Absolution

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Absolution

by Halcyon_Fairy, seiko_udoku (Halcyon_Fairy)

Summary

As the dust settles on The Second Wizarding War, new legislation is passed forcing all able bodied citizens to marry. What will a broken Hermione Granger do? Severus Snape still feels immense guilt over his part in harming her. What will he do when he learns that she will be forced to marry?

Notes

Please note that Mending Offenses should be read first.
To Rebuke a Weasley

Chapter by seiko_udoku (Halcyon_Fairy)

To Rebuke a Weasley

After the dust had settled from The Second Wizarding War, it was decided that anyone who would like to return to Hogwarts for an eighth year in order to sit their NEWTS may do so. A separate wing was built for these students and each of the eight returning students were given a private room. Hermione Granger was the first student to confirm her return, naturally.

Harry and Ron thought long and hard about whether they should or not and eventually Harry coaxed Ron into returning. Though the Auror Corps said they would waive the need for NEWTS, Harry wanted to prove his worthiness. Ron initially argued that they had bloody well earned a free ride, but with the help of Hermione, Harry helped him realize that the NEWTS were an important milestone.

The trio, along with a few other students and many members of the order, had spent the better part of the last year helping to repair Hogwarts before it's grand re-opening. Hermione had been glad to throw herself into the hard work. When she was focused on a project, she had no time to think about other things. She didn't want to think.

Even so, at night after a hard day's work, she couldn't sleep. Night terrors plagued her constantly and more than one night she thought to ask Madam Pomfrey or Professor Snape for a Dreamless Sleep potion, but always changed her mind before following through.

She felt she would have to explain to the matron and her nightmares were personal. What she had gone through was personal. The reason she didn't go to Snape? Well she was sure he wouldn't ask for any explanation, but she didn't want his already crushing guilt to get any heavier.

He had been inside her mind and she had felt his emotions. He had enough guilt and hurt and regret to weigh him down without her adding to it in any way. She knew how he felt about what he had to do and really it was any wonder he could even stand to be in the same room as her.

The spell/potion combination had worn off about a week after the final battle and even now she felt a bit lonely. Having him there inside her mind had been comforting and with him gone she felt a bit hollow. She'd helped take care of him in the hospital wing just to be near him after the spell had worn off. He'd made a fuss at first, until she'd explained how she felt safer near him and how she missed him. He'd looked at her like she'd lost her mind, but not asked her to leave again.
They'd grown closer over the months and now she felt as close to him as the boys. She would seek him out every day to check in with him or discuss the progress being made on the school and eventually he had started to seek her out as well. It was surreal when she realized that he had even become tentative friends with Ron and Harry.

This was how she'd found herself marching down to his rooms to vent about Ron to her professor. He'd been pestering her for a date for a while now and she'd found ways to distract him up until this point. She'd been attracted to him before, but well that was before. He finally decided to confront her today and what he'd said to her had hurt her in a way that stole her breath.

Barely knocking before entering, she ran to Professor Snape and as he stood from his desk in alarm she threw her arms around him and sobbed. Patting her back awkwardly he asked, “What is it Miss Granger? What has happened?” She tried to answer, but her response was unintelligible from her crying. He managed to make out Ron's name and his only response was, “Ah, Weasley.”

Severus had known about the pressure Mr. Weasley was putting on the girl to see him romantically, but hadn't known a way to dissuade the boy without giving away Miss Granger's secrets. The thought of her fighting off unwanted advances made him ill, but what could he say to Mr. Weasley of it. He'd not touched her against her will and from his point of view there was nothing untoward in asking for a date.

Severus sat Miss Granger down and began preparing tea as he thought the situation over. He didn't know why she had even ran to him. Surely she didn't expect to gain comfort from the man who had raped her? He really was surprised most days that she could stand to look at his ugly mug, much less consider him a friend.

After handing her a cup filled with her favorite English Breakfast that he kept on hand solely for her visits, he sat across from her and waited for her to calm herself. Severus had just lifted his own cup of Earl Grey to his lips when she whispered, “He called me a frigid bitch.”

His cup rattled violently against the saucer as he set his cup down untouched. “Did he now?” he asked much too calmly. Hermione looked up, startled to see him occluding for the first time since the war had ended. His face was a blank mask, but just subtly in his eyes she saw that old rage. She hadn't seen it in so long that she'd almost forgotten it ever existed.

Seeing him so rigidly angry made her want to take the words back. Back-peddling, she stammered, “Well you can't really blame him. I mean I am-” She was cut off by his hand being violently thrust forward. “Do. Not. Finish that sentence Miss Granger.”, he hissed angrily. Composing himself he continued in a much more reasonable tone, “You are not frigid. You have been traumatized by something no one should have to go through. Perhaps if you shared a bit with the boy.”
“I can’t. You know that.”, she cried exasperatedly. “Even if I didn’t tell him the who of it…” She trailed off before mumbling pitifully, “He’d never look at me without pity again.” Severus took a deep breath and ran a hand down his face. Finally he said, “I’ll talk to the boy, shall I? I won’t mention your ordeal, just that he should learn petulance and insults will get him nowhere with the fairer sex.” Hermione looked at him with such gratitude that it stole his breath.

Later that evening Severus followed Weasley and Potter out after dinner. Miss Granger had sat with Mr. Longbottom and Miss. LoveGood. Greeting Potter with a nod, he turned to Weasley. “A word Mr. Weasley”, he intoned imperiously with an arch of his brow. He turned not waiting for an answer and led Weasley to a deserted corridor.

