refuse to free young Malfoy?" he prodded.

She glared. "You don't know he's going to fail."

There was some consideration before he sagged, defeated.

"I will consider it," he said finally. "You shall have your answer by tomorrow."

When Voldemort left her for meetings, she immediately focused on her confusion and focus. Draco had been there, after telling her he didn't want to do it, and then proceeded to stand with the Death Eaters. And Severus had brought him.

She focused on the magic, hunting for their signatures. Locked on their signatures, she waited and waited until the popped out of the wards. Waiting for them to enter the Hogwarts wards was unnerving, and she paced back and forth in front of Nagini impatiently. Then, finally, they were back. The both walked up into the Hogwarts wards and she felt compelled to go to them.

"I'm just heading to Ollivander," she lied to Nagini. It seemed strange to lie to a snake, but Nagini would tell on her to her Master when she left. "Getting started on your Master's new wand."

Without further ado she popped out of the Sayre estate and directly behind the two Death Eaters in her life. With a fold of her arms and a cough, both men spun around to face her. Malfoy looked terrified, abashed. It appeased her to know he at least thought of what her reaction would be. Severus had always been harder to read, but she could see a great deal of pain in his eyes.

"Would you two like to tell me what that was?" she accused determinedly. "I thought you didn't
want to be a Death Eater, Draco. Whether he removes your Mark or not, what you just did is exactly the actions of any Death Eater."

"Hermione," Severus murmured, his voice low, "this does not need to concern you."

"It already does!" she shrieked. "He is using Draco to negotiate with me, he is trying to get me to help him because now, one of the only friends I have is under his thumb, again!"

She took a calming breath. "I'm trying, so hard, not to be taken in by him anymore. I'm trying to keep my loyalties clear and defined, no matter what my feelings are or what I'm forced into. But now, he is asking me to make him a wand! Do you understand what position this puts me in? I'm being turned into his arms dealer because you two had to do some hair-brained scheme without me!"

Malfoy stared at her for a half-second, then let out a loud laugh. Both her and Severus stared at the young boy with confusion.

"Sorry," he laughed, "but I never thought I'd see the day I felt sympathy for the dunderheaded duo. Jeez, Granger, is this how you are with all your boys?"

She felt a blush climb to her cheeks, but she fought it off by glaring at him. "They're not my 'boys', they're my friends!"

She looked to Severus for support but he gave her a pointed look in return, indicating his agreement with Draco on the matter. She glared at him too. "I wouldn't need to lecture you if you didn't do stupid things without me! At least Harry and Ron don't exclude me!"

Severus intervened then, placing a hand on Draco's shoulder to calm the boy's laughter. "Draco, go back inside. I need to speak with Miss Granger alone."

That was ominous. Draco and her shared a look, trying to discern between the two of them what was wanted. Hermione gave him a brief shake of the head, letting him know he could leave her alone with him. Draco nodded swiftly and turned to leave.

Hermione turned to look at Severus. "Well?"

For the first time in a few weeks, she was able to see him and take him in. Severus looked terrible. His eyes were sunken and dark purple bags showed her just how stressed he was. His eyebrows looked like they hadn't relaxed from their furrowed state in just as long. His normally straight-backed posture had changed into one of impending confrontation, always leaning forward like a cornered man ready to fight his way through a crowd intent on taking his life. Her heart panged.

"Severus …" she approached him, hand extended.

He stiffened at her approach and stepped back. "Miss Granger, there are things I believe you should know. Do you … do you still consider me a friend?"

"Of course."

He looked conflicted at her answer, simultaneously happy and terrified. She wanted to ask what was going on, but he led her away from the school quickly upon her reply. "Then, please, this needs to be discussed in private. This is of the utmost secrecy."

She let herself be led towards the Forbidden Forest and to a place just within the trees. He took out his wand and slashed runes into three surrounding tress, creating a temporary protective barrier for
"Severus, what's going on?" She was swept inside the protective triangle and sat on a log as he knelt in front of her. His pose was one of a penitent man at an altar, and she felt her breath catch in her throat as he looked up at her with haunted eyes. "Severus, you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

She watched as he took a shaky breath, his eyes closing. "Hermione, over the past few months I've come to consider you a vital part of my life, and my feelings for you are ...." He opened his eyes and looked at her, and she was certain he saw a wide-eyed shock on her face.

His feelings for her? Hermione thought shakily. Does Severus ... does he like me? He can't! He's seen everything: my feelings, my memories, my failures ... He saw Voldemort rape me in my own mind!

He clearly thought better of finishing the sentence, because he started again. "I've been a spy for many, many years. But before that, I needed to convince Dumbledore of my loyalty. In order to switch sides, I made an Unbreakable Vow to Dumbledore that I would obey his orders."

It was like a punch in the gut. He'd made an Unbreakable Vow. He could die, die just from disobeying. Whatever he'd been ordered he clearly thought was so appalling his life was better off forfeit. "Why?"

He grimaced. "There was ... a witch. A dear friend, a muggleborn, who I needed to save. To convince Dumbledore to intervene, to save her life, I took the vow. Now, though, the vow I made to protect one muggleborn witch means I have to betray another."

Visions of what Dumbledore could have asked fluttered through her brain and across her vision and she clutched her stomach protectively. His black eyes bored into hers.

"Severus," she pleaded, "what did he order you to do?"

He hesitated, then plucked a potion vial from his robes. The deep blue was a distinctive hue that Hermione would recognize anywhere.

"A sleeping draught," she murmured.

"I'm meant to get you to drink this, and then transport you to Nurmengrad," Severus voiced lowly. "Grindelwald's prison."

She gasped. "But ... but ... I'm not a traitor. I'm on your side!"

"It is not about sides," he stated, his voice trying to sound detached. "There is a conflict coming, and Dumbledore believes that you will have ... problems fighting against the father of your children, but that, if we take you away, we can lure him into a premature battle. We need you ... out of the way. The magical suppression wards of Nurmengrad are ancient magic and should keep you from being called back."

He looked up to her pleadingly. "I've made sure you won't feel too imprisoned. It won't be like it is for Grindelwald, I swear to you."

She cupped her hand protectively around her children. It was her only connection to Voldemort, to him. Severus knew exactly what he was asking when he asked her to come with him willingly to Nurmengrad. It was a request to betray Voldemort, to let him die. "I should go, I should want to see this all end, I should want the man who killed so many people. But ... I don't want to leave him."

as long as the sap flowed.
But … Severus was betraying Dumbledore just to tell her this. Just to make sure she didn't get hurt in the process. He was there, at her feet, trying hard to look stoic and fierce as always, but with the sheen of sadness in his eyes. If he could betray Dumbledore …

"Is … is it safe?"

Severus shook his head. "We don't know. Dumbledore believes that, if the time you spend there is short enough, there will be no damage to your children. But … there's not guarantee that their magic will be unaffected. Your children could be born squibs."

"No!" Hermione said immediately. "He can't force me to … NO! I…" If they turn out to be squibs, I'd need to leave the wizarding world. But I couldn't – the wards would pull me right back in. I couldn't get away. They'd grow up surrounded by magic and house-elves and wonder but would live on the outskirts. They'd never fit in. They'd be ostracized. How could I willingly take away from them something I love?

"There have to be so many other ways to do this!" she pleaded. "Let me talk to Dumbledore, I'll convince him to let you go and we'll find another option. Or, at least, to wait until they are born. Please, Severus."

Severus let out an anguished groan and raked his hands through his hair. "I tried, Hermione. I tried. I told him I'd die rather than betray you like that, but he wouldn't change his mind."

"But … you're his spy!" Hermione gasped. "He'd let you die?"

Severus looked away, his expression hard. "This is completely your choice. I will live or die with your choice, no matter what it will be. I won't take this away from your children … or you."

Hermione knelt by his side and took his hands into hers, intent on comforting this man. He flinched at her touch, but didn't try to take his hands away. The touch-starved Severus Snape wanted her comfort, but was so afraid of it. Did he have any friends like her? What about the woman from his past, had she seen how troubled he was? Did she ever hold his hand? Did he ever get hugs from her?

It was clear that he hadn't saved whoever this woman had been, and now to have another friend in peril brought back that trauma. She thought about it, for just a moment. Her children could be squibs, if it meant Severus lived. The tragic image of muggle children growing up surrounded by a magic they could never be a part of was nothing compared to the thought of her children, wizard children, never knowing Severus Snape.

And Voldemort … They weren't allies. They were lovers, and she'd come to see an intelligent, confident, proud man who made her want to improve so much. She did love him, and the thought of betraying him and leaving him to the Order made her feel sick. That wasn't the problem, though; the problem was that since the beginning, she knew either he would die or her friends. Even if she never wanted to acknowledge it once she became pregnant.

She made her choice, and let that part of her heart die. All along she'd known she'd be making this choice one day. There was just always the hope that she could put it off, just a little longer. Preserve this balance for a while until the infamous Hermione Granger intellect kicked in and solved it all for her.

"It's too soon," she murmured in anguish. "Too soon."

She wrapped Severus in an embrace. She sat there, wrapped in his comfort, and cried. Cried for
what was about to happen, for what she couldn't avoid, for everything. And after he'd recovered from her tearful physical proximity, he returned it. He murmured no platitudes, no comforts – Severus knew how hard this was going to be for her. How heartbroken she would be when it was over.

Finally, when the tears subsided, he murmured a soft, and assuring, "It's alright to refuse."

"But I can't let you die. I won't."

She felt him return her embrace hesitantly. He truly had no idea how to deal with Gryffindor sentimentality, did he?

"Did he give you a time-limit?" she asked. "Does it have to be tonight?"

"Before the end of the school year," he admitted, "and off school grounds."

"What? Why?" she tried to figure it out before he responded.

He sighed. "If you were injured while connected with the wards, Dumbledore fears you'll be taken back to your Master. It's his way of making sure nothing stops your capture. Malfoy has even informed us that, as the blood collar is from the Malfoy vaults, he can temporarily disable it so it will not summon you mid-transport. We have planned for this, and we're ready."

"Okay," Hermione nodded, thinking fast. "Then, here's what we'll do …"

She outlined their plan, taking into account little details Severus shared about the plans Dumbledore had for the final confrontation. They talked into the evening, preparing for every scenario and change. Eventually, her oath hand start to burn with her wand oath. It was time to return to Voldemort, and she turned to Severus in regret.

"I have to go," she told him softly, enveloping him in another hug. "I haven't said this yet, but thank you so much for trusting me. For giving me the choice."

He held her tightly, moreso than before. "I hope you know that I could never betray your trust like that. I will never assume authourity over you; you've had too much of that already."

His words pained her, but rang true.

"After my last exam," she reminded him, rising to her feet. "Go give your report."

Then, with a deep breath, Hermione apparated back to the side of Voldemort. The man she loved, who she had just agreed to lead into a death trap.
Chapter 35

Hermione thought it would be harder to lie to Voldemort. Harder to hide her guilt. It seemed that months of repressing her guilt from the current situation gave her a precedence of behavior for her to hold onto. Meaning … she distracted herself from it unhealthily. Whenever she found herself feeling anxious, she'd find a book and focus on theory and facts, or she'd sneak down to the ballroom and enter the ritual circle for more practice with her magic, or even just let her mind flit over all the properties in the back of her mind.

None of these helped when Voldemort seemed intent on romancing her.

She was up and about, eating her now salt-free and baby-friendly breakfast that the elves had been ordered to give her when Voldemort returned from wherever he went in the mornings. He caught her eye and gave her a heinous smile that made her swallow a little too harshly at her breakfast. He'd done something.

"I have a surprise," he announced, coming and giving her a passionate kiss. "You will enjoy this. When you're finished getting ready I will whisk you away to meet someone of influence in a faraway place. We'll meet them, and then take the rest of the day to ourselves."

His kiss was manipulative, trying to gain her compliance, and Hermione gave in with a secret, guilty satisfaction. "You're not going to tell me?"

"No, there's too much to do," Voldemort asserted, heading to her new wardrobe where he pulled a few boxes from it. They looked expensive, and Hermione cringed. He then grabbed a set of green robes with it. He set out the packages and outfit at the end of the bed for her inspection. "You will be adorned in finery today, a proper pure wife for the world to see. Including," he extended a small velvet box for her to have, "a ring."

Hermione's fingers froze at the lid. "I thought the collar already marked me as yours."

"To those familiar with the darker tradition, that is true," he agreed with a patronizing chuckle. "However there have been a few generations since they've been used. This ring will cover the ignorant as well, and appear like a gesture of goodwill towards your heritage."

Hermione put the ring box down as it had become suddenly heavy in her hand. He wanted to mark her again, with no thought of marking himself. No ring for the Dark Lord. No collar for him. Once again, she was reminded that she was a captive who'd fallen for her captor, not just a girl with a man. A slave to a master.

It was probably a romantic gesture, but it was given without display. Just given with her outfit, like it was a power-play instead of for her.

Voldemort, observing the gesture being discarded, swallowed his disappointment. He still had a chance. The girl had not opened the box, did not see the ring he was offering her, and as such could still be enticed to wear it willingly. He dove in, interrupting whatever thoughts had her rejecting the ring, and kissed her voraciously, desperately. One of his hands was behind her head, keeping her mouth fastened to his. His other hand searched for the ring box on the bed, saving it from her rejection.

He was addicted to her kisses. Her lips were soft as cream gliding against his and she tasted earthy war, but so sweet like she always had a cup of the white peach tea before he found her mouth. It
made him hard to kiss her like this, devouring her as she lay on the bed. His hand wandered down to the bulging belly that that was changing everything. Knowing she carried his child only made him more desperate to claim her permanently.

He broke away, intent on his goal and knowing that if it went on any longer he would pin the little witch to the bed and bury himself in her again. "What you do to me, witch," he murmured against her skin. "Wear my ring. Let them know you're mine."

He popped open the box. Let her see the gorgeous bauble he'd procured for her, the silver band with ornamental silver strands twirling around three bright diamonds, polished by the goblins themselves. He wouldn't tell her which pureblood family vault he'd taken it from, but he knew it was gorgeous and to her tastes. The small look of awe in his bonded's face was enough to confirm it.

"But they don't know you're mine," Hermione insisted with a whisper, touching her collar. He knew the half-glazed look in her eye. She was still in a lusty mood, no matter what she told herself. She wanted him. He kissed her again, gentler this time. "This is all that matters, this is what marks me. I can't—I won't be marked again."

"The collar marks you as a slave, not as an equal," he pecked her lips once more. "We have shared our feelings, little witch, and I will not have anyone thinking you are anything less than my wife. Wear this and let me present you to them, let me make them see the power you have."

"So I trade the collar for the ring?" Hermione asked, not giving in quite yet.

He stifled a hiss. "Absolutely not. That collar keeps you safe."

She grimaced. "Then I'm sorry, but no. Not while you are unmarked."

His grip clearly tightened on the ring box and Hermione flinched, anticipating force. To her surprise, he stepped back and shut the box harshly. "I see."

Hermione watched guiltily as he stashed the box in the bedside table, his movements violent. "I'm sor-"

"Get dressed," he ordered swiftly. "We do not want to keep anyone waiting."

Her anxiety over denying him prompted her to do what he asked quickly and without hesitation. The green robes shrank slightly when she donned them, adjusting to her size to showcase her bulging belly. Her house-elf popped up and did her hair as Voldemort watched and instructed. She wouldn't have thought he cared what she looked like, but he insisted on dark rouge lips, and a tight updo that her curls definitely couldn't have sustained without elf magic.

When she looked in the mirror, she saw why. Voldemort was making her look older, more mature. Hair down was too young, and the rouge on her lips made her look more vivacious. Everything about her outfit, her makeup, and her hair was to send a specific appearance of age that she did not have. She was dressing like a woman of at least twenty-five.

"Who are we meeting?" she asked, worriedly. "Why are you making such an effort?"

"Portkeys will not harm the children at this point, correct?" he asked, not answering her own question.

She nodded. "Not until thirty weeks. Why-?"
"We are meeting with the Eastern European Magical Council," Voldemort informed her. "Britain may relish in rejecting me, but other countries see the advantage of earning my favour. The delegate from Bulgaria has already chosen their side in this conflict, but with you by my side they want to negotiate an even greater involvement with the other nations of their pact. You are good for my image, my dear."

"A student wife is good for you?" she asked, incredulously.

He sneered, clearly still bitter from her rejection. "Traditionalists won't have an issue with me taking a young wife to secure my own lineage. Old magic advocates will appreciate the use of ancient binding magic in our marriage. And contemporaries view having a muggleborn wife as proof that I am not discriminatory. They can openly support me with you by my side."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably at the thought that she was helping his cause. "Then, I don't want to go. You know I can't help you, can't help Voldemort, win this."

"Do you differentiate between me and my name, wife?" he mocked.

Tension radiated off of him in waves, making her tense. She was not eager to make him angrier at her after his failed quasi-proposal, but the guilt rolling around in her system made her want to do nothing but curl up and take the day to cry. If she went, she was betraying Harry. If she didn't, she was adding insult to injury to him and he'd had enough of that growing up.

She wrapped her arms around her middle, trying to soothe the anxious ache taking her over. "Not really. There's Voldemort, and then there's the other Voldemort. The man who wants world domination and the one who wants me to wear his ring."

"No, there is only me," he wrapped one arm around her and placed the other on her pregnant belly. "I want everything. A wife who is dutiful to me, children I can teach all the magic I've learned, and a world where I can control the idiots and imbeciles who want to destroy anything of value. I want my dreams fulfilled. You simply cannot accept that someone who would kill to bring about his dreams includes you as one of them."

Tears pricked her eyes and she took a gasping breath. "You can't say these things to me."

"After you were one who begged me to tell you I love you, little witch?" he smirked, bowing low over her face. "I know what you need now, and I can give it to you. I love you, little witch. My darling Hermione Granger."

She closed her eyes against his image and shook her head. "Do you still believe you're better than muggles?"

"Yes." Her heart plummeted to her stomach. "They have their uses, and they can be intelligent, but we have magic. It is everything."

"No." She pulled away as much as he allowed and glared up at him. "I thought you learned this, Voldemort, but magic isn't everything. Muggles live for accomplishment, family, love … there are so many things that are everything to them and me, and magic is just another tool to earn those things. One they don't have but have more than made up for with their own technology. They're not inferior because of something they can't control!"

She breathed deeply, trying to control the anger that covered her heart. "Is magic more important than your goal to bring down the Ministry, or more important than protecting your children? Because that's all I can hear from your mouth."
He released his grip on her then, just slightly, but enough that she left his grip. They stared at each other, one pair of eyes angry and the other cold.

"I can't help you," Hermione pleaded. "Please don't ask me to."

"Witch, this is twice you're denying me today," he noted calmly, though his eyes showed his anger. "I thought you wanted the oath released."

And there came the bribery. She knew that once he became this angry nothing would get him to be heartfelt. She needed the oath released so she could save Severus, and she would do what she had to to bring that about. The original plan needed the oath removed so she could willingly coordinate her drugging with her Potions Master.

Sighing, she nodded.

"Well then, I suggest you do everything I ask," his eyes burned into hers, making her flinch. "You have too much to lose, my dear, to defy me now."

"If you refuse, you don't get a wand," she pointed out, earning only a raised brow and smirk in return.

He swept closer, pulling her against him again. Her body melted against him. His voice growled low in her ear. "Witch, I don't need you to create a wand in order to get one. We're headed to Bulgaria, close enough to Russia to visit Gregorovitch in a moment. You, however, need me to remove the oath. I can go elsewhere for my aim. Don't pretend you have a leg to stand on when you're against me."

They glared at each other with bodies pressed tightly together. She normally would have stomped on his foot to get him to release her, then tried to hex him. But Severus was counting on her getting the oath removed so she could willingly ingest her sleeping draught. So she sagged in acquiescence.

"How much lying are you asking for?" Hermione asked. "You're just showing me off, right? Arm candy?"

His eyes shone with victory as he stole her lips for his own. His breath fanned across her lips sensitively as he told her, "You will walk beside me proudly, and even if you internally disagree with what I say you will be non-committal and encouraging. A proper pureblood wife."

She rolled her eyes. "Mudblood forever, dear. Isn't that why you wanted me along?"

It was a night of listening to Voldemort speak on archaic fears and new ones, everything muggles to do to them if they didn't assume a role of control. He spoke about the futility of hiding magic, and his perceived benefits of revealing themselves. More than that – as apparently revealing himself to the world was open for negotiation if the price was right – he spoke about the old magics and that wizards and witches had become too selfish.

Maybe. Maybe in some ways he was right. Maybe it was selfish to not perform an ancient ritual, or to marry for advantage, or many of the things that had changed with the new ages of progress. But Hermione had something that Voldemort didn't – a value of human life. He wanted culls and sweeps of death so the world could work at a perfect level, a utopia. If reading taught her anything, its that those that want utopia often create hell instead of heaven. What good was perfection if it came at the cost of any and all happiness?

Listening to him talk like that with all the Ministers on the European Magical Council, even if he
wasn't telling them all the details of the horror his plans would bring, it solidified Hermione's resolve. She wanted to be selfish, the very thing Voldemort was railing against, but her selfishness was in keeping him in her life. She had romanticized their relationship, and she knew that if they had dated or courted she would never have continued with him. Not with their different views on the world. But how he made her feel … she wanted to keep his intellect and his care for her in her life.

She would follow through with her plan with Severus, and she wouldn't change her mind. Severus deserved to live, he deserved a chance to be happy without a Master hanging over him. And Voldemort … he'd never change. Not enough to matter.

That night she went for a walk in the back of the estate, walking among the rows of trees in the orchard, finding them lacking for her purposes, and then heading back towards the woods. She found some with bowtruckles, a few types of fir tree and then some lime and rowan. None of them fit with Voldemort.

Still, she gave gifts to the bowtruckles and took a branch or two from each tree she found. If she was going to live and take over for Ollivander, she needed to collect consistently.

Maybe she was looking for the wrong type of tree. She had kingwood and English oak, two woods that fit with her and Voldemort's combined magic but worked with hers alone. Maybe she needed to look at it in a similar light – her magic felt … whole with his, but without felt like, well, her: strong, too stubborn, and life-filled. English oak had a pensive quality too, while kingwood had a mentality of unending conflict and perseverance.

For Voldemort … he was changing, but proud. Never overt changes, but small enough to get away with it. He was a Slytherin to the core, but intelligent and impassioned. A wand that could handle that … none of the lighter wands, definitely not gorse wood. Not ebony, as it was too unchanging. His current wand was a yew wand, but she'd learned from picking her English oak branch that magic rarely lets you become reliant on one type, and preferred diversity. So it needed to compliment yew too, be a harmonious anti-thesis to it, if she had to describe the feeling she needed to find.

Yew went with Earth magic, so something more water or fire based. It also fell within the life/death circle of the ritual circle. Something less abstract and more fire or water-centric, then, for his new wand. And it needed to be less suitable for offense than his current wand, but another aspect of his magic. Maybe … he had been so protective of her and her children. Maybe a more defensive wand, still just as straightforward, but focused differently.

Holly? At the thought, she hesitated profoundly. That was Harry's wand wood, and while she knew it depended largely upon the core for its qualities, she didn't want to start comparing him with her husband.

Not holly if she could help it. There were other wands Voldemort would be compatible with, for sure. There were always at least ten different woods that would work for a wizard, as it largely depended on the core anyways. She knew what core she would use – her own blood or hair, whatever the wand felt was most compatible – and needed to find the wood for it.

Hermione wandered for a little longer, her bag filled with various branches and the remainder of the wood lice. There were just enough to distract the bowtruckles in one last tree, so she refrained from getting branches from some other trees that seemed to be magical for fear of leaving without
a piece of wood for Voldemort.

In poor spirits at her failed venture, she started to head back to the Mansion. Part of her held out hope that she'd find the tree on the way so she didn't apparate, but the mossy ground and horrid weather made her even more melancholy. She needed the oath removed, so she needed to make him an excellent wand.

Something odd caught her attention. It was a wood that seemed in sync, but it was a spruce. They were rarely inhabited by bowtruckles, as the majority of bowtruckle species were leafed and preferred to hide in less spiky settings. Yet, this Norway Spruce seemed to have at least one little guy in it.

She knew this was the tree. Carefully selecting the piece she'd cut off ahead of time, Hermione pulled out her Tupperware of woodlice and laid the open container on the ground at the foot of the tree. Two or three of the spiky things crawled to find their food and Hermione did a quick cut with her magic before leaving with her prickly prize. A happy thought made her nearly dance a little jig; she had the wand wood.
Chapter 36

It took five days of effort to make his wand.

It was one day of carving the wood, one day of speaking to Ollivander about the potion needed to preserve blood inside of a wand and to dry the branch. One day to brew the potion and another for it to mature. One hour of trying to get her blood out with a needle instead of a knife, and then a minute of bleeding from her frustration-induced knife wound into her potion beaker.

She’d been right. Since they’d bonded with blood and magic – a nicer way to describe what had happened – her blood was the perfect fit for his wand. It gave her a kind of perverse sense of pleasure, a kind she immediately felt ashamed for, that a part of her would be with him, defending him when he died. A safeguard in case the magic was too strong and required her to be there to help him survive. In a way, she would be. But it wouldn’t be enough.

Each day, the thought of leading him to his death was consuming her. Hermione had made her decision, but it was almost as if he knew she had. Each day when Voldemort came back to her he would pull her into his lap, not minding her increasing weight, and would read to her with a hand on her belly. He’d kiss her ears and lips and cheeks. Then, when her defenses were lowest, he would show her the ring he’d given her once again and ask if she would wear it. She’d almost said ‘yes’ the first time, and if he hadn’t given her a satisfied look when she took it from his hand the ring would be living on her finger now.

That fifth day, after the varnish had dried at Ollivander’s safe-house the night before, she sat in the room and spend hours making it perfect. She polished it, sanded it, varnished it again, and then polished it again and again. It was like she was preparing his last meal; she needed it to be perfect, because it very well may be the last thing she would do for him.

Hermione really didn’t want him to die, she admitted to herself sadly. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t tried to think of other options, really – if they were locking her up in Nurmengard then why not Voldemort? Because having two all-powerful wizards in there really didn’t need to happen, and because his supporters would likely still be alive. Voldemort had a habit of coming back to haunt everyone, and if he were left alive after being brought back to life … No one would believe he could die.

The second was obvious: her opinion didn’t matter in this. There was no one in the UK, no one in charge who would hesitate to kill him on sight. Or order him to be killed on sight. Regardless of her own personal preferences, Voldemort and his Death Eaters were viewed as terrorists. Terrorists were not negotiated with, and Voldemort would never surrender without a fight. It was war, and war only ended one way.

As she sat there, her polishing rag running over the wand again and again, she felt the magic in the wards shift and realized Voldemort was coming home for the day. She hastily stashed the cloth and polish in the cupboard and stood in front of the door with the wand hidden behind her back. Nagini came and sat up next to her, waiting attentively for his entrance.

Voldemort blew into the room with his robes flapping behind him, but immediately smirked when he saw her and his familiar standing there.

“A man could get used to such a … regal reception,” he told her with a smile. “A wife waiting here as her husband enters … I’m not a sentimental man, but it’s quite a pleasant sight. Have you decided to accept my ring?”
Hermione’s stomach clenched. “No, not quite. Today you’re going to release the wand oath with me.”

His brow rose. “The wand?”

Hermione brought it back from around her back and held it out with both hands. It was pale, and long. She’d based the length off of his current wand and made them identical. The handle was simple, just because she didn’t want to practice anything more intricate on the wand she’d give in. It was simply stained one shade darker for the handle and carved a separation between the wand point and the handle. It was simple, but she thought it looked just fine.

“Wood? Core? Length?” he listed off as he approached, looking at the wand carefully to decide if he deigned to pick it up.

“Norway Spruce, my blood, 13½”,’’ Hermione recited firmly, watching his eyes flicker to hers as she mentioned her blood. He reached for it, and she moved it out of his range. “Ah ah ah, I need this to ensure you’ll remove the oath.”

“And how do I know it’s a wand and not a carved piece of wood?’’ Voldemort inquired, patiently holding out his hand. “I need to test it.”

She bit her lip. “You promise to release the oath if the wand works?’’

“I am currently trying to earn your loyalty, little witch,’’ Voldemort rolled his eyes. “I give you my word, you will have your oath removed.”

There was a moment when she hesitated, but he kept his hand outstretched in front of him until she finally relinquished the wand Voldemort. He weighed it in his palm, tested it in his grip, and then flung a spell at the bed. The bedposts instantly seemed to shudder and grow four short, menacing-looking restraints. Hermione blushed and looked back to Voldemort.

“It’s a good wand,’’ Voldemort told her, nodding his praise. “Just as willing as my own, although distinctive.’’

She gave him a weak smile. “I told you our blood would work for each other.’’

He pocketed the wand and swept her into his arms, his face lit up by a snarky little smile. “You did, and I know just how much my witch likes being right. Shall I tell you something?’’ He leaned in closer his lips at her ear. “I love a smart woman.’’

Hermione pushed him away reluctantly. “The oath first.’’

Voldemort sighed, but traded the new wand for the wand he made the oath with, his yew wand. “I can’t convince you this is not in your best interests, can I?’’

“You still have the collar,’’ she pointed out. “And ….?’’

His fingers found her chin and lifted her eyes into his soft gaze. “What is it?’’

She’d been thinking about this since the night before. She didn’t want to feel guilty about what she was going to do, but it couldn’t be helped. What she could do, what she wanted more than anything, was to collect memories of the man who she’d one day need to tell her children about. Something to show them.

“Once this oath is removed, it would make me happy to wear your ring.’’
There was a moment, a brief flicker of warmth in his gaze. Then he promptly took his wand and placed it on hers. Using her wand as a starting point, to moved his hand in four swift motions.

“Et adimpletur in juramento,” he recited. Her wand hand felt much freer immediately, and refreshed as if it had been briefly dipped in a cool stream then returned to the warm, sunny environment. Then it was her turn. She put her wand on his, made the four motions, and spoke the words. “Et adimpletur in juramento.”

Their oaths were removed and her heart felt just slightly lighter. Her breath left her in a sigh of relief, making Voldemort roll his eyes. That motion prompted a hug, a tight embrace where Hermione threw herself at him. It was a grateful hug, only ended when he chuckled at her and she withdrew in mild embarrassment.

He didn’t let her go far. With one hand, he held her by the waist to his one side, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket for the familiar, often presented wooden box.

“You will wear my ring?” Voldemort said, offering the box again. “Not because of some gratitude, but you truly want to?”

Hermione bit her lip. “Should I feel guilty for wanting to even though I want you to lose the war?”

The superior smirk met Voldemort’s face. He plucked the little ring from its case and slipped it on her finger. “It doesn’t matter if you want that or not, little witch. I will not lose, and you will be mine forever. Don’t feel any guilt for taking what I most want to give.”

Hermione nodded, taking his words to heart. It was a comfort – he knew, regardless of what happened, that she wasn’t on his side. Still, he put this beautiful, unique ring. It was beautiful. A swirl of tiny diamonds, then and the center of the large swirl was a larger, more obviously perfect, diamond. The ring sparkled on her now happily heavy finger.

“Are you going to wear a ring?”

“It is not traditional in our circles,” Voldemort told her firmly. “I will not ostracize my followers for your pride, witch.”

Hermione had heard that response every time he’d presented her with the ring, and she’d internalized it by now. More and more, she was coming to realize while she may love him, she could never be happy with him. The feelings she had for him made her want to overlook all his flaws, all their differences of opinion and just be with him. But that’s not how life works. Love, in this case, was not enough because Voldemort had no idea how to love back. He loved her, cared for her, but it was a selfish love. He had no idea how to be a partner to her, no idea how to compromise, no idea how to open up. It didn’t make the guilt of betraying him any less, but hopefully it would make the loss hurt somewhat less when the time came.

Hopefully, one day she would be able to move past him.

He brought her back from her thoughts with a tender kiss on the lips, so tender she sighed into it. She tried to avoid stroking his ego, but right then she just couldn’t help it. It ended with a smirk on his part, ruining the mood and earning a glare from her.

“Don’t be that way,” he teased, pulling one of her curls. “I’m allowed to enjoy this moment.”

“Oh, yes,” Hermione huffed. “It’d hardly be a victory if you didn’t bask in it.”

His eyes danced with mirth. “Exactly.”
“Now that I’m wearing your ring and have been cleared by the healers, am I allowed to go back for the last bit of school?” Hermione quirked a brow. “At least for review and exams?”

“Only the NEWTS matter,” he waved his hand dismissively. “I told you, I can have tutors here in a moment.”

“I don’t want them hurt either, you know,” Hermione huffed, cupping her belly. “You act like I’m endangering them.”

He cupped to her lovely face and pressed a kiss to her pert nose. “Of course not, little witch, but you aren’t accustomed to my number of enemies. I cannot be too careful with the most precious thing in my care.”

Hermione inhaled sharply as his words thrummed through her core. The possessive affection weaved through his words was enough that her heart clenched, and her face grew red with her inappropriate thoughts. Jumping to the tip of her toes, she pulled his face to hers and devoured him.

“Mmmm,” he hummed against her lips before they parted. “Most precious.”

Hermione pulled away for only a second to respond. “I’m going back.”

“Hmmm,” Voldemort captured her mouth again. “Fine. But more celebrating.”

She smiled against his mouth, briefly relishing her own victory, before Voldemort just stole her thoughts by moving her to the newly transfigured bed. It would be used many ways that night.

Hermione’d barely entered Hogwarts for the first time in a month when Severus arrived in her room. He had a grave expression on his face, clearly pinched in tension. “Miss Granger, you returned.”

“Of course,” she said with a tilt of her head. “What’s wrong?”

He closed his eyes and sighed loudly. “I recommend you return to the Dark Lord. Immediately. Remaining here may prove … perilous.”

“No chance,” Hermione huffed. “I am finishing my exams.”

Severus grimaced at her. “Unfortunately, I predicted that. If you truly wish to remain here, we will need to present you in the Headmaster’s office. The aurors want a word.”


Severus unfolded the newspaper from under his arm and presented it to her. A giant photograph of her, pregnant and standing right next to Voldemort. He had her hand clasped regally and affectionately within his own, a smile clear on his face until he turned in the direction of the camera with a harsh, murderous glare.

She knew exactly when the picture was taken – a reporter had been chased from their meeting with the Eastern Europeans. Evidently, he’d either gotten away or hidden the film from his camera. Its caption read ‘Hermione Granger, best friend of boy-hero Harry Potter (left) shown pregnant and on the arm of Voldemort (right) at the annual meeting of the Eastern European Magical Union.’

She looked at the article to find it just as bad.
This week marked the annual meeting of the Eastern European Magical Union, held this year in Poland. While it is always a divisive meeting, no one expected the appearance of the dark wizard known only as Lord Voldemort. Exactly what was discussed between the dark wizard and the leaders of our fellow European Ministers is still unknown, but what we do know is that he arrived with muggleborn and best friend of his nemesis Harry Potter, Hermione Granger.

Since last month when we released the news of Miss Granger’s scandalous pregnancy, the magical community has been speculating about the identity of her child’s father. Many suggested it may be Harry Potter himself, in a continuation of their tryst during the TriWizard Tournament. Others have seen Miss Granger on more than friendly terms with Malfoy and Black families’ heir Draco Malfoy, sparking rumours that the child may well be his.

This photograph is evidence of a much worse reality. The leader of the Death Eater movement within Britain is becoming a father with the best friend of one of his worst enemies. The shocking five decade gap in their ages should be a cause for worry, but that is not all. According to inside sources at the Ministry of Magic here in Britain, Hermione Granger was married December 31st to none other than He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named himself! Married!

Is Hermione Granger under the Imperius Curse, or are her power-hungry ways finally showing themselves? How did the two adversaries meet? Will the Ministry issue an order for the arrest of this pregnant muggleborn? The Prophet will keep you updated as the situation unfolds.

No news yet on how Harry Potter has taken this devastating betrayal. For the reactions of fellow students and ministry officials to this heartbreaking reveal, continue on page 5.

Hermione’s hand was clenching the paper tightly, almost too tightly, in her hand. This was it. Her life was, essentially, over. No one would forgive her after this, no one who didn’t know ahead of time. She checked the date, and her worst fears were realized – this had been printed two days ago. Whatever damage this news could do had already been done while she was hiding away with Voldemort.

“I guess it was too much to ask, to have it hidden a bit longer,” Hermione murmured sadly. More firmly, she spoke to Severus. “The other students?”