Turning he saw that the imbecile looked nervous. Good. Without warning Severus rammed him against the stone wall and shoved his forearm against his throat. He then leaned in close and whispered in his ear, “Mr. Weasley I may not have enjoyed being a death eater, but I assure you I learned quite a bit while in Voldemort's employ. If you ever so much as think another disparaging remark about Miss Granger I. Will. Gut. You. Like the squealing little piglet that you are. Do you understand me?” At Weasley's panicked nodding, Severus stepped back and smoothed his robes. As he turned to go, he threw over his shoulder, “Have some pride man. If she doesn't want you there are sure to be other witches who do.”

No one heard from Ron for the rest of the night, but the next morning he asked to speak with Hermione privately. Though she was leery of what he might say to further damage her self-image she followed him out of the Great Hall and into the empty corridor. He scratched the back of his head and looked anywhere but at her as he said, “I was out of line yesterday. I knew it as soon as you ran off. Sending Snape after me wasn't necessary, but I understand why you did it. I deserved worse than the theatrics he used honestly.”

Hermione wasn't sure if she were more surprised at his lack of anger or his quick apology, but she was relieved that their friendship hadn't ended because of her fear of intimacy. She exhaled the breath that she didn't realize she held and smiled at him. “Oh Ron, you're forgiven and I'm not sure what Professor Snape said to you, but I regretted telling him about yesterday when I saw how angry he got. I was a bit worried he'd get physical with you, so it's good to see you in one piece.” She joked. As she began to walk away she didn't see him blanch at her mention of violence, nor the dark figure standing guard behind a pillar.
To Propose to a Granger

Chapter by seiko_udoku (Halcyon_Fairy)

The school year got off to a better start than any year previously and Hermione threw herself at her course-work like a woman possessed. Though some may have thought her mental for aiming to earn twelve NEWTS, she just liked to consider herself ambitious. Professor Snape had playfully mocked her, saying she wanted to beat his record of ten.

Severus himself found he finally had the freedom to be, if not agreeable, reasonable. He had formed hesitant friendships with most of his colleagues and even a few students. Then there was Hermione Granger. He tried to keep her in the box labeled student and comrade, but his useless lump of a heart always seemed to stutter around her.

He wasn't quite sure when he stopped seeing her as someone he had victimized and started seeing her as a beautiful young woman, but he'd spent many nights wallowing in self-loathing. He never made any advancements towards her or disclosed his feelings for her, but even seeing her as attractive made him slightly ill.

He'd told himself the only reason for his anger at Weasley had been that she deserved better after everything, but deep down he knew there was another reason as well. He didn't want Weasley fawning over her. Hell he didn't want Weasley looking at her. He wasn't good enough for her. But then Severus wasn't, and could never even dream to be, good enough for her.

He knew realistically that the main reason he even felt this way about her is that she'd never looked at him with pure hatred, even while he'd violated her. There had been moments where she'd flinched or shied away in fear, but she'd never hated him as everyone else in his acquaintance was wont to do at some point or another. She even had more reason than most to despise him, but against all odds she'd decided to instead become his friend. What an odd duck Miss Granger was.

He'd remembered how nervous he was to go back to teaching and how Albus' kind words and Minerva's stoic support could not calm him, but one touch upon the arm and a soft word from Miss Granger had felt like a spiritual calming drought. She'd told him he was free to be himself, so he decided to test his wings.

He'd not slammed the door open, but had pushed it open with a brisk purpose. He'd not derided nor insulted any of his students. He'd even answered a few questions from the brave few that asked. When the eighth years had come in, he'd walked up to Longbottom and shook his hand for killing that thrice damned snake.
Now months later, he was interrupted from his musing at the high table by the arrival of the owl post. He retrieved *Potions Quarterly* from a plate of scrambled eggs and moved *The Daily Prophet* aside for later study. Just as he was becoming engrossed in an article about the uses of Appaloosa Puffskeins in potions, he heard a commotion spread across the hall and Miss Granger fled the hall clutching *The Daily Prophet*.

Looking down, he flinched at the headline splashed across the front page. **New Legislation Requiring Marriage Within Three Months**, it read. If a witch or wizard were unable or unwilling to find a match for themselves, the ministry would appoint them one. Dear Merlin, had the ministry lost their minds? The article claimed that the majority of the Wizengamot approved of this new law. They'd be eaten alive by angry witches.

Throwing it down in disgust, he ignored Minerva and Albus' attempts at discussion of the article and left in search of Miss Granger. She didn't have anyone else she could talk to about why she was so adverse to relationships and she had come to him many times over the last year. He had been reluctant at first to be her confidant, but as she'd pointed out if he refused her she had no one. So he had listened to her when she needed it, which wasn't as often as he might have expected and not nearly as painful. She never mentioned WHY she had issues with intimacy or being touched, just what had occurred to upset her recently.

Severus finally found her in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom after asking The Baron for help in locating her. He didn't think twice about entering the rarely used girl's toilet as he strode in warding the door heavily behind him. She sat curled up under the sink with her face buried in her knees. She lifted her face at the sound of his entrance and her face crumbled when she saw him.

“What will I do?” She wailed piteously. “I'm n-not r-r-readyy.” He strode forward and dropped to his knees in front of her, shushing her. “Shh, we'll just have to find you someone else that has no interest in being married.”, he murmured already going through a list of candidates in his head. “No man is going to agree to marry me without sex Professor!”, she sighed.