Snape replied monotonously. “Many believe the Prophet’s article. Others believe it is too ridiculous. It is a small minority in this school who do not wish you ill now, and it is only because Potter and your other friends are denying the article vehemently.”

“They’re lying to protect me, huh?” she sighed. “Should I deny it too?”

“Refuse to comment.” His eyes were hard. “Do not deny it, as it may anger the Dark Lord, but do not confirm it. Ambiguity is your friend.”

“And the aurors?” Hermione asked, looking up now. His black eyes comforted her. “Will they give me truth serum?”

Snape gritted his teeth and snarled. “If they have any wish to live, they will not. Veritaserum is dangerous in expecting mothers and their children.”

Hermione smiled at his protectiveness of her, although guiltily, and placed the newspaper on the bed.
"I wouldn’t put it past them," Hermione sighed. "Shall we go then?"

Severus gave her a slight bow of the head and led her from the room. It was extremely unfortunate that the Headmaster’s office was one of the highest in the school, because with her ever-growing belly it had become much more difficult to keep her footing. After tripping for the third time on the moving staircase, Severus sighed in irritation and wrapped his arm around her torso, like he was prepared to lift her.

"Wha-?" Hermione jumped.

He looked tense. "I will not have you injuring yourself. Either let me help you this way or I will use magic to lift you all the way there."

That decision was easy. His sure support kept her from falling again, although he often took too much of her weight. Especially when the staircases moved. He released her only once they were at the door to the Headmaster’s office. For a moment they just looked at each other – Hermione was looking for comfort, and Severus was providing what empathy he could with his eyes – and the unspoken words brought some form of peace to Hermione’s heart. Together, then, they entered the Headmaster’s office.

Within minutes of them entering the office, one of the gossiping, weasels of portraits had gone off and the aurors came blazing through the Floo. Madam Bones, Minister Scrimgeour, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and two others came through the Floo like the most high-profile processional. Dumbledore’s office was full with people.

"Aurors," Scrimgeour ordered immediately. The two lower-ranking wizards, wands drawn, approached me. "Miss Granger, surrender your wand."

Hermione complied, although only with her vinewood wand. Her other one firmly stashed in her other pocket, she smiled innocently at the Minister. "Sir, may I sit? I’m getting quite big, you see, and it’s a little tiring to stay up."

Madam Bones gave her an uncomfortable smile, while the Minister looked just disgusted at the simple mention of her pregnancy. "If you’ll agree to come with us to the Ministry, Miss Granger –"

"Scrimgeour," Dumbledore interjected with a stern voice peeking out from behind his polite smile, "as a student and a muggleborn, we both agreed I needed to be present."

"If she agrees to forego that little defense, it would go a long way to proving her innocence," Scrimgeour defended immediately, glaring at Hermione with venom. "Well, Miss Granger?"

It was obvious that, while Dumbledore had somehow managed to gain their civility, Scrimgeour was already convinced of the Prophet’s version of events. For once, completely true, but inconveniently. Hermione sighed and just sat herself in one of the padded chairs in front of Dumbledore’s desk, audibly breathing out in relief when the weight stopped being applied to her feet.

Properly situated, she smiled fakely up at the Minister. "It seems like this will take a while. Why don’t you have a seat?"

The Minister glared. "I’ll stand. Amelia!"

Madam Bones produced a bit of parchment. "Miss Granger, we’re here to collect evidence. It’s not a formal interrogation, but your responses will be recorded and used if found relevant to any current or future investigation. Is that alright?"
“No,” Hermione glared, “it’s not. But do I get a choice?”

Madam Bones ignored her protest with a small grimace and set up the parchment and Dicta-Quill. Once it had been set up, Scrimgeour reached into his jacket and produced what looked like an original copy of the photograph that had been posted in the Prophet to slam on the Headmaster’s desk. “Miss Granger, this is you next to You-Know-Who, correct?”

“Yes, it is.”

Bones placed it in her hands. “Can you remember the situation wherein this photo was taken?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Madame Bones, I am aware that this was taken at the Council meeting two days ago. Can we get to what you really want to know? Do I support him? Not in the slightest. His agenda is self-important and lacks the fundamentals of human compassion and decency. Harry’s my best friend – have I betrayed him? No, I haven’t. Have I done anything illegal? I don’t think so, but I have killed a Death Eater who was using the Cruciatus on a family of muggles.”

Madame Bones’ eyes were wide.

“Now, how about the gossip?” Hermione continued angrily. “Unfortunately, the father of my child is nobody’s business but my own and I refuse to name him publicly. As far as I’m aware, being pregnant is not a crime. Anything else?”

They exchanged glances with each other, then Amelia looked towards her again. “Miss Granger, whose ring is on your finger?”

The entire room looked down to the ring twinkling on her finger. Reflecting the various lamps in the room. Dumbledore gazed at her quizzically.

“The man I’m bonded to,” Hermione admitted awkwardly. Ambiguity. Snape told her to be ambiguous.

Scrimgeour gave her a victorious sneer. “Answer it properly. Who is your husband?”

“I told you, I refuse to name him,” Hermione said firmly. “I have no obligation to answer you.”

Scrimgeour placed a certificate on the desk, most likely a copy. “We know about your bonding, Madam Riddle. There is no record of you being bonded to Voldemort, but we do for a man named Tom Riddle. A man that hasn’t been seen in fifty years.”

The paper placed in front of her was a record of the bonding magic between her and Voldemort, under his given, birth name.

“You’ve produced proof that Tom Riddle is my husband,” Hermione pointed out. “So why are you asking me?”

Scrimgeour glared at her. “You-Know-Who is a wanted criminal and we want your information on his whereabouts!”


She heard one of the aurors snort, and smirked to herself as Scrimgeour glared over her head at the offender. When Scrimgeour looked back, she returned to an innocent face.
“You just admitted to being married to Tom Riddle!” Scrimgeour roared, waving her certificate around. “Tom Riddle must be He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, admit it!”

She gave a genuinely confused look. “You think my husband, Tom Riddle, is Voldemort?”

Madame Bones gave a longsuffering sigh and pulled Scrimgeour back. “Miss Granger, if Tom Riddle is not You-Know-Who, then why were you with You-Know-Who rather than your husband at the Eastern European Magical Council?”

“He asked me to.”

Hermione saw the shock on their faces. “He offered me my freedom to appear with him publicly. I took it, and now I’m back for school. Obviously, appearing publicly is his way of forcing me out of society and into the Death Eaters, but I’m not going to join him.”

“So, you were kidnapped by You-Know-Who?” Madame Bones asked specifically.

“Yes.” Hermione agreed, refusing to add specifics.

Scrimgeour continued to glare. “We only have you word for that, Madame Riddle. Was there anyone present for this kidnapping? Anyone who we can actually use truth serum on?”

Severus stepped forward and placed a calming hand on her shoulder. “I can speak to that.”

“Professor Snape,” Scrimgeour observed coolly. “And how do you fit into this scenario?”

Hermione watched as Severus and Scrimgeour leveled their imposing glares at each other. It was held for a minute, a long 60 seconds, before the Minister looked to Dumbledore. Almost as if for protection. Hermione saw the telltale amusement in Severus’ eyes at the victory.

“Severus is Miss Granger’s advanced tutor,” Dumbledore informed the Minister kindly. “After she became pregnant, we thought it’d be better if she worked to take the adult NEWT this summer, before her children are born. He takes her on many trips to collect potion ingredients and expand her knowledge. It was on one of these trips where Miss Granger was taken.”

Scrimgeour wasn’t having it. “And it wasn’t reported?”

“We were informed,” Dumbledore said slowly, “that if we wanted Miss Granger returned, we would need to keep this matter secret. I apologize for the secrecy, Minister, but we made a decision based on how violent we know Voldemort to be. It was for Miss Granger’s own safety, you see.”

This back and forth went back for a while. Whenever Dumbledore passed it off to one of them, Hermione and Severus would give specifics but the general lie belonged to Dumbledore. He spun them all around his words and eventually, Scrimgeour relented.

“We’ll add Miss Granger’s kidnapping to the list of charges for You-Know-Who,” he finally relented. “If she remembers anything more, like where she was held, please contact us. And for any future kidnappings, please refer them to the auror department immediately.”

“Of course, Minister,” Dumbledore twinkled kindly. “Thank you for coming personally to see to one of our student’s safety.”

All the aurors left through the floo, one by one, until Madam Bones remained. She came close and wrapped her arms around Hermione, hugging her tightly. Hermione froze in shock.
“I’ve wanted to do that since Dumbledore told me,” Madam Bones said with a firm smile. “I’ll do my best to discourage the press. Best if no one believes this, right?”

“Thank you.”

It wasn’t her who said that, but Dumbledore. The aged Headmaster got up to shake Madam Bones’ hand goodbye like he wasn’t jumping in front of Hermione. If she’d needed defended, she would have called his move defensive. But since it was an Order ally, a friend of Dumbledore, and someone who was offering her help, Hermione only felt confused as to why. It was almost as if Dumbledore was keeping her from speaking with Bones.

“We greatly appreciate you keeping a lid on things on your end,” he expressed gratefully, giving her a grandfatherly grin. “You’ll keep me informed?”

“Of course,” was the ready reply. “Take care of her for us, alright?”

“You have my word.”

Dumbledore’s idea of taking care of her was to bring her to the Great Hall for breakfast and put her on the dais for everyone to see. The open hostility of the room took her breath away as it was choked in her throat.

“Good morning, everyone!” he called. “If I might a have a few minutes of your time, there are some concerns I need to address.

“Miss Granger and I have discussed the recent article in length,” Dumbledore told the school to whispered wondering. “After an inquiry by both myself and the Ministry, I believe her innocent of association with Voldemort, and ask that you ignore the recent article slandering her character.”

He then levelled his gaze at the students. “I will also remind you all that fighting is not tolerated in this school.”

_Translation: I know you’re all going to start dealing vigilante justice to the wife of the Dark Lord. From Severus’ glower, she knew that it was a poor choice of words, if not just a horrible way to handle the situation. Doing that seemed to validate all the rumours; if Dumbledore himself sees there’s a reason for us to attack Hermione, then there’s some truth to the article, isn’t there? It was sound logic, in the circumstances, and from breakfast onward the Slytherin friends she’d accrued and even Ron and Harry started escorting her to classes.

Her powers helped with all the magical abuse, but she couldn’t see the physical attacks coming. Weasley Wizard Wheezies products found her everywhere, and trips and shoves were now standard. There was always someone there to catch her if she was physically tripped or hurt, so the babies never got damaged, but it was still dangerous for the attacker. More than once, Nagini made an appearance from her bookbag and started to lash out at the offender.

Because of Nagini, Hermione was forced to banish the snake back to Sayre mansion and ask her friends for help. Megan spoke in her defense to the Hufflepuffs, who were more than willing to believe one of their own. Harry widely proclaimed his unwavering support, causing most Gryffindors to think twice about attacking her. Ravenclaws were only deterred when all the Heads of House started treating her bullying with zero tolerance.

It was a relief, both to her swollen feet and her paranoia, to finally make it back to her quarters in the dungeons for the night. Then, just when she’d relaxed on the bed ….
“Occlumency, now.”

Snape appeared in her door like a vampiric visitor, his expression merciless. That was until he saw her belly-up on the bed. His expression turned from severe to self-congratulatory.

“Wishing you hadn’t returned, Miss Granger?” he smirked. “You’d think after being pregnant for so long a woman would understand the fatigue that comes with it.”

“I’d be fine if people hadn’t been attacking me all day,” Hermione griped. “I’m only tired from being on my guard the whole day.”

His smile turned predatory. “Well, you have a little while longer to go. Occlumency lessons. Now.”

She just groaned and threw her arm over her face. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“But my feet hurt,” Hermione whined, wiggling her feet like a small child. “I’ve been walking all around the castle!”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Come to my office, and massage some Soothing Balm into them for you.”

Hermione looked at him in disbelief. He stood there, calm and collected as ever, offering to do such a humble and intimate thing. It surprising warmed her heart to know he would, just for her.

“You, Severus Snape, would lower yourself to massaging my feet?”

“Could you reach them on your own?” He quirked a brow at her bulging belly, making her flush in embarrassment. Snape felt his lips twitch as he saw her red face and had to restrain himself from the explicit thoughts rampaging through his mind. That, however, did have a bearing on his next, probing words. “Contrary to popular belief, I do know how to treat a witch. Shall I … show you?”

Although he heard the innuendo in his own words, Hermione remained annoyingly oblivious. She smiled at him sweetly, like her heart was in her very smile. His heart throbbed annoyingly.

“I’ve known you were sweet for a while, Severus,” she said with a softly. “Others will see it too, once this war’s over.”

Thus ended his daily attempt at wooing her. He extended his hand and raised his increasingly-heavy which from the bed. “Alright, enough of this Gryffindor sentimentality. Let’s heal your feet, and then you will have no excuses to forego lessons. Come along.”
Chapter 37

Her mind was like a perfectly cool lake’s surface. The focus of Hermione’s mind was not unfocused, but also not focused. It was that perfect place between zoning out and intense thought. A place of perfect disconnect from the distractions Professor Snape had enchanted to go on around her. The made no impact, they simply were. All the while, she observed coolly the different probes from her friend and mentor as he tied to elicit some kind of reaction that could lead to deeper discovery in her mind.

They were there for minutes, hours, until Severus finally withdrew and cancelled the music and distractions that were going on around them.

”Hmmm,” Severus pondered her sat there. “Sufficient. I’ll report to the Headmaster.”

Hermione’s heart soared, and she sank into the chair beneath her in relief. Her shields descended, she could feel them now, but she didn’t care. Unlike Severus, it wasn’t an innate ability in her. She felt more comfortable without them. Still, disbelieving, she said mildly, “Really?”

He quirked a brow. “Have you not sufficiently blocked the Dark Lord since our last lesson? Did you not successfully block me the last few times? You are, as far as I’m concerned, a proficient Occlumens. You may converse with whomever you wish. However, don’t discount the fact that there are many ways to overhear conversations, and that others have not been trained as you have. You must not speak of our plan to anyone, regardless of your proficiency.”

“I know,” she smiled sadly. “I’m just glad to even say hello to the guys again. Now I just have to get through school.”

Hermione had been dreading her exams and what the end of them meant, worried for Severus and for her own babies. The exams were only two weeks away now, and every day was another round of stress.

“You have an appointment after this, do you not?” Severus asked politely, pouring her a cup of tea.

Hermione gave a small, hesitant smile. “Yes. It’s the last one before, well, the end, I guess. Last month I wasn’t sure … I didn’t want to know the genders. I just … it will make it so much more real. I want to know … know before this all happens.”

“And are you ready for the information now?” he prodded. “There is no shame in keeping the mystery.”

She sighed. “With what I’m going to do … I’d like to discuss names with him before it happens.”

Severus gave her a quiet look. “The names and the children, both, are to become reminders of your time with him, aren’t they?”

“I…I…” Tears prickled at her eyes. “Is that wrong of me?”

“Everything about this situation puts me ill-at-ease,” Severus told her. “However, as I’ve said before, the way you choose to cope is not something anyone can judge. I’ve done much worse to preserve a memory.”

To others, it would have been an acerbic condescension, but Hermione knew Severus was being comforting. It was working, too. If he’d simply said ‘no’ she wouldn’t have believed him, and he
knew that. If he’d said it was an innocent thing to do, she would have screamed. Instead, he understood that no matter whether it was something she should do, it was something she had to. Even a killer like Voldemort should have some say in the name of his children, shouldn’t he?

Hermione gave Severus a sad smile. “Thank you. For understanding.”

There was silence as they both contemplated over their tea. Hermione, thinking how difficult it would be to have such a conversation without tears, and Severus, pondering the psychological distress it might cause this witch to raise children not only whose father died, but who that father had had a part in naming. Helping her with her loss would be a challenge when this came to an end. He would be there, though, to help the witch he had grown so fond of.

“Would you like me to join you?” Severus finally drew his courage together to ask her. At her shocked face, he looked away. “I merely thought you might enjoy having someone to blubber over when you inevitably succumb to your hormones. If it is unnecessary—”

“Yes!” Hermione blurted. He regarded her lowly as she blushed brilliantly. “Yes, sorry. If you can, I’d love you to be there. Draco’s coming, obviously, but … I’d feel better if you were there.”

He chuckled. “Then it would be my honour.”

Hermione beamed up at him, completely pleased with his response. To Severus, it made his discomfort well worth it.

SSHGSSHGSSHG

“Uncle?” Draco quirked his brow as they entered the Hospital Wing. “I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“I offered to accompany Miss Granger,” he replied stiffly.

The seemed to have a silent conversation with their faces, a sign of their familiarity but one that made Hermione feel uncomfortable and left out. To her exceeding relief, Madame Pomphrey bustled in and cut the tension.

“On the bed, Miss Granger!” she moved her by the point of her elbow. “That’s right, just like last month. Raise your shirt from your stomach too.”

It was unnerving the way Severus stared. Draco always had averted his eyes during the appointments, either too embarrassed to stare at a pregnant lady or trying to preserve her modesty. Severus Snape didn’t flinch in his gaze, but watched intensely. Even when she raised her shirt to bare the very round belly, he didn’t avert his gaze but looked at her large belly with an unfathomable expression.

“Severus, you’re making her heart rate spike,” Madame Pomphrey chastised the Potions Master, making Draco cough out a chuckle. “Oh, none of the Mister Malfoy. I simply can’t check her blood pressure if you’re going to make it jump up like that.”

He quirked a brow at her, but politely averted his gaze from her belly. Sure enough, her heart rate resumed a semi-stable rhythm and she was soon thoroughly checked over and declared as healthy as the month before.

“Your body is showing too much strain for my liking,” Madame Pomphrey said matter-of-factly. “You need to keep up proper nutrition and sleep, especially these last few months if you don’t want them coming too early. And try to avoid stress. You are only 24 weeks along, and I need you to
make it another month and a half AT LEAST, understood? Now, the children –“

Hermione gave a sad smile. “Can I know their genders?”

Madame Pomphrey beamed. “I was wondering when you would ask, Miss Granger. Do you want to see them first?”

Hermione nodded.

With a complicated wand motion and a muttered spell, the see-through stomach was once again on display with her much larger babies in full view. They looked so small and fragile, Hermione just wanted to feed them like Mrs. Weasley to get some meat on their bones. Madame Pomphrey took her folder in hand and made some notes, took some measurements, and then patted her stomach fondly.