He looked at her for a long moment before clearing his throat. He hoped he wasn't about to make a huge mistake. He quietly suggested, “You could marry me, if you'd like.” She looked stunned for a moment and he felt his pulse quicken as he added, “In name only. I would never harm you again. I would do anything to protect you from further pain.”

Without warning, she threw her arms around his neck ending up in his lap. Before he could panic about any possible response his body might have to her, she withdrew and thanked him as she wiped at her eyes. After she composed herself, she looked at him calculatingly and asked, “Are you sure about this? You could find yourself a nice witch-” She was cut off by his laughter.
“Yes I'm sure, you insufferable Gryffindor. I have no more interest in spouse hunting than you do.”, he said exasperatedly, though he didn't add that it was because he'd be happy to have her. She gave him a relieved smile and breathed, “Well I guess I'll have to save you from that then. We Gryffindors have a hero complex I've been told.” At this he smiled a genuine smile and replied, “It's one of your house's better traits.”

Shaking himself from his sappy thoughts, Severus kneeled up on one knee and took her hands in his. He cleared his throat nervously and asked, “Hermione Jean Granger, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” She gave him a blinding smile and replied, “The honor would be mine, Sir.” “you'll have to learn to use my name, you know. Are you sure your heart can take it?”, he quipped.

She laughed and said, “Yes Severus.”

And that is when Severus Snape knew he had no chance. His heart had given itself away, quite without his permission. He wished it had chosen an obtainable target this time, but when had anything ever gone his way in life. He was thankful that at least he knew enough not to ruin his friendship this time. He told himself resolutely as he picked himself up off the floor that he would never tell his Fiance how he felt.
To Meet The Parents

Chapter by seiko_udoku (Halcyon_Fairy)

Chapter Notes

This chapter was really hard. I originally wrote an angsty scene between Severus and Harry, but it didn't feel real. I think Harry is too mature after the final battle to be a sullen brat anymore. Anyway, sorry it took so long. I hope you enjoy it.

Hermione spent the rest of the day talking to her friends and other students about the law. She didn't tell anyone about her engagement to Severus, but asked Harry to meet her after dinner in her rooms. By the time she got to her rooms, she was a nervous wreck. She stopped pacing mid-stride as he knocked on her door. Staring at it for a moment, she willed this conversation to go well.

Harry was much less antagonistic towards his professor after the end of the war and one could even say they were on friendly terms, but she didn't know how he would take this news. She crossed her room swiftly and opened the door to him. After they had sat down, she braced herself and spoke, “Harry, I'm not ready to get married and I'm not ready for anything that comes with it. I've found someone who had agreed to marry me, but we won't have a relationship.”

He looked more calculating than surprised and that scared her, honestly. “Ron won't like it, but he'll come around eventually.” He grinned and then added ruefully, “Well after the initial explosion. Are you sure about this?” Hermione had a feeling Harry had already worked out who is was and her suspicions were proven right when he added, “Doesn't he want to try to find someone? He could be happy if he tried.”

She closed her eyes feeling guilty as she responded, “I asked him the same thing Harry, but he said he has no interest in wife hunting.” He had that calculating look again as he said, “You know, I know you said you're not ready, but I could see you being good for each other eventually.” At her incredulous look he added hastily, “I mean think about it 'Mione. You're both bloody brilliant and you have a lot of the same interests. Also, you can give each other what you both need.”

“And just what is it you think we need”, She asked somewhat defensively. He smiled sadly as he answered, “Well you need to feel safe. After everything that happened, you don't need to feel pressured and he won't. Don't look all panicky like that, I'm pretty sure Ron hasn't figured it out, but I know you wouldn't be that jumpy with us for nothing. You don't like anyone to touch you anymore.” In a small voice she asked, “And him? What does he need?” Shrugging he murmured, “What he never had. To be loved.”
Hermione lay awake most of the night thinking about what Harry had said. She didn't know if she'd ever feel safe enough to love anyone, but even if she did, she doubted it could be him. Harry didn't know it had been Professor Snape who had hurt her. If he did, he probably wouldn't be so accepting. Hell, he'd probably try to kill him if he ever found out. No matter that it was the right choice or that he'd protected her.

She figured he was right about Ron, but she was actually afraid to tell him. It would hurt his pride to have lost to Severus and he'd probably lash out in a huge way. Even if she explained that she wasn't ready, she could see him trying to change her mind. He'd liked her for almost as long as she'd liked him growing up, so she could empathize. But really, she couldn't see it working with Ron even if she didn't have intimacy issues now. He was Quidditch mad and she was brainy. They'd never had anything in common save their friendship, Harry, and the war.

As her thoughts turned back to Severus, she sighed and curled up tighter. He deserved better than this, whatever this was. He probably hadn't been lying when he said he didn't want to marry anyone, but he was free now that the war was won. He could at the very least be dating without her in the way. She wondered briefly if he would cheat on her and then had to laugh at herself. It wouldn't be cheating in any case since they wouldn't really be a couple. As she drifted off she felt hollow and sad, but at least she felt safe.

The next day, Severus caught her in the hallway and asked her to come to his rooms to talk. She'd been to his rooms a few times before and it had never made her nervous, but today she felt jumpy and unsure of herself. She sat stiffly on his dark brown couch as he prepared her tea with his back turned. She took a few calming breaths and chided herself. Did she think he would pounce on her? No. Did that stop her mind from imagining it. Also, no.