“Congratulations, Miss Granger,” Madame Pomphrey smiled. “You are carrying two identical, healthy, baby girls.”

Such a simply phrase, but Hermione felt every single tear she’d ever withheld come over her eyelids and spill down her face. Baby girls. She was going to have baby girls.

Severus took her hand in comfort while Draco offered her a handkerchief, not knowing what else to do while she was still uncovered for Madame Pomphrey. Hermione hiccupped a laugh at his hesitant behaviour. After all the times he’d hugged her, she’d think a little bit of skin wouldn’t deter him. Still she accepted the handkerchief and tried to stop the tears.

“I’ll just go and update the files. They’re still a little small, but if you make sure you’re eating whenever you’re hungry and taking your vitamin potions, that’s just fine. Congratulations.”

Madame Pomphrey patted her hand before bustling back to her office, leaving her with her pre-designated godfather and Severus.

Severus attempted to distract her form her tears, a wiser strategy than his usual ‘stop your sniffling’ approach. “What female names have you considered?”

Hermione glared good-naturedly, although she thought the effect would be less with her eyes red-rimmed and moist. “You shouldn’t assume I make lists for everything, you know.”

“It was an educated guess,” Snape smirked.

“I-I don’t really know,” Hermione replied, her voice soft as she tried to keep it from cracking with her tight throat. “I have nearly ten names I liked for each gender, and five pairings for fraternal twins. None of them sound better than the others.”

Severus chuckled. “You never did have the ability to pare down your assignments, did you? Promise me they won’t end up like Dumbledore with five names apiece. No child deserves that.”

Hermione and Draco both chuckled.

“If you do, I’ll just keep calling them blueberries,” Draco offered, earning a light smack from Hermione. “Hey, it was accurate!”

“Hmmm,” Severus placed a hand on Hermione’s belly. It felt warm and comforting, making her sigh in contentment. Severus looked at her with a strange expression, and she found her breath catching. “Are you thinking muggle or wizard for the names?”
She blushed. “Both? Something that works here and there would be very nice.”

“I’m sure you’ll choose wisely,” Severus interjected. Then his face went pensive, and Hermione saw his forehead crease in despondent thought. “You’re fortunate, Miss Granger. Sons are often harder to separate from their legacies in the wizarding world; your daughters may be accepted, one day.”

That line brought the group back to solemn reality. As happy as they were to disconnect the happy news from him, they all knew that the dark shadow of Voldemort would overshadow their lives.

Hermione nodded though, accepting his comfort. “Most Purebloods want sons, though, right?”

They both caught on to the meaning of her words and flinched. Draco spoke first, his voice tense, “You think …”

“No,” Severus interjected firmly. “The Dark Lord will not care. While those in his circle discriminate due to legalities, he has never had a problem with women if they have power. As his daughters, their power would never be in question.”

“He wants them,” she told them with a hesitant voice. “He … he’s really protective of them. He talks to them like a father, already. It’s so … real. I promise I didn’t ask because I thought he’d hurt them …”

Severus’ eyes darkened and he shot a look to Draco. “Draco, step out. I need to discuss something with Miss Granger.”

There was a brief moment where Draco looked to Hermione for her nod of acceptance, then he about-faced towards the door. When he’d stepped outside, Severus threw up privacy wards and turned to Hermione.

“Hermione,” he offered an appraising eye, but a dejected slump, “are you second-guessing our current course?”

“No! Of course not!” Hermione grabbed the hand on her belly. Severus practically jumped, having forgotten it was there. “I’m not going to go back on my word, Severus. I wouldn’t do that!”

“Then what?” He pulled back his hand and folded it with the other across his lap. “You are crying.”

Hermione shook her head. “I-I’m HORMONAL!! I’m allowed to cry. It-It’s the waiting. Him being alive but knowing he’s going to be killed … I’m-m going to be fussing over everything unt-til this is over.”

Severus nodded. “From my perspective, you are treating him as one treats a terminally-ill loved one. Your emotional response is a kind of early mourning, to help cope when the trauma occurs. My question is whether any of this response is from guilt that may, one day, prove the flaw in our machinations.”

Hermione paused. Of course she felt guilty, but his words made her wonder why. From the beginning, her and the resident Dark Lord had an understanding of where they stood. She was allied with Harry, the one he would do anything to kill just to ensure his own immortality. He … he wanted to rule the world. To start a monarchy, a legacy. A world where magic was the most important quality. He simply couldn’t see how it wasn’t.

Yet … they’d grown close. They could hurt each other physically, yet she hadn’t moved to stab
him or kill him in his sleep. He knew she’d raise his children on her side, and yet he promised not to take them from her. They’d developed a sort of conditional trust, like honour among thieves only with warriors. Trust was what made it hard, she realized. She trusted him to care for her, and he … who knew if he trusted her the same way. If he did, should she feel guilty?

“If I did feel guilty, but still went through with it, would the guilt ever go away?” Hermione asked tentatively.

Snape’s eyes were contemplative, distant. Like he was remembering. “There will come a time when you accept it. You may regret it, you may even occasionally relive it, but the guilt does eventually fade into the past where it belongs.”

That was a very good answer, clearly from experience. Hermione simply nodded.

That night she approached Voldemort more tentatively than normal. He quirked a brow, but let her get the words out without prompting. She sat to the side of his chair and took his hand into hers.

“We’re having girls.”

Girls. At those words he had immediately taken her into his arms and proceeded to pleasure her and deny her only to shatter the earth around her. In just two weeks, she wouldn’t feel his lovemaking again, and she savoured his intense, visceral reaction to the joy she brought him.

Sated, naked, and with his arms wrapped around her stomach, Hermione sighed. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

“Why would I not be?” He kissed her neck, sending shivers down her spine and tingling through her entire nervous system. “You believe I wanted sons? I am surrounded by bratty boys and subordinate males every day. My daughters … my girls … they will be better than them all. I am undeniably pleased to be having twin girls, my very own pair of little princesses.”

There was so much emotion there that Hermione wondered if something had happened to make that phrase so emotional. Did he always want a little girl one day? Hermione knew better than to ask, to pry, but oh how she wanted to understand the deep feeling behind that phrase.

“What should we name them?” Hermione asked as casually as she could, but inside she was begging. “Do you have any favourites?”

“I don’t want either of them to regret the names we pick. They must not have a connotation to either of our sides, to anyone we have ever known.” He paused. “This is as important to you as it is to me, am I correct?”

She nodded mutely.

“I’m glad,” he murmured in Hermione’s ear, bestowing the lightest of kisses upon it. “What type of names are you thinking of?”

They discussed names well into the night, Nagini came and wrapped gently around them as they spoke, and eventually they had a small list. Satisfied with their work, Hermione kissed him with all the fervour of her impending goodbye and then pulled him close so they could sleep.
Chapter 38

Everything was prepared. She’d written letters to her parents and even Malfoy after Snape had assured her that he could keep his thoughts to himself. While saddened that she couldn’t do the same for Harry and Ron, she knew Dumbledore would tell them something about her to appease them.

Severus had already taken her things for transport to the prison. Books for reading, study materials for her last few NEWTS, paper and ink for letters … And her crochet supplies. She’d decided that if she were going to have endless hours that needed filling, she would gift her little girls with handmade blankets, hats, booties, and whatever else she could finish before they were born. When she’d shared that hope with Severus, he’d gone out and retrieved a veritable chest of soft yarns. He’d even included a book on crafting magics that she could use to rune the blankets when she was allowed to leave the prison.

All that was left was her exams.

Hermione was as prepared as she would ever be.

SSHGSSHGSSHG

“Quills down!” Professor Vector called to the hall. “That concludes this exam. If you didn’t finish, condolences; I hope all your other answers were correct.”

Exams were stressful, but normally Hermione could relax afterwards. Instead, the flight of the parchment towards the front of the room signified the end of the simple school problems and the beginning of the end of a passage of her life. Her back tensed as she left the school door, only to come across her friends.

“She’s out and alive!” Ginny wrapped her arms around Hermione and squeezed delicately. “Your exams are done! Are you feeling okay?”

“Just fine,” Hermione said with a tired smile. “I wish I had time for a nap.”

They shared with each other about their final exams, the boys gaped as she told them that she’d taken a few NEWTS instead of sixth year exams, and finally, the bells tolled in the tower.

“I’m sorry, guys, but I have to go.” She pulled them all in for a hug, kissing the boys on the cheek.

“Hermione, where’re you going?” Harry asked worriedly. “We were going to have a big party in the common room. You’re still a Gryffindor, really.”

There was nothing but a smile that she could offer them in return. “I’m sorry, Harry, but I can’t go. The Headmaster wanted to talk to be about next year. But don’t worry, you’ll see me soon.”

“If she wasn’t, she’d be coming with us.”

Malfoy and his friends swooped in, his blonde hair gleaming pompously but his sneer less than it normally was in Harry’s presence. If anything, he wasn’t looking at Harry. He was instead looking right at her with a look of concern.

He quirked a brow, hiding his intent. “Skipping on the Slytherin party too, Granger? Well, we won’t get in your way. But I’ve been informed you’re spending the summer holidays with my
family. You won’t mind a little get together then, would you?”

Draco Malfoy. She offered him a small smile, but it was half-hearted. “I certainly wouldn’t mind. But really, everyone, I have to go. Just go enjoy the end of the year. Don’t you worry about me.”

Goodbyes said, she made her way down to the side-courtyard just above the dungeons. Severus was there, disguised as the Headmaster himself with his permission. It was necessary and they both agreed on that. No one wanted Severus to end up dead because someone told Voldemort he was the one who’d taken her from the school.

When he saw her, he barely managed a smile which still was completely wrong upon the aged face.

“Miss Granger,” he greeted. “Are you prepared?”

“Yes, of course,” she laughed. They began walking down and Hermione tried to distract herself from her dread by giving her companion an amused look. “So, you’re wearing colours today.”

Severus gave her a scathing look that looked completely wrong with Dumbledore’s face. It actually got a short guffaw from her. “The Headmaster’s taste is appalling. And I smell like an old man.”

That sent her into tittering giggles. “How long do you have until you turn back?”

He checked his pocketwatch, the only remnant of his former apparel.

“Thirty minutes,” he replied, shooting her an amused look. “You took a long time to waddle down the corridor.”

“I have leg cramps!” she cried in outrage. “You try walking with two cantaloupes in your stomach!”

Severus had thankfully had Hagrid hitch up an adult thestral to carry her into the forest. Severus may make fun of her speed and even smirked at her swollen feet, but he knew she wouldn’t be able to walk the whole way past the wards in the forest. If the thestral had been less sturdily built she would have felt much worse about making it carry her heavy body to the border, but the thestral didn’t seem too burdened by her as it trotted along. Severus led it and her through the paths of the forest with care that Hermione had become accustomed to until they finally crossed the invisible boundary of Hogwarts.

Her magic tingled in discomfort, but only minimally as they passed through the wards. Like a slight itch in her brain. It wasn’t pulling her back, it wasn’t making her anxious, but it was discomfiting. Finally, a fair distance from the edges of the protections, Severus stopped and lifted her from the back of the black beast. His face had changed back at that point, leaving him in the bright, twinkling blue robes. If only she’d had it in her to laugh.

“Thank you,” she murmured as he set her on the ground. His gentle side still sometimes stopped her in place, but she was starting to see it more and more. “This is it?”

“It is.”

He took a moment, assessing her, before he pulled the vial from his robe to present it to her.

“This, at least, I can promise is safe for your children,” Severus said with a forcibly calm façade. “You have my word that I will do everything I can to have you released before they are born so we can put them through a restorative regimen.”
She gave him a smile. “You’ve already promised to help me with them if they don’t have magic, and then if they do. Stop feeling guilty. It’s out of our hands now.”

They both took a moment to ponder everything before Severus took a deep calming breath.

“Are you prepared?”

Prepared to betray him? She’d never be. But as she cuddled her belly, stroking it with her deepest wishes in her heart, she accepted the vial. For the girls. For Harry. For Malfoy. For Severus. For the future.

“See you on the other side?”

Severus gave her a look of absolute sadness. “You needn’t do this. There is still an opportunity to turn away.”

He was blaming himself for this and Hermione knew it. She could sense it in the feeling of his magic, she could see it in his eyes. But there was no comfort she could give him besides to trust him to take care of her, and to hope her children came out alright. But still ….

“There were never any guarantees,” she said with a sad smile. “But … can I have a hug? Before?”

She’d asked this before – not often because it tended to make Severus morose and stiff – but Hermione needed that last reassurance. Severus, in a rare moment of insight, moved closer to her held her cheeks in his hands to look into her eyes. It felt oddly intimate, more intimate than anything she’d experienced with him before and more intimate than the hug she’d requested.

“I will do everything I can,” he promised, his eyes blazing. “Every provision has been made for you, and if anything happens I … I want you to know you can ask for me. Even if I can’t come, I will send someone in my stead to tend you.”

Then he wrapped her delicately in a hug, softer than he wanted because of her prominent baby-housing but also because of his own reticence to get involved. Still, one thing was bursting from his throat with little hope of him stopping it. Instead, he focused on telling her what she needed to hear.

“You’re doing the right thing.”

She gulped, but managed a breathy, “Thank you. Thank you.”

“It is I who should thank you,” he murmured. “God knows if the Headmaster would have carried out his threat, but with the plans finalized …” The rest left unsaid. With the plans set, he needed his spy less than ever before. Especially with his godson now a set member of the ranks and fellow double agent. If Snape wasn’t going to follow orders, what use did Dumbledore have for him? And if he did hold it over Severus until the last minute, what made them think there would be time for him to be released before he died?

“This isn’t just because of you,” Hermione pulled away from his chest to pierce him with her fierce amber eyes. “It’s for everyone. For them.”

When she put her hand on her stomach, Severus lost some of his composure. He leaned over and pressed a delicate kiss to her forehead.

Hermione’s heart stuttered in her chest. The comfort she sought from the Potions Master was a set fixture in her life, but she knew – knew – that this was different. And from the look on Severus’
face when he observed her shock, the shame that crossed his features and his eyes like a shadow, he knew it too. A profound sadness filled her chest as she wondered whether, when this was over, she could ever return the affection in his eyes or whether she would disappoint him.

Unspoken, they both seemed to agree that now was not the time to talk about it. Severus pulled the vial from his pocket, its violet hue dancing through its complex mixture and telling of its hypnotic, knock-out properties.

“Allow me to help you sit.” He provided her the additional support as she lowered herself to the ground carefully, her legs cramping the very moment she was on the grassy carpet. “This may take a moment to absorb. Once you drink, I will help you lie back so you need not fall. The potion itself will wear off within a few hours, but your body may use the induced rest to keep you asleep awhile longer, especially since we are unaware of the effects of being in Nurmengrad as of yet. I have a midwife staying with you once you arrive, and she will be there regularly during the next month or so. If anything goes wrong, she will be able to help.”

Hermione nodded seriously and took the vial from his hand. He stopped her before she continued, his face severe.

“I was only ordered to get you there,” Severus said seriously. “If you contact me at any point having changed your mind, I will do everything I can to get you out.”

The gesture was sweet, but Hermione knew what was at stake and how Severus would suffer if she ever did that. There would be no change of mind. She unstopped it and lifted the purple concoction to Severus.

“Cheers.”

Her prison room was … nice. It was small, but it had a bookshelf packed with books from Severus’ shelves and books for the baby, there were journals and muggle pens for her notes, and there was always a bowl of snacks sitting on her bedside table. It was kind of cozy, and she could walk around it some.

Hermione had a guard who came in to talk to her every now and again when she was bored. Her name was Emma and she was kind, but very dry. She only came in to see how she was doing, deliver her meals, and then sometimes to calm her down when she cried. Hermione never told her about her situation or why she was there, and from what Emma had told her she had very little clue as to the true reason she was there either.

Every now and again, Hermione was seen to by a midwife but it was always clinical and done quite quickly. She seemed … afraid, not usually of her but of being in the same building as Grindelwald and eager to leave whenever she arrived. Hermione understood. Grindelwald was the floor beneath her – exactly the floor below.

Her big comforts were the children resting inside of her. Among the books Severus had left her were works of muggle fictions, and she took great comfort in reading them to her unborn babies. They kicked happily as she read them The Little Prince, and only acted up a little while when she read them the story of Frankenstein. Apparently he was a C.S. Lewis fan, or maybe he thought that would be good for her, because she read the entire Chronicles of Narnia to her oversized belly before beginning on any of the others.
The Problem of Pain made her cry. Warm, cathartic tears. The religious language didn’t always appeal to her, but the man’s logic and hope broke her heart. Then came the words. “The creature’s illusion of sufficiency must, for the creature’s sake, be shattered […] And this illusion of sufficiency may be at its strongest in some very honest, kindly, and temperate people, and on such people, therefore, misfortune must fall.”

The words crushed her already broken heart. She had seen Voldemort as good enough to her to justify her own heart, but she knew better. It was sufficient, not good. It was enough to earn her pity and in that regard her feelings, but that wasn’t enough. If it was, she wouldn’t be here.

“Love may forgive all infirmities and love still in spite of them: but Love cannot cease to will their removal.” Another quote from the book, and it just reaffirmed the feelings she already knew. She was unable to really write to anyone, only occasionally receiving letters from Severus, that the books were her only companions in her prison.

Every few days, she fell asleep while reading and woke clutching the book to her chest.

She prayed it would end soon.
next. Fools. They would not escape his fury. If he cared for Miss Granger the way Severus suspected, every Death Eater would be mobilized to find her. All would fail, and all would be punished equally.

There was nothing more he could do but apparate back to the dog’s hovel for a pain potion and a conference with the Order.

He limped into the ancient house and headed straight to the Potions room, flinching away from the loud voices of the dining room. There was nothing more unappealing than dealing with that lot while in pain, and especially knowing what the discussion was centered around: their pregnant witch-bait in Nurmengrad.

There was a minute or two to himself after downing the only pain potion that wouldn’t leave him too groggy for the meeting. A few minutes where he could gather his thoughts about the turn of events.

He could still see Hermione Granger taking his potion on the dewy grass of the meadow, her eyes fluttering closed as she slowly lost consciousness and slipped under. Her eyes were trusting, understanding, and warm whenever she looked at him. Even when the tell-tale haze entered her face, a small smile grazed her lips as she looked up to him.