“You know if you think much harder over there, you might short-circuit.”, he teased and then added more seriously, “I promise I'll not ever touch you without your express permission, Hermione.” As he handed her her tea, she felt wrong footed for being so transparent. “I'm sorry, I know you aren't going to hurt me. That was the whole point of this. I don't mean to be so-” “Don't. I wasn't scolding you, I was reassuring you. You have every right to feel how you do. Now on to the reason I asked you here so early in the day. I thought we could go see your parents today unless you have plans?”
Hermione cursed inwardly. She hadn't even thought about having to tell her parents about this. She'd only seen them a handful of times after the end of the war and they were just as loving and doting as ever. It was too much for her. She found herself shying away from her father and she knew it hurt him, but she couldn't explain. How could she.

Finally she found her voice and answered, “Today is fine. What should we tell them?” He raised a brow and countered, “Well I suppose that depends on what they already know?” “Not much really. They know you’re my professor, because I would write to them about potions sometimes. They know almost nothing of the war, but they are aware I fought in it.” He sighed as he leaned back in his chair. “What do they know of my....personality?” She understood his hidden meaning. Had she bad-mouthed him? Told her parents about how cruel he was as her teacher?

She looked at her hands clasped in her lap as she answered meekly, “I never shared much of my negative experiences at Hogwarts with them. They know that I respect you and that I admire your intellect. They know that yours was my most challenging class and one of my favorite subjects. I did mention the night you saved us from Professor Lupin, but I glossed over how dangerous it was.”

He looked surprised as he asked, “Are you saying they may have a somewhat good impression of me?” At her nod, he chuckled and stood. “Well let's get this over with then. I'm going to change into some muggle attire. I assume you'll want to dress up as well. Would you meet me at the entrance hall in half an hour?”

Hermione was shocked by Severus' appearance. He had on a soft green sweater and black slacks with his hair pulled back in a queue. It made him look much less intimidating and almost approachable. She herself was wearing a long-sleeved blue button down top and jeans. She felt somewhat under dressed next to him, but it was just her parents.

On the way to the apparition point, Severus asked her how she wanted to play things. They could explain the law to her parents or they could pretend to be marrying for love. She somehow didn't think her parents would understand her just docilely going along with this daft law, but she also wasn't sure she could pretend to be in love. Wouldn't her parents notice that she wasn't overly affectionate with him?

He told her he would take care of the details, so she let it go with a sigh mingled with fear and relief as she placed her hand on his arm to apparate. They hadn't told her parents they were coming, so her mother opened the door wearing her infamous gaudy apron that she only wore on Sundays when making her dad's favorite, pancakes. She looked surprised for a moment and then was rushing forward to envelope Hermione in a warm hug that was stiffly returned.
She ushered them in as she called out to her dad. “Honey, Hermione’s here and she brought a guest. Put your book down and come say hello to your daughter.” As Severus studied the woman, he was shocked at how much Hermione took after her. She had the same unruly chestnut hair and petite build and though her eyes were blue, they held the warmth and laughter that her daughter's did.

And as Richard Granger turned the corner into the sitting room Severus saw Hermione's eyes looking at him in puzzlement from a stern looking man slightly shorter than himself with salt and pepper hair. “Hullo dear. I’m glad you’re here. I found the most interesting article the other day about Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome that I'd like you to read. Oh, but we can discuss it later.”, He said distractedly as he looked to Severus questioningly.

Hermione cleared her throat and said, “Mum, Dad, this is Severus Snape. Severus, this is my mother Helen Granger and my Dad Richard Granger.” Severus shook both their hands and said smoothly, “A pleasure to finally meet you both. Hermione has told me so much about you.” Richard looked at him suspiciously and said, “Really, she’s not told us much about you.” Helen elbowed him and interrupted, “You're Hermione's Potion's teacher right? The one who spied for the order.”

Severus looked rather embarrassed as he said, “Yes, I am. However, I'm not here as Hermione's professor today.” Richard looked quite angry as he stood from his chair. “No. I suppose you're not are you. How long has this been going on?” Hermione jumped up as well and stammered, “Dad you've misunderstood. Severus-”, but Severus cut in quietly looking at Richard calmly, “Hermione and I developed a closer relationship over the past year. It is not uncommon for witches and wizards to begin courting at age sixteen and Hermione is seventeen, of legal age in our world.”

“I don't give a flying fig about your age of consent or dating norms. I'm more concerned that you're carrying on with a child under your care.”, He retorted hotly. A hint of steel entered Severus' eye as he said, “Though you seem to be mistaken about the nature of our relationship, Hermione Granger is not merely a child. She is the most brilliant woman I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. She has been through a war and played a key role in our victory. If you think I could take advantage of her even if I had the inclination you don't know your daughter very well.” Hermione looked thunderstruck for a moment at the glowing praise, before returning to fretting over her father's reaction.

Helen remained quiet with a calculating look in her eye throughout the whole exchange, but then she smiled cheerily and said, “Oh Richard, you and Hermione have a seat will you. Severus and I will go fetch some tea, shall we.” And without waiting for a response she went into the kitchen. Severus looked at Hermione questioningly as he followed obediently.
As the door shut behind them Richard crossed his arms and huffed, “Well? How serious is this?” She looked away from him and mumbled, “Pretty serious.” He scoffed and studied her for a moment. Some of the anger faded from him as he asked, “Do you love him?” Hermione stupidly hadn't expected that question and her only response was to blush furiously and gape at him. She fidgeted as she asked, “Dad if we weren't in love do you think I would have brought him here?” Being friends with a Slytherin seemed to be paying off, because though she'd not answered him, he relaxed visibly and groused, “Well, there's that at least.”