His breath shuddered, his emotions too much for even his shields. Severus had used a portkey to take them to Nurmengrad, but without magic he had needed to carry the witch through the prison. He refused to let the guards handle her, only giving up on the exertion when a stretcher was offered for her transport. Even then, he stood vigil next to her as long as he could. He checked on her guard, Miss Daniels, and wished he could think of someone better to replace the witch. Surely she wasn’t skilled enough, surely something would happen to Hermione and he would be to blame for trusting the twig of a witch.

But he had no choice, as he never did. All he could do, he did; he had left her a letter on her side table, unpacked the maternity clothes he had procured, put the last few books he could onto her shelves, and tucked the blanket over her one more time.

Her lying there, on a simply small mattress in a prison cell, still lingered in his brain. Hermione Granger did not belong there; Severus would not let her remain.

His mind once again focused and the pain potion beginning to work, he was finally prepared to go speak with the Order.

Their loud discussion had been muted since he walked past – presumably they had started talking about topics unsuitable for the tiny ears of the Weasley brood – but he was not deterred. He walked into the room and was immediately put upon by the twinkling Albus Dumbledore.

“Severus, how was Tom?”

Snape sneered. “Murderous. Miss Granger is quite important to him as are the heirs she carries. I will be shocked if every last one of his allies is not mobilized to find her by the end of the night.

“He has threatened to kill me if the girl is not found by the birth of his children.” He leaned against the wall impassively, keeping himself cold and aloof. “He will keep this promise, Headmaster; I suggest we get this offensive ready as soon as possible if you wish to avoid the untimely death of your spy.”

Everyone seemed to mute at his mention of his death, but he wasn’t a fool enough to believe they
would mourn him.

“Of course, time is of the essence,” Dumbledore agreed. “Miss Granger has given us a wonderful opportunity to end this before it escalates further, and we should use it fully.”

His plan was still slow-moving and would take weeks to fully mobilize. Remembering the image of Hermione drugged asleep in Nurmengard, he silently prayed her children would hold on to be born until she was free and in Mungo’s.
Chapter 39

There, Hermione looked at her creations with no uncertain satisfaction. Finally, she had two completed baby blankets for the little ones. It was a little unbelievable how long it had taken, but with wrist cramps and the days she just didn’t do anything with them, three weeks for two blankets seemed pretty speedy.

And they were so cute! She’d made them different from each other in just a reversed kind of way. One had a white center with a thick green trim, the other with a green center and a thick white trim. Each had a set of multicoloured little tassels that she could already picture the twins chewing on. The baby names were stitched on the blankets themselves as she had assigned them, in a pretty golden yarn. A deliberate nod to herself even as the green spoke of their father.

There was a confident rapping on the door. “Come in!”

Emma’s mousy head popped in with a smile. “Mail for you!”

The sealed parchment was in her hand so quickly she worried about giving Emma a cut before she got distracted by the familiar scrawl and the words inside the seal. Severus had written her once more, informing her of the state of the nation.

“Oooh, you finished!” Emma plucked the blanket from its place on the chest and held it up. It was a little big, sixty inches on both sides, but she wanted the baby to grow up with it a little before she replaced it. “Oh, these are darling. Just imagine wrapping the girls up in these one day, seeing them snuggled up in something you made them special. It makes the heart warm, doesn’t it?”

It really did, Hermione agreed. She let the woman coo while she read, her heart losing its warmth as steadily as the words processed in her mind.

Miss Granger,

Final preparations are underway. Potter has arrived at Grimmauld Place and is receiving last-minute tutoring. Dumbledore has said that Potter will be brought to you, there in Nurmengard, to comfort you. I would not believe him. He is sending Potter to you with the Sword of Gryffindor, and has been having the boy practice with it these past few days. I have no doubt that Dumbledore believes the Dark Lord will find his way to you and he is prepared to have Potter kill him without magic in this gruesome manner. Be prepared.

Draco is still in good health. While Dumbledore does still live, contrary to orders, we allowed him to present information on the healer who has been attending you these past few weeks in exchange for his life. The Healer, of course, cannot provide your location but the Dark Lord has been comforted by the regular viewing of her memories of you. I apologize for this invasion of privacy, but Draco’s compliance in this matter as well as your regard for him have kept my godson alive. I cannot apologize for that.

Fear not, the healer has not been harmed and will be able to return to you.

As I write, I’m preparing for my final orders. In the next day or two I will give the Dark Lord a location where he’ll believe he can find you. You may think he will not come, or that he will not bring his Inner Circle with him. You would be wrong. He has been ruthless in hunting for you; when he learns of the location of the Order Camp near your supposed location, he will do what he can to destroy those hiding you from him. This will come to a head soon.
If the battle we predict occurs, it may last anywhere between a day to a few weeks. The Ministry will not mobilize to help the Order, nor will it call upon allies for the Order. It will be individuals against individuals.

I tell you this not to worry you, but in case you do not hear from me again. There is a chance I will die in the coming conflict, and I want to reassure you that one way or another, you will be free soon. Either we win and you are released, or ... we both know the Dark Lord will find you should we fail. I’ve ensured it.

Just a while longer, lioness.

Yours, (this word was scrawled terribly, almost like he’d been struck while writing it)

Severus Snape

Droplets thudded against the parchment in her hand, it shaking as she tried to hold back those tears. Her own shaking had woken up the children in her belly and they kicked at her, just adding to the discomfort. She could hold back her croaking sobs.

“Hey, hey, you okay?” Emma was now sat on the yarn chest, holding her arm in comfort. “Hey, talk to me.”

She shook her head. “It’s starting. I’m here, and it’s starting.”

Emma knew there was nothing she could do and just sat by the weeping witch, watching as the peaceful witch once again descended into an insidious anxiety. Finally, Emma had to give up in order to check on the rest of the prison. With one final pat of the shoulder, she left the girl to her grief.

With tears and sobs, Hermione was stuck in her head. Everything was so ... awful. Her midwife was regularly interrogated, Draco and Severus – the entire Order – were in danger, and she was stuck where she was.

The sound of her sobs were so loud she could hear the clunking of rock above her head. Not until she heard a heavily accented voice whisper down to her, “All right there, girl?”

She just about jumped. It took her eyes several blinks to clear enough to see the blue eyes looking down at her from a hole above. It was a small hole, looking like it came through four layers of rock and wood. Was that ...?

“Grindelwald?”

The eyes squeezed together in mirth. “I like knowing the world has not forgotten me yet.”

Hermione nodded. “No one has. Your name is legend, nearly as popular as the man who defeated you.”

The man seemed to get comfortable, or at least his partial face shifted. Maybe she’d passed some sort of test and was interesting enough to talk to. With a few grunts at his new position, the conversation could continue.

“It is good to hear, good to hear, hexe. Now tell me ... How is Albus Dumbledore?”

“He is dying,” her voice was soft. “A dark curse on his hand. He has a few months left, at most.”
The other wizard’s eyes turned sharp. “Albus fell to a curse?”

Hermione nodded, waiting for the expression of glee that would come to the old nemesis’ face. It never came. If anything, Grindelwald looked … sad.

“Do you think the old man will visit you?” he asked. Hermione shook her head. “But he locked you in here, yes?”

“For my own sake.”

“Unglaublich,” the man muttered in his home tongue. “What did you do?”

Weeks of silence, weeks of not being able to tell Emma what had happened or to have a sympathetic ear, and her defenses were down. The tears poured again, and she sobbed into her hands. Worse, this man was the predecessor for the man whose children rested inside her. He was probably the reason Tom Riddle became Voldemort.


“Sorry.”

He just huffed through the whole. “Shall I guess, then? It was something dark.”

“No,” Hermione sobbed. “Someone dark.”

There was a silence. Then a light-hearted laugh.

“You would not be the first. Indulge an old man, will you? I haven’t had a good story in too many years, and whatever brought you here must be an interesting one, hexe. Tell me what happened.”

His elegant hands ran along the wooden beams, the tippy-tops of each of the cribs. He still couldn’t do it without feeling, without those too many emotions she had left him with. Even now his hands shook in repressed anger, repressed loss.

Weeks. It had been weeks since Hermione Granger had left him. She had known what was happened, he knew she did. That was why she’d asked for them to name the children, why she’d seduced him into one last love-making. Hermione Granger had planned to betray him, to take the children and hide.

As a Dark Lord, he had every right to be angry at the witch. He wanted to throttle her, to strap her to the back of his throne and strike at her back like a disobedient little slave. To make her naked, bend her over the edge of the bed and ----

His fists clenched. And that was the problem with whatever anger he mustered against the girl; it never lasted. As angry as he was, all he wanted was her back. He wanted to shake her, but he didn’t want to truly harm her. He wanted her back in these rooms, her belly still filled and growing under his hand, her little actions there whenever he looked telling him what a guilty pleasure he was to her. He wanted to be there when his children were born and place them there, right in these cribs.

A knock interrupted his melancholy.

“What?!” He roared at the door.

“My Lord, the spy is here with news.”
He moved quickly, apparating directly to the ballroom where Severus Snape was kneeling prostrate before his throne.

“What news have you, Severus?” Voldemort hissed. “I told you not to return until you had found her.”

“I have, my Lord,” Severus swore, his head still bowed. “The old man told me where Miss Granger could be found at last.”

He was in front of Severus in a moment, face in his hands to force it upwards for meeting the spy’s black eyes. “Show me. Legilimens!”

Dumbledore was bent over a map with a few trusted advisors, Severus included. Groups were represented by, oddly enough, candy, but Severus’ knowledge of what they represented wasn’t necessary since the final pile of caramels were being added to the far side of Romania.

“Why are you gathering the Order forces in Romania, or all places?” Severus asked the Headmaster. “There is no reason for this. The threat it here.”

“It is more important to have them there to deter Tom,” the old man twinkled.

Severus glared. “From what? I swear old man, you are holding too many secrets.”

Dumbledore seemed to consider Severus’ concerns, before nodding. “Very well. As you know, the old magics are exceptionally rare.”

“Yes …”

“There are very few places to contain anyone of such power.”

…… “The girl. You’re holding the girl with Grindelwald. You’re putting all our allies between the Dark Lord and his goal.”

“He will come for her,” Dumbledore confirmed. “When he does, there will be us and the Black Sea between them. We’ll finish this.”

Voldemort thrust his spy’s face from him and started pacing, thinking. Dumbledore wanted a fight, did he? That’s why he took the girl, convinced her to leave him – Dumbledore wanted to draw him from England and kill him. Well, he would be expecting him to be alone, to be no match for the small collection of riffraff he’d gathered.

“Your arm, Severus. We’ll give the old fool what he wants. On my terms.”

“Dumbledore has challenged me!” Voldemort cried. “Well, if he thinks I will cower before him he is wrong! We will slither through the grass and into their camps, we will bite their ankles before their forces even wake from their beds! The old fool will die!”

“Things are coming to the head,” Dumbledore stood as the head of the Black table, a picture of wizened authority. But it wasn’t the Order he was speaking to – the Order was already gone – but the children. Harry was there with Ron and Ginny. Gryffindors as well who want to fight, friends
of Hermione who wanted to help her. And then Severus was there, leaning against the wall. “Voldemort will be at the Romanian coast within the week. I would not have any of you there for the battle, but there is something I want to trust all of you with.”

“What is it, Headmaster?” Ginny asked, naively.

He gave them all a sad smile. “As you know, Miss Granger is going to be where Voldemort goes first. I think she would feel better if she were protected by her friends.”

“But … that’s in the prison!” Neville interjected. “How can we protect her there?”

Severus saw his old hands, one rotting away even quicker than before, fold in front of him. “Take away a man’s magic and all that is left is the body. You will not need to fear the killing curse while you are with him in those walls to retrieve her. Holding him off from her long enough for us to arrive is all I need from you.”

Severus knew that wasn’t true from the seriousness he was approaching this with. He wouldn’t have Potter face the Dark Lord without magic, nor would the Dark Lord enter any place that would strip him of his power. Something, something was at work. He just didn’t know what.
The voice of her new prison pal came down every day now, usually for an hour apiece. There must be something wrong with her to find companionship in a second dark wizard, but besides Emma there was no one else. At least with Grindelwald she was mildly disturbed by him. He was eloquent and intelligent, but appeared psychotic. His face would spasm randomly into the most unpleasant expressions before settling back into his regular neutral.

But then there were the times he spoke in German. Hermione could never tell what he said, but if it was longer than a single phrase it was usually an angry monologue that she couldn’t help but think was nefarious in purpose. It always sounded murderous, or insulting, or *something*. He would sneer and spit on the ground, even snarl if she asked for him to tell her what he meant in English.

This was especially when she mentioned her hopes for the future, which had been growing for the last little while.

“*The world is for men, hexe,*” the old wizard said. “There is little work for you with two *kinder* about your ankles. How will you live?”

“I’ve been offered a shop in Diagon Alley,” Hermione admitted. “Ollivander – the wand maker? – he’s been teaching me his craft.”

He went from calm and sympathetic to angry violent in the time it took her to blink. German curses and angry words she couldn’t understand came raining down on her. Their conversation was abruptly ended; echoes of gruff voices came from above and the stone in the roof was replaced. His shouts had clearly attracted the guards.

Then from outside the door and down the hall, Hermione heard a familiar shriek.

“Wa-What?” She couldn’t believe what she heard. Her arms shook as she lifted her heavy body from the bed and headed towards the door of her cell to open the flap on the door. “Ron?”

“Mione?” a mix of red, black, and brown hair came around the corner and jumped at the sight of her through the cell door. “Mione! You’re okay!”

“Ron? Harry?” Just seeing her two friends brought tears to her eyes. Her children kicked around painfully in her belly, and she wished she pulled fruitlessly at the door handle to try and go to her friends. “Where’s the guard?”

Ginny looked upward warily. “She said, er, *he* was acting up. But we were worried, we couldn’t just wait where she left us.”

Hermione resented that her guard had to leave just as her friends arrived. Mentally cursing Grindelwald for choosing right then to lose his psychotic marbles, Hermione focused on her friends.

“What are you all doing here?” she asked. “How did you even know where I was?”

Harry now, coming forward, answered. “Dumbledore told us everything. He wanted us to come guard you.”

“Guard me?” She glared through the bars. “Just say it—Voldemort’s coming for me tonight, isn’t he? The battle’s starting. Why would you even TRY to be here when you know he’s coming?”
The Neville and Harry looked at their feet. Ron scratched the back of his neck. Ginny just ran forward and grabbed her hands where they rested on the bars. “Don’t worry, we’re just all getting into place. We’ll be here for a week if You-Know-Who acts like we think. We might not even be here when he comes. Think of it as just us visiting our friend.”

Hermione took her hands and relished in the shared warmth from the girl. It had been so long … Emma was nice, but she hadn’t touched the woman. Emma occasionally touched her – while she was crying she’d touch her arm, when she went to the showers she’d help lift her and get her into the spray – but she never returned it. It felt wrong to bring someone else in that hadn’t been there before, especially if she didn’t know why she was there. But Ginny just offering her hands and being able to touch her in return made tears come to her eyes.

“Umm, you okay?” Ron mumbled from the side. Harry whacked him upside the head. “What? She’s crying!”

“It’s just hormones, Ron,” she dismissed him with a watery smile. “Well, it’s also really, REALLY good to see you all. I missed you all so much … I just wish I could hug you all!”

It wasn’t a good idea to bring up the literal prison cell door between them, as it served to make it more awkward. Still, they managed a stilted conversation about their summers, about what they were doing so far. She learned that they’d all gathered at Grimmauld Place once again, that the adults in the Order were all stationed around the edges of the sea she was surrounded by, patrolling and communicating via protean charms and Patronuses to catch Voldemort when he came, and that Ollivander was still okay. She asked about Snape, with incredulous looks all around, but was told they hadn’t heard anything from him.

When her guard finally returned, she was tired from standing and her feet had swollen if the heat pulsing from them was any indication. But when the cell was unlocked, she still let herself be carried forward and into a giant group hug with her best friends. She sagged into their warm embraces and let her tears freely flow down her cheeks.

Harry stroked her hair like he did when she cried, Ron tried to make her smile by poking the corner of her mouth, and Ginny and Neville just hugged her with their warmth and kindness and love.

Ron tried to lighten the mood with a joke when his finger wasn’t working. “So, what’s there to do around here?”

Dumbledore was a fool.

Tents of his followers, allies, and minions dotted the shore in formations but the wards around them were minimal. They weren’t looking to keep him out, but the little sensory wards would let them know if he or his followers arrived. They would be easy enough to disable.

No, the reason Dumbledore had set up a tower in the middle of the camp as his own temporary dwelling that was a solid several feet taller than the wards he’d set up. The old fool knew he could fly, knew he could sense the wards he’d placed. Even more than that, the tower erected was glowing brightly against the gloom. The other tents and campsite had small fires, at most, but the Headmaster had adorned his parapet with glowing white lights as thought he were hanging Christmas lights. The Headmaster was inviting him for tea.

His forces were waiting for him. To the east he had stationed the werewolves, to the west were his lower Death Eaters each with one of his Inner Circle for him to signal. The rest of his Inner Circle were waiting a ways away for the signature burning on their forearms to call them into battle.
around him. Did he delay the fight to accept the invitation – risking the initiative in battle should he alert his followers – or did he initiate the surprise attack?

He leapt.

Through the air, everything whipping around him and biting his skin with the chill of the night. Revenge was coming to Dumbledore this night. He had taken Hermione from him, hidden his children, banished them to the middle of a desolate sea.

Still, when he landed through the opening Dumbledore had clearly left for him, he hesitated. The old man was sat there in an old camping chair, wand extended gingerly in his hands as if it were an offering.

“You should not have invited me tonight, you fool,” Voldemort hissed. “Do you wish to die?”

“Yes.”

The words struck him in the chest as the blue-eyed Headmaster’s gaze met his with an unfathomable look. It scared him. The look of men who were so unafraid of Death coming for them.

Dumbledore moved, making his wand twitch, but he only pulled up the sleeve on his robe to reveal the effects of his long-standing curse moving its way higher and higher. Dead and grey, his hand a forearm were dead weight now for the Headmaster.

“Does it hurt, old man?” Voldemort hissed maliciously. The man wasn’t reacting how he expected, igniting his fury even more. “Perhaps you understand the pain you’ve caused, then.”

“I understand your anger, Tom,” Dumbledore told him baldly, “but before you kill me, would you begrudge a chance to tell one, final story?”

His eyes narrowed. “You left yourself open to … regale me with more of your morals?”