Meanwhile in the kitchen Severus stood nervously behind Helen Granger as she put the kettle on. Though she'd not raised her voice or cast any aspirations on his character yet, he found himself more afraid of her reaction. As she turned around with a predatory look, he felt justified.

“Hermione has kept much of her Wizarding life separate from us, but as a mother I know things.” She began nonchalantly. “Tell me Severus. Do you know what happened to my daughter during the war?” He tried to look calm as he replied offhandedly, “I was along side her for much of the war. We went through some ordeals together.” Her face lost most of it's warmth as she asked, “Do you know who hurt her? Someone did. Even if she won't tell me, I know.”

Severus felt sick as he simply said, “yes, I do.” “Were you with her when it happened?” His hair fell forward as he nodded once. He waited for the condemnation, but instead she made a sad little sound and wrapped her arms around him. “You're the one she told us about aren't you? You're the one who rescued her when The Dark Wizard took her aren't you?”

Severus was appalled that she seemed to know about Hermione's assault, but before he could make a fool of himself, she continued. “She wouldn't tell us what happened, but she said that she was taken and that someone came and brought her back safely. She told me she'd become good friends with him, but she never mentioned you were dating.” She stepped back from him and wiped her damp eyes as she huffed, “I'm so relieved. She's not been the same when she comes home. She hardly even lets us touch her, but if you're dating she must not be too traumatized. She wouldn't date if she weren't ready, she's a smart girl.”

Severus fought down the urge to vomit as they returned to the sitting room. They all sipped their tea rather awkwardly until Helen cleared her throat and asked, “So Hermione, did you just want to show off your new beau or did you both stop by for a reason?” Hermione opened her mouth, but it was Severus who answered, “I asked her to bring me to meet you. I didn't quite tell her why, though she didn't really question me either.” He then turned his full attention to Hermione.

He smiled a bit crookedly at her as he said, “I've wanted to ask you something for quite a while. I hope I'm not being presumptuous by asking on our first trip here together.” He then slid gracefully off the sofa to kneel in front of her and Hermione felt her heart go into her throat. She'd not expected
him to put on such a show for her parents' benefit and she was having trouble reminding herself that he wasn't being completely sincere. Severus Snape was a consummate actor. The way he was looking at her made her pulse race and her face heat, but no, this was an act.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black box and opened it as he said, “Hermione Jean Granger, would you make me the happiest wizard alive, by becoming my wife?” She looked at him searchingly for a moment. He seemed so sincere, it hurt. She didn't even realize she was crying until he gently wiped her cheek. “Yes. Yes I would love that Severus.”, she said thickly.

Her mother was making happy little noises in the background as he slid the ring onto her finger. It was a beautiful platinum band with runes for love and friendship woven throughout and it had a single stone that shone bright shades of purple, green, blue, and pink. “It's stunning”, She breathed. “what is it?” “It's a magical variety of fire opal. The protection spells woven into it is what gives it that glow.”, he said bashfully. He looked so earnest that Hermione felt herself leaning towards him.

Helen chose that moment to interrupt by saying airily, “We're so happy for you darling. Aren't we Richard?” Richard immediately closed his mouth with an audible click and then swallowed. “Yes. If you're sure about this, then we're very happy for you both sweetling.” And with that, Severus' first time meeting the parents came to a close.

As they reappeared from apparating, Hermione left her hand resting on his forearm. “Severus, thank you. You didn't have to do all this, but thank you so much.” He turned to her and rested his hand atop hers as he replied, “You deserved nothing less, Hermione.”
The next day, Hermione could tell that Harry had spoken to Ron right away. When he looked up from his breakfast his face lost all of its color. She thought about turning around and fleeing the Great Hall, but she wasn’t a Gryffindor for nothing. She took a fortifying breath and sat across from him.

“Alright, Ron?”, she asked nervously and was rewarded with a grimace. “Erm. Congratulations 'Mione. I heard you're getting married.”, he said as he squirmed and mashed his eggs with a spoon. “Yes, well. I am, but you don't have to congratulate me. Neither of us much want to marry anyone.”, she replied. He looked up at her with a hurt look and then asked quietly, “Are you sure about this 'Mione? You'd rather be stuck in a loveless marriage than to try to be with someone you might come to love one day? I could make you happy.”

She shook her head sadly and replied, “No, Ron, you couldn't. And I could never make you happy either. You'd want someone to dote on you like Molly does Author and I plan on having a career. I'm not sure if I want kids yet either. I don't think you'd want to sit by the fire with a good book like I'd want either.” He looked resigned and said, “I get it. It doesn't mean I like it, but I get it.” He got up and left without another word.

Truthfully, the conversation had gone much better than she expected. It still upset her that she had hurt Ron, but at least he didn't seem to be angry or done with her friendship. She glanced up at the head table to see Severus studying her over his steepled fingers. She smiled and nodded to him as she also left breakfast. She didn't have much appetite these days.

Later Hermione was studying in the library when Severus sat across from her. “We'll need to meet Albus and Minerva to discuss our engagement.”, he said with a wry smile. Hermione closed her Transfiguration book with a thud as she realized the whole school would know they were married. She didn't know if she could stand the ridicule that would induce.

She cleared her throat and nodded, “Yes. I suppose they'll need to be told sooner rather than later. What will we say to them?” He shrugged and said offhandedly, “It makes no difference to me. We could try to repeat what we told your parents, though I doubt Minerva would fall for it. Albus is daft enough to believe it readily. Or...” He looked at her seriously, “We could tell them a partial truth of what happened last year. You wouldn't be forced to give details. You have my word.”
“Can’t we just tell them I’m a lesbian and you’re saving me from heterosexual sex?”, she joked in a panicky voice. Severus looked appalled as he asked, “Are you?” “Merlin no, Severus.”, she laughed. “I’ve always fancied boys.” He looked relieved as he said, “Don’t scare me like that woman.” And then mischievously added, “But I suppose I am enough to put anyone off men.”

Instead of the laugh he had hoped this would produce, her expression turned thunderous as she replied, “That isn’t funny, Severus. If things were different-” She trailed off sullenly, looking away from him as her face heated up. He barely heard her as she continued, “If it hadn't happened, I could see myself fancying you.”

Her statement both hurt him and made him feel strangely happy. He knew it wasn't said in seriousness, she'd have never looked twice at him under normal circumstances, but it was a sweet thing to say. He decided this sugary lie might be his new Patronus memory. Even if she didn't mean it, no one else had ever even lied and said they fancied him.

They decided to talk to Albus and Minerva after dinner. So it was that Hermione spent the rest of the day tense and irritable. By the time dinner came around she found that she still had no appetite. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten a full meal, but she also couldn't remember the last time the thought of food didn't put her off. Her stomach was understandably in knots by the time she met Severus at the gargoyle in front of the headmaster's office.

He nodded to her and spoke the password and they both stepped onto the stairs. He seemed nearly as tense as she was and she could tell he was occluding much more than he usually did these days. When they stepped into Dumbledore's office, he didn't seem surprised to see them. “Ah, Severus, Hermione, come in. Come in. I was just about to invite Minerva for a spot of tea. Her presence wouldn't be a hindrance?”, He asked with twinkling eyes.

Severus narrowed his own eyes as he replied, “Not at all. We had rather hoped you would. I take it you know why we're here then?” “Oh, come now Severus. We can't have all the fun before Minerva gets here. Let me just fetch her, shall I?” As he shambled away to the Floo Severus scoffed disbelievingly. “I had hoped to shock him for once, but it seems he's still a step ahead.” This caused Hermione to giggle like he had hoped, effectively lightening the mood.

Though the Headmaster already suspected the reason for their visit, it seemed his deputy was not equally all-knowing. “Well, it's a pleasant surprise for you to join us Severus. It took you long enough to finally accept the invitation.”, She said warmly, before her eyes settled on her star pupil. Her smile faltered as she asked, “Or is this not a social visit?”
“No I'm afraid it isn't. Miss Granger and I need to discuss a matter of grave importance with you both, though it seems Albus is already aware.”, he said exasperatedly. “And what matter is this?”, she asked briskly. Dumbledore set about pouring the tea as he said jovially, “Miss Granger is to be married of course.”

Minerva looked quite angry as she said sourly, “Yes, I'm aware of that. All witches who've reached maturity have to find a spouse.” She had just brought the tea to her lips as Severus decided shocking her was second best to shocking Albus and said, “She's to marry me.”

As he had hoped, Minerva sputtered and choked on her tea. Albus clapped and said, “Splendid. Splendid. I believe you'll be quite the happy match.” As Minerva recovered from nearly asphyxiating on caffeine, she scowled and admonished him, “That isn't remotely funny Severus.” “No it isn't.”, he agreed with an arched brow and slight smirk.

Hermione cleared her throat and addressed her head of house, “Professor Snape has agreed to marry me so that I can avoid a true marriage.” Stunned, Minerva replied, “I know you'd rather not be mandated into this, but surely you'd rather someone more-“ She trailed off ineffectively. She didn't mean to insult Severus, but regardless she had insulted Hermione's sensibilities.

She scowled and said, “With all due respect Professor, I'd rather marry Severus than some bludger brained bore. Putting aside the fact that we don't plan on having a physical relationship, Severus is one of my very best friends and I would like to think the sentiment is returned. I see no problem with our becoming roommates.”

Severus felt an achy sort of warmth at her words, before Minerva continued undeterred, “Be that as it may, one day you will be ready to explore romance and you don't want to be stuck in a loveless marriage.” Hermione shook her head sadly, “Professor the war cost me many things. I'm not sure I'll ever want to date anyone. If that time ever comes...” She looked at Severus as she said, “We'll discuss it then.”

Minerva looked stricken as her words and their meaning sank in, but Albus unsurprisingly did not seem ruffled. It seemed that was another secret he was already aware of. He purposefully stirred his tea loudly and said, “Well congratulations again. When will the wedding be held?” “We hadn't discussed any details yet.”, Severus answered smoothly.

After the silence stretched out awkwardly Minerva asked in a small voice, “Will you be having a full ceremony?” Hermione looked questioningly to Severus and he said, “I had hoped to one day- It is no matter if you would prefer not to. After all, it would be a farce.” Hermione hesitated before saying, “I think we should. Just because the Ministry is forcing our hand doesn't mean we can't try to find a way to enjoy it.”
Hermione truthfully didn't know how a wedding ceremony would go for a couple marrying in name only, but if it would make Severus happy she was willing to do it. She also knew that her mother would be livid if she did the Wizarding equivalent to eloping. She was sure that saying her vows in front of a few guests wouldn't be much more awkward than saying them privately. She was actually shocked that Severus would want to go through with a big to-do, but he'd been denied many things and she wouldn't add to that list.