“No, none of that,” Dumbledore chuckled sadly. “No, this is the story of a wand and its two brothers, a stone and a cloak.”

His breath caught. The Tale of Three Brothers.

“They once belonged to powerful if misguided wizards,” the old man began, sitting back. “To be able to create an invisibility cloak that has not faded to this day is impressive enough. The ability to call back the dead, or at least as we recall them, must be lauded as genius. A wand that is as unbeatable as its owners are fallible.”

With a movement of his still functioning hand, Voldemort’s attention was drawn back to the wand in the wizard’s hand. Definitely not an Ollivander wand, he knew, but could it truly be … ?

“This wand has quite the tragic history,” Dumbledore admitted his own wand’s power freely, yet didn’t hold it up but let it sink in his hand as if it weighed a thousand pounds. “The original owner died, of course, at the hand of a rival who stole it in the night. But then came another rival, then another, then another. Until Grindelwald found it in the hands of an unfortunately ill-informed young wizard who had no idea what wand he possessed.”

A raspy breath, and then Dumbledore continued. “Gellert and I used to be friends, closer than friends, but I couldn’t let him hurt so many people. He viewed it as a rebellion, a movement, but it was nothing but a violence that needed to end. The Elder Wand became mine through conquest
even as I lost someone so dear to me. From his hand I plucked the Elder Wand and watched as he screamed and cried over his failure.”

Voldemort glared. “Your point, old man?”

“My point, Tom, of course,” Dumbledore said deferentially. “I’m merely warning you this one final time. Take this wand from me, kill me, try to take back your wife and child by force, and you will lose them both forever.”

His wand was on the Headmaster’s temple in a moment, his insides boiling with fury. “Are you threatening them?”

“Not them, Tom,” he said with no fear in his voice. “They will survive this even if no one else does, I’m certain. You won’t. Not if you insist on this fight. I offer you this one last chance to negotiate with me … or you can kill me as you’ve wished to do for so long and, in killing me, seal your own fate.”

Had Voldemort a shred of regard for the old Headmaster he might have listened. He might have acknowledged his threat. He might have even stopped and begun negotiations.

But he had only hatred for the old man who had thwarted him time and again, who spouted his anti-dark magic rhetoric even though his own power came from there … he hated the man who his wife had decided to side with over him. Who had convinced her to hide herself from him.

“I will take my chances,” Voldemort hissed. “Without you, there is no one left to stop me.”

“I will not stop you.”

“No, you won’t,” he hissed. “Farewell, old man. Avada Kedavra!”

The curse didn’t have far to travel and neither did the magical backlash. For the only time magic connected the two men – the legend and the nightmare – for one moment of time. Voldemort felt the life force leave his old enemy, felt his body sag from the end of his wand. And the magic … he shuddered as it washed over him. Power, pure power. He had never killed one who had undergone the ritual and it was heady. A portion of the unfettered magic of Albus Dumbledore now ran through his own, a pleasure that he couldn’t even fathom.

The wards around the campsites fell, but Voldemort paid them no heed. No, the magic had done something even greater. Without Dumbledore, the magic of the mythical prison of Nurmengrad had ended. Voldemort could feel it in the shift in the ley beneath him. He was free to collect his little love.

Standing over the corpse of his enemy, Voldemort laughed.

Magic rolled back into the facility and through Hermione Granger as she was in the middle of a card game with her friends. It hit her in the collar, the stomach, and then the rest of her followed suit. Her friends sat up as she gasped, undoubtedly feeling the same hit of magic. Her heart started pounding.

“You need to get out of here,” Hermione turned to Harry. “He’s taken down the defenses, you need to go!”

“Then you do too,” Harry grabbed her hand. “He can’t get to you. He can’t!”
“I don’t have a choice!” Hermione shrieked. “Without the wards on this place, he could just call me to him at any point. But he doesn’t know you’re here, he doesn’t have to kill you. Please, Harry.”

Hermione started at the sound of guards dropping above her. Grindelwald. He was just as dangerous, but at least he wasn’t out for Harry.

“We’re not leaving,” Ginny sat next to her on the bed. Her hazel eyes were hard. “This is it, ‘Mione. Everyone we know is out there fighting.”

“Yeah!” Ron pumped his fist up. “Bring it on! It’s five against one. He can’t get all of us before Harry stabs that wa-“

Harry elbowed Ron in the stomach, pointing to Hermione who looked pale at his words. Hands were cupped on her stomach defensively.

“Erm, well, sorry.”

Hermione wanted to reassure them that she’d help them, but right as she did a ripple in her magic told her that Voldemort was there, right on the property.

“He’s here, he’s here,” Hermione struggled to get to her feet and Ginny followed. “If we do this, I need everyone behind me. Come on.”

As a group, Hermione led them out of her cell and into the corridor. With her magic as a guide, she followed the feel of Voldemort and the kicks of her children to the next corridor and towards the approaching Wizard. She set them in the middle of the corridor and waited for him to round the corridor.

He looked … powerful. Hermione from afar she could only have felt his unfettered magic, but she could feel the other soul on him. He had just killed someone, or multiple someone’s. The aura of magic surrounding him told her that. His eyes were filled with a sadistic glee, a glint of victory and a high of power. She felt her eyes water. If he only looked desperate, or sad, or even normal she would have hesitated to hurt him. But now …

“Hello Voldemort,” she was softer than she intended, but it carried. He grinned at her, but didn’t lower his wand as he stood there to take in her entourage. “How are you?”

He grinned. “I’m about to take you and our children home, and Dumbledore is dead.” Harry screamed his denial. “I’m doing very well, little witch.”

“I can’t stay with you,” Hermione couldn’t take her eyes away from him either, though. Taking in his face, his figure, his stance. “I can’t let my children’s father kill everyone I love.”

“I love me, witch,” he taunted. “You can’t deny this.”

“I do.” Behind her, the boys squawked. “But I love Harry like a brother. The Weasleys like family. I love my friends and I love my muggle parents. Loving you isn’t enough. Not enough to ignore this.”

It had taken a lot to come to terms with that. No matter how she loved him she couldn’t not stand against him. It wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough.

“Please,” she begged, “please just stop this. Run away, start a new life for yourself. I don’t want to hurt you.”
Still, his eyes were glinting dangerously. “You will come with me, Hermione. Now.”

“No.”

Voldemort’s eyes turned to her friends before returning to her. “Then I will kill them.”

Her eyes hardened. “No.”

A shot of red from her friends told her they were done waiting. Simultaneous shouts of ‘Stupefy!’ rang down the hallway and Voldemort threw off all four of their stunners.

“The adults were talking,” Voldemort sneered. He conjured fire in his hand, growing it. “Now, run!”

Like a coiled snake, the flames shot forward and aimed directly for Harry. Hermione swallowed the spell in her own magic and turned it around, hurling it back at her bondmate with equal fervour.

Harry and the other were scrambling then, moving forward towards Voldemort and ducking around the pillars of the corridor to throw their hexes and charms. Hermione caught the ones that were sent to them—the dark ones that couldn’t be defended from with a protego—and returned fire where she could. Five against one, indeed. But regardless of their numbers they were losing. Hermione couldn’t catch all the spells because she wasn’t fast enough or she was too inexperienced with her magic and all of her friends had cuts, burns, or bruises by now from where his spells pierced their shields. Pillars were blown to pieces by Voldemort trying to get to her friends.

“No!” Hermione shrieked as a spell got too close to Harry. Voldemort barely cast her a glance and she flung her own curse at him. “Stop!”

Harry leapt forward with the sword of Gryffindor, close enough to try to at least off-balance Voldemort with an attack. One spell from the Dark Lord had the sword flying from Harry’s hand and clattering to the ground behind their enemy, impossible for them to reach. Harry, swordless, tried to draw his wand but was disarmed immediately and grabbed by the throat by the pale man. Hermione threw her magic at them, trying to separate them, but Voldemort threw her own attempts away and pointed his wand Harry’s temple.

“Two of my enemies, all in one day,” Voldemort hissed. “First Dumbledore, now … time to die, Boy-Who-Lived. Time to join your mother, boy.”

He tossed Harry to the ground and pointed his wand. Hermione couldn’t stand between them in time, and her magic couldn’t protect Harry. Her other friends were throwing spells too, but none got through.

Voldemort raised his wand, “Avada-!”

The fatal words were stopped and Voldemort choked. The Sword of Godric Gryffindor was coming out his chest covered in the red of his blood, and Voldemort’s words were a burble of blood. He fell to his knees, revealing the man who had done the stabbing.

Grindelwald.

He stood over Voldemort like a man possessed, his eyes alight with the thrill of bloodlust and victory. His hands and chest were covered in the blood of man she loved.

“No!” She came forward as fast her belly could let her, her sides stitches at even her fast walk. Voldemort looked up at her and coughed, blood coming from his mouth as he tried to breath. “No,
Voldemort was bleeding out in front of her and her magic could do nothing. She didn’t know the rituals, didn’t know the spells. Nothing was coming to her mind as she knelt in his cooling blood.

“What do I do?” Hermione pleaded with him, watching as he swayed and his eyes started to flutter. “You know what to do, I know you do! Tell me!”

He looked at her, a spark of panic in his blue, blue eyes. “It feels like water.” His laugh was hysterical, pierced with cough of blood. “My blood, herk, my blood feels like water.”

His laughter took him to the ground, the sword still stuck in him. Hermione sobbed.

“Nobody’s ever cried for me,” he wheezed, his eyes unfocused. “Nobody …”

His eyes rolled back in his skull, closing as he passed out from the blood loss. She still had time, though. Still had time to save him.

She turned to Grindelwald, her face wet with tears. “Help me, help me save him,” she begged. “Please! I don’t know how!”

Grindelwald wasn’t listening to her. He had bent down over the body of Voldemort and plucked the knobby wand from his hand, letting out a gasped pleasure at its touch. “Endlich.”

Her hands pressed against the neck of her love, searching for a pulse. She couldn’t feel anything. Nothing. Could she be missing it? He had only passed out, his heart hadn’t stopped, it can’t have stopped.

“He can’t be, he can’t be,” she pressed her fingers all over, trying to find his pulse. She put her fingers in front of his mouth, trying to feel his breath. Nothing. Nothing. “No, no, no.”

Then, as if answering her, the magic that had been inside the man in front of her broke away. Her magic rippled and shook as she felt Voldemort slip away, his magic breaking at the edge. The parts caught in her magic stayed, but everything that had been bound to his severed from both him and her and disappeared. Her body shook and her eyes filled with tears.

“No!” Hermione screamed. “No!”

Her friends pulled up behind her, holding her and taking her in their arms. The sobs came and wouldn’t stop, not easily.

“One thing you learn, hexe,” Grindelwald tells her while she cries, accent lilting and soothing amidst the deafening horror of the scene, “is that sometimes men must die.”

Her sobs choked her, making her unable to respond.

“And killing is easier for an old warrior like me,” Grindelwald acknowledged. His eyes carried over all the children. “None of you has the spirit required to kill. I stepped up.”

“He-he-” she was so stressed, her body wracked with tears, that she could feel her belly contract and her children kick up a storm. It was too early. She needed to calm down.

Grindelwald stooped low, making everyone jump and their wands raise again. He ignored them as he took a piece of stony rubble and transformed it into a beautiful, large glass vial. He enchanted it entirely wandless, awing them all.
Then, without a shred of remorse or disgust – without even changing expression – the old wizard dipped his hand into the open wound in Voldemort’s chest.

“What are you doing?” Neville cried in horror.

The wizard continued on, cutting open the chest of his fallen victim and pulling up the ribs a little. Harry had to turn away and puke into her little prison toilet. Ginny looked positively green as well, and Hermione just couldn’t bear to stop watching even through her tears. Finally, Grindelwald held up the heart of his successor for a moment, as if savoring the warmth, and then squeezed it over the vial.

Blood filled the little crystal vessel, bright and crimson. Not even resting from defiling the man’s body, Grindelwald wandlessly cut open the organ and tore the white, fibrous tissue from each of the cavities. Those he put in the jar as well, with the blood.

“A gift for you, hexe,” Grindelwald seemed to come back to himself, holding the vial towards her. When she shrank, he gave her a murderous look. “It is the man’s heartstrings, heart essence. Your people will soon come and take the body. Take this; it will make a fine wand to remember him by.”

The eyes of Grindelwald were sincere, that much she could say. But his actions were psychotic, and his body was sparking and flinching with some repressed motions that Hermione knew would be more violent.

When she hesitated to take the gift, Grindelwald thrust the vial forward more insistently. “Take it!”

Her hands wrapped around the sickeningly warm vial and she nodded to the man. She didn’t know if she could be thankful, not when he’d killed him and ripped him open, but he needed acknowledgement.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

Grindelwald laughed then, his voice a cackle and a wheeze. He raised his wand to his temple, making the kids gasp. “Live well, hexe.”

“No!” She screamed, but it was too late. Grindelwald slumped to the ground right by Voldemort, his eyes open and vacant. The wand in his hand exploded in his hand and pieces flew around the hall, the magic within dying as well.

Everything was still and silent. Then a wailing sob rang through the prison as Hermione Granger mourned.
Chapter 41

Once Voldemort had died, the Death Eaters had run and the Romanian Ministry felt safe enough to intervene. Werewolves and death eaters and anarchists were caught and the Order suffered minimal casualties because of how early on Voldemort had died. There still were deaths. Moody had fought his last battle. When Draco had turned sides, Lucius had attempted to follow only to be cut down. Hagrid … sweet Hagrid wasn’t made to fight, but fight he did only to end up falling too. That one hit Harry harder than anyone, and he insisted on transporting the body of his oldest friend back to Britain and paying for his funeral.

Hermione nearly went into labor that day just from the stress and had been put on bedrest as much as she could considering the trials and award ceremonies. She had been interrogated mercilessly by both the Romanian authorities and their own Wizengamot. The Romanians were wondering about Grindelwald and his death, how he’d gotten out, and whether she could get the wards back up for the prison. She couldn’t. The Wizengamot were looking for any reason to send her back to the rock, only stopped when Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Neville had stood up for her and told them about the apparently epic battle where Hermione had protected all of them in turn from Voldemort until he’d finally been killed by Grindelwald. They were forced to give her an Order of Merlin, Second Class, right alongside her friends.

Severus had survived and earned his Order of Merlin First Class and exoneration in the public eye. Every Order member testified to his bravery, and Draco had even come forward to tell them about how much Severus had helped him avoid the mark (no one mentioned how it had been removed, instead opting for saying it had never been there in the first place). While many still looked at him with childhood distaste that came from taking classes from him, he was still viewed as a tragic hero.

Using the Quibbler to start the wave, they were able to get her photographed with her friends at the funerals for Dumbledore and the other Order members who fell, and mildly praising articles printed even in the Prophet. She hadn’t cared for her own reputation, but she needed her children to be safe. The articles raised their public opinion of her and the threats to her all but stopped.

One month later

“Tell me I can stop,” Hermione pleaded when a particularly violent contraction hit her. “I just want to lie down!”

“A little bit more, dear,” Mme Pomphrey encouraged her. “We just want to make this as nice and quick as possible for you and the little ones.”

Harry was holding her up on one side, Malfoy on the other to walk her around and they both tried to encourage her forward. “Come one Granger, just a little bit more.”

“Don’t listen to him, ‘Mione,” Harry encouraged, “you take your time. Don’t move until you’re ready.”

“Just shut up,” Hermione grumbled at the both of them, but walking forward anyways. A snort came from her delivery station and she glared at the offender. “You too.”

Severus looked amused. “Take a deep breath, Miss Granger, and laugh at the ridiculousness of the
two boys you have working together. You’ll feel as relaxed as I do.”

She chuckled a bit, and Harry and Draco wrinkled their faces at each other as she did. Then she yelled and huffed through another contraction. “No laughing, laughing hurts!”

“We’re here, we’re here!” The Granger parents were rushing into the Hospital Wing, both flushed from clearly running up the warded path until they could reach her. Hermione blubbered as her mother came to stand by her. “Oh, sweetie, you should have called us earlier.”

She blubbered. “I wasn’t sure they were coming. I didn’t want to bother you during the first week.”

Both Granger parents had returned to their practice, welcomed back by all their staff and colleagues. Until her water had broken, she hadn’t wanted to call them.

“Oh, you silly girl.” Draco and Harry backed off then, letting the parents lead her around for a few minutes.

That next contraction was the longest by far, lasting over a full minute and nearly bringing her to her knees. Mme Pomphrey motioned for her boys to bring her over to lie on the delivery table to check the dilation. Both boys refused to look anywhere below her necks.

She barely had a minute of rest before the next contraction came and she cursed and tried so hard to not kick out at the stirrups. Draco and Harry had no idea what to do to comfort her, and she had soon banished them both to just outside the curtain where she could still see their silhouettes but not their stupid, nervous faces. Her father joined them, looking a little green, while her mother stayed as did Severus.

“Well done,” Severus praised her when she came down from the latest contraction. “You haven’t once begged for additional pain potions and haven’t told us you’re giving up or that you can’t do this. You are doing very, very well. Now focus on breathing, relax in this time between the pain.”

“Give me your hand,” she ordered angrily. “I’ll show you pain.”

He gave her a fond smile but still relinquished his hand. “Even your threats have no venom. You’re doing very, very well.”

“He’s right, sweetheart,” her mother laughed. “You should have heard me giving birth. I cursed everyone like a sailor and threatened to strangle the nurses if they didn’t somehow make the pain go away.”

The next contraction prevented her reply and she roared and squeezed Severus’ hand for everything he as worth.

“Oh!” Madame Pomphrey moved between her legs and she felt her “That was it! You’re wide enough now. Next contraction and you start pushing, alright? I’ll tell you to ease up when I see the head, but until I do just follow your instincts and move and push when you feel it.”

It took her hours to get the first baby out. The act of pushing was a disemboweling, so painful that it felt like everything was about to come out of her as she died there. Madame Pomphrey told her she was doing well and it was going well, but it still took too long and she was crying and screaming and sweating for an hour before the first girl was born. Severus released her hand to go and collect the child for cleaning and diagnostics, only letting her see it for a minute before he next contraction began and he went to take care of her first born.

The next girl followed within ten minutes, three pushes later.
Just as she breathed a sigh of relief, Madame Pomphrey started patting the baby dry and muttering to herself. “Come on, now, little one, you can cry. It’s alright, but we need you to breathe before we can cut the cord. Come on, breathe.”