Minerva looked pleased as she said, “I have a lovely set of robes from my own wedding if you would like to see them. I had planned to pass them on to Morgana, but my wee lass never married.” Hermione was surprised to hear both that Professor McGonagall had married and that she had a daughter, but agreed readily, “I'd love that.” Minerva beamed as she said, “It's settled then. I'll air them out and you can stop by tomorrow evening to look at them.”

As they left the office, Hermione touched Severus' arm and said, “We really haven't discussed anything. I had thought if we weren't marrying for the obvious reasons we wouldn't need to, but that's not quite right is it? I didn't know you wanted a real wedding. There are probably other things we should know going forward.” He grimaced and said, “If you've changed your mind I won't be angry. I shouldn't have sprung that on you. We can go to the Ministry if you prefer.”

“I didn't say that.”, she huffed. “I just meant we need to know our plans. Like where we plan to live, my plans after graduation, finances, those sorts of things.” Severus looked hesitant before nodding and saying, “Meet me tomorrow and we'll discuss it then. I have a potion I must attend to at the moment.” And with that he made a hasty retreat.

Truthfully, Severus knew most of the answers to her questions. Though they were sensible things for a woman to ask her intended, he knew she may not like his answers. He planned to sell his home in Spinner's End and purchase a home in or near Hogsmead. As for her plans, though he would love to discuss them and hear about her goals, he really felt he had no say in them. Whatever she chose, he would support her. Money was the least of his concerns. He'd worked over twenty years without spending much of his salary since he was fed and housed and kept in potions ingredients by the school for most of the year and lived in a paid off cesspool during the Summer. He planned to take care of any and all of her needs. He knew she would balk at the idea. Bleeding honorable Gryffindor. Well he would deal with that argument when it came.
When Hermione came to see Severus the next day, she was surprised to see Narcissa sitting primly on his sofa. She stood and hugged Hermione. She was one of the few people Hermione didn't flinch away from, surprisingly. “Oh it's good to see you.”, she said as they both sat down. The two hadn't seen each other much since the Malfoys' trials in which Hermione testified on their behalf.

Severus watched on with quiet satisfaction. Helen had already admitted to not being much of an even planner and he knew Narcissa could help Hermione plan a nice affair.

“I've been told congratulations are in order?”, Narcissa said with a smirk. Hermione paled a bit and stammered, “Well we're not- I mean it isn't-” Narcissa waved her away and conceded sympathetically, “I understand it's not a conventional union, but we must make the best of the situation we're given. You'd be hard pressed to find someone more devoted and loyal than our Severus here.”

“Cissy!”, He hissed warningly. She rolled her eyes at him and turned back to Hermione. “He doesn't like his better traits acknowledged, but you knew this I'm sure.” He huffed and she continued unperturbed, “Have you thought about what venue you would like to use for the ceremony? I would offer the manor, but I doubt you'd like to hold it there.” No, Hermione definitely didn't want to get married where she had been tortured.

She looked to Severus, but he arched a brow at her inquiringly, being no help whatsoever. Looking back to Narcissa she replied meekly, “I always pictured getting married outside somewhere, but it doesn't really matter. I'd rather we did what would make Severus happy.” He crossed his arms and asked cautiously, “Would it make you unhappy to make an affair of it? You don't need to try to please me, Hermione. I'm already the one getting the better deal here. I won't be stalked by the likes of Trelawney or Rita Skeeter if I have a beautiful young bride on my arm.”

She blushed at the compliment and thought seriously about his question. Finally she replied pensively, “No, I think I could rather enjoy dressing up and maybe some dancing if you weren't adverse to it. Where had you thought of being married?”

He smiled a slow smile at the image that roused of her wearing silken robes and dancing in his arms, before uncrossing his arms and leaning forward conspiratorially. “I'd always envisioned an outdoor wedding as well. With string instruments playing in the background as my bride and I took to the
floor.” He then cleared his throat and looked down, clearly feeling vulnerable for admitting to such.

Narcissa gave Hermione a private feminine smile before saying sweetly, “Well we'll have to find you a nice outdoor setting then. How many shall be in attendance?” She pulled out a quill and parchment as she said the last. Hermione winced and said, “I'd like my parents, Harry, and the Weasleys if that's not too much.” Severus nodded and added, “You and your family will obviously attend, Narcissa. I should think the Hogwarts staff should be invited, but otherwise I have no one I wish to attend.”

Narcissa wrote the names down and muttered, “A very intimate setting then.” She then looked up and asked, “And do you both have any preferences to colors?” Hermione impishly replied, “I suppose Severus will say black, all black.” She was shocked by his hearty laughter. She'd never heard him laugh so freely.

He shook his head and smiled rolling his eyes. “No, I should think that the occasion would call for some modicum of colour. I suppose that's better left to Cissy and yourself however. I don't have much experience, you see.” At his last statement Cissy merely raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps once we choose robes for you we can plan the décor around them?” “Oh I won't be choosing robes. Professor McGonagall has offered me hers.”

Humming Severus said, “Yes but you've yet to see them and for all you know they could be tartan.” “You're being so cheeky today Severus. I think it's lovely that Hermione has someone to offer such a gesture. What of your mother dear?”

Hermione blushed and looked anywhere but in their direction, “Oh well my mother was a bit of a free spirit in her younger years. Her dress was...interesting, but not for me I'm afraid. I don't believe Severus could handle THAT much color.” This earned the mocking laughter of both her companions.