“She’s not breathing?” Hermione panicked, voice hoarse from her previous screams. “Is she alright?”

“Just stay still,” Madame Pomphrey encouraged her, “she’ll be fine, it’s fine.”

Her mother tried to calm her, but it wasn’t until her first baby was in her arms that she could even focus on anything but her panic. Her mother patted her and held her close, shielding her gaze best she could from what was happening between her legs. After over a minute and no cries being heard, Madame Pomphrey began to give her baby CPR with Professor Snape supporting and rubbing a potion on the baby’s chest. Hermione was crying, helpless as her baby struggled to live.

Then the cry came. Her heart steadied and she wept in relief as Madame Pomphrey finally cut the cord to her second baby girl and brought her over Hermione to see. She was so bloody, barely made better from the medical work needed to get her to breathe, but just like her sister she was beautiful. She wanted to hold her, but she was taken away by Severus again to be cleaned. She buried her face gently into the minute fuzz on top of her first baby’s head as Draco and Harry came through the curtains with her father.

Mr Granger smiled down at her and brushed a hand over her curls. “You did well, little bean. That little lady’s gorgeous, and so is her sister I’m sure.”

“So, is that my goddaughter?” Draco asked, earning an elbow from Harry. “What? It’s rude to presume.”

Hermione looked at her little blue-eyed, black-haired little girl. “Thea Evelyn Granger, these are your godparents. The unicorn is Draco –” “Hey!” “And the nervous one is Harry.” “Hey!” “They’re both a little loud, but they’ll be great godparents to you and your sister.”

“Speaking of,” Severus came back into the birthing area with a second bundle of fabric. They had grabbed a different colour blanket to identify the second baby; Hermione really didn’t want to misidentify them, but now that she had them both in her arms she didn’t think she could. Each little girl was identical, but their magic was just a little different from each other. Her second twin was crying. “I believe this little one was missing her little family.”

Hermione took her second child into her other arm and let them lean together against her chest, bleary little eyes barely opening and her little cries hushing as the baby’s arm finally touched her twin. It was so adorable.

“You should try feeding them, dear,” Madame Pomphrey told her, finally closing her legs and cleaning up the station. “They should search it out if you place them near your nipples.”

In a rare moment of synchronicity, Draco and Harry both announced they would be going to tell their friends about her successful birth and ran from the hospital wing to the laughter of the adults. It took some fengilling, and several blushes in Severus’ direction, but she finally had positioned both babies by her bare breasts and encouraged their rooting for her milk. She avoided Severus’ dark eyes by talking to them while they ate.

“Hello Terra,” Hermione whispered to the second little girl. “That’s your name now; Terra Elowen Granger. This is your sister, Thea, but I already told her her name. Your father and I both picked your names, and I hope you like them my little ladies. These are your grandparents. And Draco and
Harry are the ones who ran out just now, avoiding seeing me feed you. Poor boys. You’ll meet the Weasleys soon too, and they’ll love you to bits. Severus is the one who cleaned you both up and made sure you were okay. He’s also important, okay? He’s sometimes going to be feeding you, and changing you, and he’s been very kind to offer so no being fussy for him, alright?”

Severus looked touched by her little dialogue with her children, and she would have teased him but her eyes were getting heavy. The adrenaline was dying and her discomfort was lessening more and more as she laid there. The warmth of the babies against her made up for the chills she was feeling from their delivery, calming her and making her bleary.

“I think I need to give you to your grandparents when you’re done,” Hermione murmured to her babies, looking up at her mum and dad who nodded. “You’ve tired me out, little ones. Mum needs a bit of a nap.”

One at a time, Thea and Terra were handed over to her parents and she worriedly watched. Her babies should be there with her, but they at least needed to be put in their crib while she slept. She fretted her hands as they were taken away by her parents.

“They’ll be in your arms again the moment you wake,” Severus promised her, making to follow the Grangers. “I understand babies need regular refills.”

Hermione laughed, earning herself a tender look from the older man. Her body warmed at just that, and she found herself exceptionally needy.

“Stay?”

Severus was glad to. He came and sat by her side, offering his hand when she asked for it. Worries fought to leave her heart as she lay there.

“You don’t hate them, do you?” Hermione asked hoarsely, giving him an uncertain look. “For being his?”

Severus brought her hand to his face and gently placed a kiss upon it, holding it within his own. “I do not. They are beautiful and innocent and you love them. So much so that it is impossible to not look on them with fondness.”

She bit her lip. “Will people love them like I do?”

“A mother’s love, as we know, is often beyond compare,” Severus reminded her gently. “Do not worry about the future. They have a retinue of loyal, powerful people to protect them and each will come to love them as much as they love their mother.”

“Including you?”

Dark eyes met amber as the implications of her words came. Severus looked down on her tenderly. “Brave little lioness,” he praised. “Rest for now. There will be time to talk once you have finished grieving.”

Tears sprang to her eyes that only proved that he was right; she was still in mourning over his death. Hermione withdrew her hand from Severus’ and looked down at herself. “When they are strong enough to go home … I want to take them by his grave. Let him see them. Is that alright?”

“I will go with you if you’d like. But now’s not the time to think on it. Sleep. Your daughters will need feeding in another couple hours, and you need your rest.”
The grave of Voldemort was not in public knowledge. It was part of the deal she’d made to bury him, that she’d not use the Voldemort on the stone and that it was not to be in an accessible place for his followers or the public to reach. Since Voldemort had gifted her the Sayre mansion upon his death (much to the disgruntlement of cousins to the original owners) she’d had him buried on the property.

But there were too many memories in that place to use it as a home so after she had him buried on the Sayre Estate, she’d moved in with the kind Malfoys at Severus’ insistence. It was one of the few places she could now stay with her binding where she was actually welcome.

But now she stood by the grave of Tom Riddle, Thea in her arms and Terra in Severus’. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I thought you’d like to meet your daughters,” her voice trembled weakly. “I used the names we picked. Thea and Terra, the sun and the earth. They look like you right now, but they might have my eyes yet, I don’t know. The black hair is yours, though, I think. I hope so, they’ll have an easier time with it.”

That wasn’t important. Hermione sniffled and refocused. “I wanted to say … I forgive you. I … I’ve had a lot of help since you died. Not just friends, but I talked to someone in the muggle world about how I was feeling. I didn’t realize it, but you’ve never asked me to forgive you for what you did to me at the beginning. But I do. I loved you, I did, but I know that’s not because we could have had a happy future. A future with you would have been full of heartbreak and that’s not what it should have been.

“But I know better now,” Hermione told him. “And I have you to thank for that. I now know what I need as well as what I want, and that has helped me move on.”

She placed raised her hand and two identical stones of peridot rose from it and went to be embedded on his headstone, right where she’d left the place for them. “I’ve put their birthstones on your grave to connect them to their father and you to them. I don’t know if I’ll tell them who their father is, but I wanted you to know, wanted you to meet them.”

She brushed her tears from her face now that her hand was free, hoping to compose herself.

“I was hoping to tell you how happy I was, how happy the girls made me. I don’t think I have words,” Hermione gave a sad giggle. “But, there’s something else. You know how my Patronus kept changing? I always thought that it was over after those two changes, but now I’m a mother. I sent my patronus the other day and … well, my happy thought was them. And it was different. Maybe this will show you.”

Hermione raised her wand and focused on the memory of their birth, of them snuggled and rooting against her chest. “*Expecto Patronum!*”

Just like her animagus form, a silvery margay slunk from her wand and ran and jumped around the grave.

“I guess I finally learned to be exactly what I am,” Hermione smiled a bit more freely at the grave. “I guess that, no matter what, I would have ended up here. So thank you.

“And goodbye.”

Severus, who’d been silent, moved to wrap an arm around her in comfort. She’d said her piece in strength, but now that she had he was there to support her. They stayed there for a while longer.
before apparating away.
Epilogue

The alley was crowded and rowdy as she made her way down it. Ollivander had offered to open the floo for her, but she’d stubbornly insisted that they needed to talk first before he took that step. Stupid of her. People looked at her with mistrust, only made better by the fact that she was no longer pregnant and the children were at home with Draco and Severus. Still, shoulders bumped and shoved, paths were blocked, and Hermione felt their eyes everywhere on her. Judging her. Assessing her.

Finally, right by the end of the alley where it split right and left alongside Gringotts, she entered the old Ollivander’s Wand Shop. The windows had been repaired, the shelves had been reassembled or replaced … the wands that had been there had all been either raided by the desperate or taken when the initial Death Eaters had captured him, but she saw the wands they had made while in hiding filling up one shelf on the back wall. It was progress, however small.

“Oh, my dear, you came,” Ollivander ambled from the back room covered in sawdust and wood shaving, patting his glasses clean once again. He never protected them with magic as he believed it affected his vision of the wood’s design, but he still needed a new handkerchief every day to clean them. It was good to see him, and the two exchanged a fond hug. “Finally ready to take over here? I’m getting on, you know.”

Hermione smiled as she was led to the back room. “Well, the girls are finally on solid foods now. I thought it’d be the best time to come and negotiate with you.”

“Negotiate?” Ollivander gave her an objecting eye. “You still insist you aren’t simply going to take the shop?”

“That wouldn’t be fair,” Hermione insisted. “I know you said you still have plenty of money in your vault, but I insist on paying you something for this. You’re heading to America, for goodness sakes! Portkeys that far are expensive, and I know you want to spoil your grandchildren too.”

Ollivander sat in a wooden chair and Hermione headed to the little gas kitchenette to boil the kettle for tea. He always had tried to get her to stop, but she argued she was his apprentice and that it was her job. In truth, she could see war and age were catching up on the old wandmaker. He still walked with a limp from his torture, was tired more readily. He needed to leave and retire, but he felt responsible for keeping his shop open. That was the reason she came the moment she could leave her babies alone for longer than a few hours; he needed her to do this.

“The shop is your due,” Ollivander said softly. “You saved my life and the lives of countless others. In truth, you deserve more than my little shop, but it seems the rest of the world is content to ignore you.”

Hermione gave a half-hearted laugh. “You give me too much credit.”

Ollivander looked at her like he was looking at one of his wands. Whatever he saw, he decided to ignore it. “What would you consider fair, then?”

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me pay you full price?”

Ollivander shook his head and they both shared a laugh.

“Alright, alright,” Hermione smiled. “How about this; half price for the shop, and I buy your portkey to New York?”
Ollivander shook his head. “I will not put you out so much. You may purchase the portkey and perhaps even pay me a few months of rent, but no more.”

“Garrick Ollivander,” Hermione huffed, “you are such a Hornbeam!”

The old man smiled. “Then why do you fight my very nature?”

“Just because you’re stubborn doesn’t mean I’m not right,” she waved the teaspoon in his direction. “At least let me give you some fraction of what this shop is worth.”

“Very well. The fraction is ten percent.”

“Don’t make me laugh. You won’t even accept half, so how about forty, at least.”

“Twenty percent, then? Come now, don’t be difficult.

“You’re the one being difficult! How about thirty-three percent? A third?”

“25. That is still a hefty sum, Miss Granger, I will not accept any more.”

Hermione huffed in frustration. Stubborn, stubborn Hornbeam! He wouldn’t give up until he had done whatever he single-mindedly fixed his goal to.

“Twenty-five percent, your portkey, and I pay for your first year living in New York.”

“I’m living with my daughter’s family,” Ollivander reminded her.

Hermione grinned. “Then you’ll have no problem with me paying for food and expenses? What do you think, 500 galleons a month sound fair?”

“1200 for the year,” he countered. “100 a month.”

“2400,” she shot back, bringing over the tea tray. “Think of it as a goodbye gift, and a way to come back to visit.”

Ollivander rolled his eyes but nodded as she put the teacup in front of him. “Very well. Twenty-five percent, the portkey, and 2400 galleons over the course of the year.”

Hermione smiled. “You’re too kind, you know.”

“As are you.”

They clinked their teacups and drank to the deal.

It had taken her many lost napetimes, a few conferences with Ollivander, and two tear-stained breakdowns, but she had finished it. Her English Oak wand had been filled with the blood and heartstrings of the man once known as Voldemort and lacquered as well as she could for permanence. No one but those present at Grindelwald’s final moment, and Severus, knew the center of her wand. It was her main wand for crafting, so in tune with her magic that it often led her to some strange wands with little reason or rhyme besides, ‘the magic told her’.

The shop did well despite her presence there. At first people either came just to see the war heroine, or to condemn her. Nowadays things had calmed and Ollivander’s was just as it had always been; a centerpiece to Diagon Alley’s aesthetic.
She was lucky to have Severus. Some days he would take the girls and care for them, others he
would be brewing for someone and the girls would come with her to work. They would play in the
room upstairs while she carved and helped customers. Today was Severus’ day with them, so she
was surprised when her Floo activated mid-afternoon.

“Mama!” The young cry came from the direction of her fireplace. Setting aside the tools she was
using, she barely had time to stand before her arms were full of a two tiny four-year-olds. “We’ve
been good!”

“Don’t you dare, little hellions,” Severus came up behind the girls.

He may have looked severe, but the tenderness in his gaze towards her daughters made up for it. It
made him unbelievably attractive to her. She’d rejected him many time over the years – the girls
were still too young, she wasn’t ready, she was living with him and didn’t want to strain their
friendship – but at some point she’d stopped fighting it and hadn’t regretted it. She wanted him,
and he wanted her. Damaged goods and all.

“Hermione, tell these two little beasts that my punishment still stands.”

“What did you two do?” she asked the girls sternly, hands on her hips. “You know Severus
wouldn’t punish you if you were being good girls.”

Thea was the ringleader of their group of friends, a little three-foot bundle of tenacity only quelled
by her mother, Severus, or Terra when she was in a mild mood. And it looked like Severus had
been given a bad day with the pair of them.

“Well?”

Terra caved first but tried her hardest to not look guilty. “Sev was making potions again, the nasty
purple ones you make us drink when we are sick. We wanted to make them taste better.”

“It was just the peach juice!” Thea interjected, trying to sound innocent. “We didn’t know!”

Both girls adopted an infamous look of pure misery and innocence. Lips pouted, hands clasped
behind their backs, tears welling in their blue eyes … That look had gotten countless cuddles,
favours, and sweets from the other adults in their lives and they always adopted that angelic look
when they were about to be punished. They were dramatic little Slytherins, as Severus would say.

Hermione gave Severus an apologetic look. He shook his head. “They are fortunate the potion was
already completed and didn’t explode in their faces. As it is, that potion I left cooling was an order
for Draco’s main office and it will need to be redone.”

“You know the rules,” Hermione told her two wavy-haired miscreants. “Potions are dangerous,
much more than mummy’s work, and Severus is just as much responsible for you as I am. When
you do something naughty, there are consequences because we care about you. So if he says you
need a time out, or lines, or to clean your room, you have to listen to him. What did he tell you was
your punishment?”

The girls looked down, not telling.

Snape rolled his eyes at their antics. “Not telling your mother doesn’t mean she’ll change the
punishment, nor will I.”

“But you’re not our daddy!” Thea wailed petulantly.
Hermione raised her eyes to him, seeing the weight of those words in his eyes. He resolutely looked at the girls instead of her.

Taking this opportunity, Hermione knelt by the girls. “That wasn’t nice, Thea.”

“He’s not!” Terra defended her sister with a stamp of her foot.

Hermione shook her head. “Not right now, no, he’s not. But that doesn’t mean he hasn’t raised you just as much as mummy has, and it doesn’t mean that mummy doesn’t love him. I think one day very soon mummy will marry him, and then he will be your daddy.”

Eyes snapped and connected. Severus looked hopeful for a moment, before he put up his barriers once more. Hermione gave him a smile and nodded, feeling a blush rise to her cheeks at the intensity of his gaze. Did he still feel for her? Did he still want her?

She turned her eyes back to her children. “Severus loves you. Apologize.”

Both girls looked ready to cry, and so turned to the imposing man with hanging heads. “Sorry Sev.”

Hermione nodded approvingly at them. “Thank you, girls. Now what was the punishment Severus gave you?”

Both girls pouted. “Time-out.”

“Then you go to time-out and you stay there for eight minutes,” Hermione told them. “Since you’re in the store, you get to go to the corners. Now.”

Both girls sniffled, but still hiked over to the two separate corners of the room. Severus immediately put up his signature muffliato and approached her, pulling her into his arms

“I’m sorry about all that,” Hermione sighed. “I swear, if the Weasley kids weren’t even worse I’d feel like an awful parent.”

He rolled his eyes. “You are a marvelous mother and they are tolerable most of the time; better than the other spawn I’ve met.”

“That’s because they’re scared,” she feared. “I wonder when they’ll forget.”

“Forget the time Thea had her arm dislocated by her hating public, or when they nearly had their mother taken from them by the Ministry, or last week when they both accidentally apparated away from the Parkinson girls after their hateful diatribe?”

Hermione’s eyes welled up. “All of it.”

“They are their own people,” Severus comforted. “The way they were raised will win out. You have two gorgeous daughters that anyone would be foolish to judge. Besides, some people think they’re mine. Hardly better to come from an illicit professor-student relationship, but still …”

They looked at the mopey slouched backs of the two girls with little smiles. It really wasn’t that bad of a punishment, but they always looked so put-out. Hermione was glad for the black hair, truly. It was easy to deal with, and Severus was right that some people thought he was the father because of it.

“She was wrong, you know,” Hermione said after a moment. “You are as good as Thea’s father.
Terra’s too. Her words weren’t fair to you.”

“She knows that, and yet … she’s a child, she needs absolutes. Thea has felt … ill-at-ease this week since the break-up of Weasley and that Imogene girl. I believe she worries that I will leave. She wants permanence,” he told her, lifting her blushing face to his. A soft kiss was pressed to her lips, making her sigh. “I heard you say you want to marry me. Do I get any say in the matter?”

“You asked me before,” she pointed out with a quirk of her brow. “Are you saying no?”

Severus smirked. “I expect to be wined and dined before my lady proposes to me. You don’t even have a ring, do you? I am shamed.”

Hermione laughed and smacked him on the arm. “Alright, you beast. Come to dinner with me on Saturday. I’ll show you wined and dined.”

“Then I’ll save my answer for then,” he grinned mischievously. “I hope you take this very seriously; one rogue napkin and I might say ‘no.’”

“You…” Hermione was cut off from her diatribe by a searing kiss, the kind that had her heart warm and her head woozy. His hand came up to her curls and held her steady, forcing her lips even closer to his. “You-“ kiss, “are,” kiss, “a,” kiss, “lout.”

“One you wish to marry,” Severus kissed her ear, causing shivers down her spine. “One who loves you.”

Hermione smiled up at his, but in her mind she couldn’t help but think of the reason she’d said no when he’d asked. “You … you don’t mind that it’d have to be muggle?”

Even with Voldemort gone and the yearly visits to his grave now more nostalgic than sad, her magic still held a piece of him. It was there when she tested each new wand, there when she fixed the accidental messes her children made with their magics, it was there whenever she used it in her day-to-day life. Even her wand – the one of English Oak and the blood of her bonded mate – reminded her. And because of it, she could never bond magically with another man. Not Severus, not anybody.

The sadness in her must have shown, because he pulled her close in his arms so she could rest against his herb-scented shoulder.

“I would never ask that of you,” he whispered in her ear. “That part of you is his, and I feel no less cared for knowing that just as you do not feel unloved because of my once-love. You’ve nothing to apologize for.”

She felt him smile against her ear and kiss it, making her shudder. “In fact, I should be thanking you. Do you know how long I’ve waited for you to marry me?”

Hermione ducked her head under his to kiss his chin playfully. “Well, we wouldn’t want you to wait any longer, then. How about we make it official tonight? I’ll take you out, the twins could have a sleepover with Scorpius …?”

He pressed a tender kiss to her lips, the kind she’d never had with anyone else. “That sounds perfect.”

She refused to apologize. Instead she stood defiantly in front of her daughters and stared down the shop-owner who had hexed her children.
“They can’t be doing that stuff around here,” the shopkeeper justified himself. “‘Twas just a little punishment.”

“They nearly choked!” Hermione shouted at the man. “You can’t soap children’s mouths when they’re not your own! I am their mother, and they didn’t do anything wrong!”

Terra and Thea were trying not to cower behind her, but she felt a tiny hand on her back. That would be Terra, and Terra would be holding her sister’s hand. They were united, but Terra was far more likely to reach for her mother in times like these. Thea would fight if she let her, the more Gryffindor of the two. She couldn’t imagine how terrifying it was to have their mouths scoured and being unable to swallow or breath from the bubbles in their mouths.

“They need to be taught to keep their … problem private,” the man spat.

Hermione glared at the man. “You ignorant brute. They are little girls, and their problem is a gift of magic. Talking to snakes is not an evil practice.”

And that was the crux of it. The girls had run off to the Menagerie when Hermione had turned her back and when she’d found them they were choking out soap in front of the snake habitat with this dunderhead telling them it was a murderer’s trait.

“You-Know-Who—”


The flick of her wand was just a formality as her jinx collided with the horrible shopkeep. He yelped as his legs and arms vanished and he shrank down to the very thing he’d hated so much – a snake. She made to levitate the new addition into the habitat, but the girls cried out in protest.

“No mummy! The snakes don’t like him,” Thea implored.

Terra pulled on her sleeve. “Can we take them with us? He can have their home when they’re gone!”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Why don’t they like him?”

Both girls turned towards the habitat where the snakes were hissing at the levitating invader, ready to strike once he was within distance. After a moment and a hiss or two of their own, the girls turned their wide eyes to their mother.

“Their cage is too small,” Thea told her with a pouted lip.

Terra’s turn for puppy dog eyes. “Mummy, they are trapped there. They never get to play outside.”

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. The girls were lucky, very lucky that the alley wasn’t full of wizards yet. It was too early in the morning for more than the desperate shopper to be there and was just barely opening time. But if they stayed any longer she might very well need to call Harry to get her out of the charges for assaulting a shopkeep.

Making a quick decision, she grabbed an empty bowl and put the new snake in it for its own protection and brought the girls in front of the habitat. “Okay, two to keep. The others we’ll set free, agreed?”

The girls clapped their hands excitedly and reached into the habitats, seeming to know exactly who
they wanted. Later she would look the snakes up and discover that most of the snakes he kept in stock were rat snakes, some European and some American. None there were venomous. Both girls picked different snake breeds, but they were both fundamentally the safe rat snake of southeastern Europe. An Aesculapian snake for Terra, and a Persian rat snake for Thea.

She dropped a bunch of Galleons at the register and took the habitat, the other snakes, and her girls’ new pets out of the shop. She’d have to call Harry when they got back to the shop to turn the owner back. The rest of them she either freed because they were British snakes or got them to another pet shop.

Their eleventh birthday was right before the school year began, just in time to still go to Hogwarts. They would be the youngest in their class but they didn’t care, all they wanted was to go. It was enough to make Hermione a wreck.

Still, there was something she could do to send them off properly. So two weeks before their birthday on a Saturday morning, bright and early, she placed a notice in the storefront that it was closed for the day and took her two beautiful girls to the wand grove.

The forest they were in was just outside of Sheffield and belonged to the Notts, had for centuries. They were the ones who worked with the Ollivanders and negotiated for wand woods and the like. It was a magical place that intersected four ley lines and the magic in the air was palpable. Woods taken here were very likely to be wand woods and today her girls would look for their own.

“Do you remember what I told you?” Hermione asked each of them. Their heads bobbed excitedly. “Good. Now stay together and remember your wood lice. Don’t try to cut your branch without me, okay? And if you don’t know or would like help, I will help you pick your wood as well. It’s not something everyone can do, alright?”

The girls barely waited for the end of her sentence before the started in on it. They moved to tree after tree, trying to do as she’d taught them and feel the magic of each. Hermione followed, feeling each wand tree they passed and looking for the matches herself. If they didn’t feel it she’d guide them towards it with a few words and see if they could.

Hermione had an idea of what would take them, though. They were twins so they might come from the same tree, but she had narrowed it down. Thea was a south-side wood and Terra was a north. Each girl had their own affinities in magic that she’d seen since they were born, but they had a lot in common. Both had their father’s temper and their mother’s excited curiousity.

And they were little Slytherins. Oh, she’d raised them to be honest and straightforward, alarmingly blunt, but Severus had raised them to be cunning. Both parents had tried to teach the girls to be thoughtful, too, so they tended to pause themselves every now and again before they restarted with a completely different aim. Their parents didn’t know what happened when they froze together like that, but the girls explained they were just, ‘trying to agree on something.’ Twin power or not, they were very much of one mind whenever they struck.

With her observations in mind, she led the girls be proximity to the center of the grove.

Over the years Ollivander had planted many wand trees in the grove to encourage the diversity found here. More exotic woods could not be found, but the sturdier varieties of everything else could. Cherry and apple, Scots pine and spindle, linden trees and strawberry trees all along the way. The girls pranced over to one, earning an excited shout from Terra. Thea frowned though, saying, “that’s not right,” and led her sister to another tree. Hermione only nodded at Thea and Terra, letting them know she agreed, before the moved on.
When the girls approached the tree she had scoped out before, she knew she was right. The cedar tree practically danced next to the girls, its energetic magic glad to be of use to the twins who hadn’t yet realized it was their tree. Hermione felt them and the tree, mentally picking out the two branches for them. There was one, thicker and closer to the ground. Terra’s for sure, north-facing and true. Thea’s was farther up and south-facing, thinner.

When the girls touched the tree, they jumped about a mile high in victory before the turned with a frantic, “Mum, mum!”

Both girls were so happy when she nodded at them, proud they’d managed to find their tree all by themselves. To continue this independence, she let them feed the bowtruckles and cut their wand woods from the tree relatively unassisted. Thea needed to be levitated, but the girl still sawed off the tree branch with her own strength. With the wand wood chosen, Hermione brought the girls over to the place where she’d dropped of her Core Chest and motioned for them to sit with their branches in their hands.

“Now, you’ve been chosen by the cedar tree,” Hermione told them. “Cedar is a passionate, intuitive wood. It will respond to what you truly want, regardless of whether you know it at the time. It is a true wand, true to itself, to its owner, and it hunts for truth from those around it. Your core will determine what attributes of your wand are enhanced and which will be dulled. I do not expect you to have the same type of core as you have wand tree, but we’ll see.”

Cupping her hand around her pregnant belly she smiled at her daughters. “It is also a very familial wand. You don’t know how happy I am; cedar tells me you both love your me, your dad, and your brother. I know you’ll still love this family even with your soon to come sister. But … you both know I love you, right? And that your dad loves you?”

Both girls looked down at their branches and up at their mom, faces set in stone as they fought to conceal their emotions. Thea spoke first.

“But we’re not HIS.”

Hermione didn’t wait to take both girls into her arms. They fought for a second, but their mother’s pregnant belly kept them fairly still.

“Thea, Terra,” Hermione pulled back and looked both of them in their eyes, “your father loved you. Before he died he looked forward to your births. He picked your names. I don’t want you to think that your father didn’t want you for a second.

“But I also don’t want you to think Severus doesn’t either,” she continued, taking a deep breath to open her magic even more, taking in the girls in front of her. Both looked at her an nodded hesitantly. “I know you love your brother, but we had this talk before he was born. You are our daughters, and Conrad is our son. Not one of you is less in our eyes because of what heritage you have or your gender or anything. Do you understand that?”

Terra frowned even as her sister nodded. “You and dad love us … but you’re having another girl.”

Ther it was. The girls were really excited when they’d had a little boy, eager to have a brother like their friend Teddy. But another girl they thought would replace them. Hermione pulled them into her arms again. “Do you really think I could ever replace my little girls? Do you think either of us raised you just to stop loving you when another little girl came along? We love you, and we’ll miss you every day you’re away at school.”

Tears leaked from her eyes and she brushed them away. “Now, enough of that. We need to pick
She held her belly up while bending over to open her ingredients case and made sure her wards around the area held. There were too many expensive ingredients here to not worry about them being stolen, but she’d wanted her daughter to go somewhere special for their wand selection. Ollivander’s had been special for her when she was eleven, but her daughters had grown up in the shop, watching their mother match woods to cores and even learning to carve them themselves. They’d designed their wands months beforehand for their mother to make, and she knew they were looking forward to it.

“Thea, as the oldest you get to pick first,” Hermione motioned the little girl forward. She knew their magic better than anyone’s and so she pulled the tray she’d pre-prepared for the young girl. Fire was Thea’s ally and so phoenix feather, dragon heartstrings, and the fire-breathing chimera’s hair were placed before her. She thought she knew which the girl would choose, only to be surprised when instead of dragon heartstring she reached out and pulled one of her few phoenix feathers forward. It seemed to shine just a bit brighter in Thea’s hand and Hermione knew her daughter had chosen well.

“That’s the one,” Thea beamed at her mother. Both phoenix feather and branch were placed in a special box her mother had prepared. “What does it mean, mum?”

Hermione placed the box within the chest. “Phoenixes themselves have good intuition and are known for seeing the true center of the people they meet. More than that, though, they are dramatic, fiery, and loyal. This core will highlight those traits in your wand, while also make the spells you cast more powerful so long as your heart is truly behind it. This is a loyal, very protective wand. Truthfully, this will be a fighter’s wand but please don’t test that, Thea.”

Despite the admonishment, Thea preened and grinned at her sister as she sat back on the grassy floor. Terra came up next, and Hermione could see that while she was just as excited as her sister, she was also nervous. Terra was always the more self-conscious of the two and Hermione reminded herself to praise the core of the second girl just as much as she had the first.

“Ready Terra?” Hermione smiled as the girl nodded and leaned forward excitedly. Terra – as her name suggested – had an affinity for earth, maybe with some water mixed in. Cut from the same cloth though they were, Thea was day where Terra was night. That came with an affinity for potions that Severus was eager to pass on and a grounded core that would mature more steadily than her sister. Herbivore and plant cores would do well for her, and so Hermione had assembled a selection of unicorn and kelpie hair, spriggan sap, and some of her centaur tail hairs. “Find the one that feels right with you and your wood.”

Terra took a while longer, fingers brushing bottles and hairs as she tried to find the right. She finally pulled out a small vial of sap and one of the centaur hairs, looking between them as if deciding but looking torn. Hermione reached out then and touched both cores, feeling how they had decided to share the center of her daughter’s cedar wand.

“Are they both saying they’re yours?” Hermione asked her daughter, who nodded in frustration. “Then they’re both yours.”

Terra looked surprised, so Hermione elaborated. “I have a wand with a centaur tail hair as well, but their hairs aren’t very powerful. They’re almost always combined with another core. Would you like me to tell you what I think the combination of your cores means?”

Terra nodded, her teeth biting at her lower lip like Hermione always did.
“Spriggan sap is very naturally attuned,” Hermione told her, “and very conscientious about it. So are centaurs, but their magic focuses on seeing foundations and futures, while the spriggans are about the here and now. It feels like they’ve come together to help you understand more, and to help your intuition in areas of study like potions, herbology, or magizoology. This wand will be less centered around people, like Thea’s, and instead around environment.”

Hermione took the branch and cores from Terra and placed them in another box for transport. “You both chose really well. Are you ready to go home?”

The baby came right before school was set to start. Conceiving a baby for Christmas was more trouble than it was worth, and she was glad it at least had the decency to come a few days before her daughters had to be sent off.

In case there were complication and she’d be required to stay in one place for long, she’d had a midwife come to deliver her baby girl in the home she had with Severus. She could feel both girls staying up way into the night as they nervously awaited their newest sibling. When she came crying into the world, both girls tried to come in but Severus intercepted them before they could see their mother’s awkward and bloody position, or her feeding the newest little Snape.

“Oh, you were tiring,” Hermione breathed and kissed her newest child on the head. “But I don’t think I’ll ever get used to how quickly I come to love you all. You’ll be so loved, darling.”

A knock came at the door and Severus peered through the crack in the door. “Are you ready for visitors?”

Hermione smiled tiredly. “If there are kids, no jumping.”

He turned his head to their children. “You’ll have to be gentle with your mother, alright?”

Three little children came through the door, the twins and their little four-year-old brother. Each gasped as they saw the little baby in their mother’s arms and hurried over to the side of the bed with Conrad just a little further behind with his shorter legs.

Her mother and father came in too, accompanied by Harry, Ginny, Ron, Draco, and Headmistress McGonagall.

“Girls, Conrad, meet your little sister,” Hermione leaned the baby over just a little bit to show them. “This is baby Mina. Mina Annalise Snape.”

Conrad crunched his nose. “She looks like a raisin.”

Severus rolled his eyes and Hermione laughed at their littlest one. Ron nodded his agreement with the little tyke though, earning an elbow to the ribs from Ginny. The girls, though, held their hands behind their backs and cooed at the little baby. She saw her opportunity.

“Do you girls want to hold her?” she asked. Both nodded. “Alright. Terra, you first.”

Severus came up behind her and helped position Mina in her arms, but then let Terra just look at her little sister.

“Congratulations, Miss Granger,” Minerva started them all.

“Yeah, congrats.”
“Good job on the mini-you.”

“She’s so cute!”

“She’s so small,” Terra said, the question on her face. “Conrad wasn’t small.”

“Well, you were a little smaller back when he was born,” Hermione recalled fondly. “She’ll be much bigger by Christmas, I promise.”

Thea and Terra sported identical frowns at the though. “Do we really-“

“Need to leave?”

“What if you need us?”

“Or something happens to Mina?”

Severus chuckled and patted them fondly on the head. “Your mother and I raised both of you without incident, two of you. I’m sure we’ll manage.”

Their godfather consoled them too. “Besides, we can all help out, too. We’ll protect little Mina.”

Both girls looked really sad at the thought of leaving their newest family member, so Hermione took pity on them. “Maybe I could convince your Aunt Minnie to let dad guest lecture in Potions … and he could bring baby Mina with him for a visit.”

All heads swivelled to Minerva who clapped excitedly and gave her wholehearted approval.

Severus quirked a brow at her even as the girls nodded enthusiastically. “Do I get a say before you volunteer me for days of monotonous repetition?”

“No!” All four woman cried together before everyone promptly laughed.

The years passed. Thea and Terra were both Slytherins – predicted by them both – while Conrad joined the ranks of Gryffindor. When Mina grew to Hogwarts age, she would become the out-of-the-blue Hufflepuff of the group, allowing Hermione to tease Severus endlessly about all of his hidden Hufflepuff traits.

The twins were still inseparable even as adults. Thea never grew out of the need to protect her twin, and Terra always counted on Thea to be the leader of them. Even when they wanted to be independent from their parents they lived together in their little flat. Terra worked with Severus in his private potions business which had expanded to take over the upper floor of Ollivander’s, while Thea had found her calling as a curse-breaker like Uncle Bill. Both, therefore, worked in the Alley with their parents and met up for lunch nearly every day.

Conrad, the little heart attack, had fought his parents to not only marry right out of Hogwarts, not only marry the daughter of Charlie Weasley, but also to move with the new Sophia Snape (nee Weasley) out to Charlie's dragon reservation to work. Both of his parents had a near-heart attack at the thought of their sole boy going up against massive dragons on his own, but couldn't deter him for longer than the wedding took. So after a few months of training with Severus (and a few dozen threats to Charlie's life if he let their boy be killed) they knew they couldn't keep him in England and so they saw him off to Romania.

Little baby Mina was the one who stayed with her mum and learned how to make wands. It had
started out as a kind of arts and crafts time with her mum, learning about making wands and learning how to carve them herself, but then it was a summer job, and then she graduated Hogwarts to work there full-time. At first Hermione was reluctant to let her little girl commit to running the shop with her out of fear that the loyal Hufflepuff was doing this only to help her mother; she certainly didn't want Mina to do anything she wasn't interested in. Yet after pushing the issue a few times Hermione came to see that her daughter truly did enjoy the work and especially the people. It put her fears to rest.

Every year in July Hermione would make the trip to Sayre Mansion and the grave of Tom Riddle with a bouquet of zinnias in her hand and maybe a report card or two from the girls. It was a personal time for her and so after the first visit Severus let her come alone. After their first year of Hogwarts they girls started to join her in her yearly remembrance. She told them what she could about him, about the wars he caused and how he'd tried to kill their uncle Harry multiple times, but when she spoke about how she'd come to be pregnant with them she couldn't tell them the truth.

Instead, she told them she'd loved him enough. Enough to be with him for a little while and to care about him, but how she'd betrayed him in the end. To their eternal credit, Thea and Terra never condemned their mother for her choice and loved her even after.

Their lives went on and on without Him. They laughed, they loved, they suffered, they wept, but the chapter involving Voldemort was over.

And as she'd had inscribed on his headstone, "Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom, not a guide by which to live." – Robert Kennedy

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