“Well I suppose we can iron out more details later, dear. This is a good start. I'll begin work on looking for your venue and owl you with the prospects.” She stood and hugged them both in turn and then let herself out. Hermione was left once again feeling overwhelmed by the whole concept of her upcoming nuptials.

Severus looked at her placidly and asked, “Are you alright?” She heard the faint strain to his voice and her attention snapped to his eyes where she could see his fear simmering behind his shields. He would probably be mortified to learn that she could read him so easily these days, but without his bitterness and anger to push her away she had learned what to look for.

She smiled wanly and reassured him, “I'm fine Severus. I think I'll actually enjoy this when the time
comes, but it's a bit much to take in at the moment. I mean I've not really ever even dated unless you count the Yule Ball with Victor Krum and here I am planning my wedding.”

Severus' heart lurched at the thought of how she must be feeling about everything that has happened and now another choice was being taken away from her. He almost regretted being the one she was being forced to marry, but better him than some sleazy wizard who would force his attentions on her. And what a joke that was, because he already had done that. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, the look she shot him gave him pause.

“I know that look Severus Snape. Whatever you're about to say is going to be self-deprecating and completely daft. I hope you understand that I am grateful that you're doing this for me. I still feel a bit guilty though. You should be free to pursue your own attachments without me in your way.” Her eyes drifted to the fire and her expression was so lost that it stole his breath.

He wanted to go to her, but thought better of it. It would be no comfort to have him touch her and he had promised never without her permission. Instead he replied glibly, “Now who is being daft woman? I have no interest in trying to form attachments. I'm a Slytherin. I am doing this just as much for myself as for you.” Perhaps his statement would have hurt or angered her in another lifetime, but after everything it was exactly what she needed to hear. He was using her just as she was using him; for protection. She could live with that.

Hermione left Severus' quarters and went straight to Minerva's. When she pulled out the large white box and untied the red bow, Hermione felt a sense of anticipation she had not expected. Really she was a girl after all, so it was reasonable to be excited over a chance to dress up right? Right.

She couldn't help but gasp as Professor McGonagall lifted the lid to reveal the most stunning rose petal pink robes. Though she didn't think the color really suited her complexion, she had never seen finer robes anywhere. They shimmered in the light and were soft to the touch. “Oh they're so lovely.” She blinked back tears as she imagined what it would be like to wear these robes for someone she loved.

“They're even more lovely than they look at first glance. There are charms stitched into the very fabric. It's of fae origin, you see. They enhance the emotions of the person wearing them and are said to heighten the bonding experience. There are several protection and domestic charms upon them and they can become any color you like. I think a nice warm amber would look lovely on you my dear. Why don't you try them on and we can size them to you?”
As Hermione stepped out of Professor McGonagall's en suite, she did a small turn for the woman. Minerva wiped briskly at her eyes as she said, “Oh lass you look stunning. Now come let me fuss over the fit.” Minerva swished her wand here and flicked there until the robes clung to her curves in a becoming, yet modest, way. She'd have made them a bit more showy, but was hesitant after what Hermione had revealed the previous night in Albus' office.

Minerva was circling the girl with a critical eye when she noticed something odd. She was wearing her cloth wand holster. That wouldn't be so out of place to have forgotten, but just above the top she could make out an angry red line of flesh. Hermione caught her gaze and murmured, “old wound from the war.”

“My dear it doesn't look old. Has Poppy looked at it?” Hermione shook her head vehemently. “No. It's from a cursed blade, there's nothing she can do. Please don't tell anyone.” Nodding, Minerva lifted her wand and elongated the thin straps of the dress to long trumpet sleeves. “Does Severus know?”

Hermione looked rebellious as she huffed, “He may, though I hope not. He wanted to treat it, after, but I wouldn't let him. I was so ashamed.” For the first time in so long, Hermione's shields broke as she began to sob. Minerva pulled her into her arms as she cried. “There now darling. Shhh. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You’ve been so brave for so long.”

Hermione pulled away breathing raggedly after a few moments. “I've researched it extensively. There's no way to heal it. I don't want him to see it. It's so ugly.” Minerva cut her off heatedly, “Severus would think no less of you. I'm willing to bet he has many more scars than you do lass. He may even know a way to help you that you've not found in a book. He is a Potions Master after all.”

Hermione only shook her head in denial. “He mustn't see it. Please don't tell him.”, She begged. Through everything she'd gone through, the cub had never asked anything of her, so Minerva couldn't deny her now. She would keep her confidence. “Very well, but I think you really aren't being fair to Severus. He cares deeply for you, even if not romantically.”

Though to be honest, Minerva had trouble believing that Severus didn't feel anything for her cub. His intentions in this engagement were noble to be sure. He would never force himself on the girl. That was given, but she could see how he softened around Hermione. If she allowed herself to care for him, he would be a stalwart companion to her. As Minerva saw her out, she was troubled by the convolutedness of the whole situation. She only hoped that they would learn to love each other, so that they could both heal.
For those of you wondering why Severus and Hermione didn't have their little discussion they had planned, well he distracted her with Narcissa didn't he? ;)

To Choose A House

Chapter by seiko_udoku (Halcyon_Fairy)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As November gave way to December, Hermione spent her evenings with Severus, Cissy, and Professor McGonagall planning her wedding and her weekends were spent either visiting or writing her parents. Her mother was brimming with maternal pride and excitement and even her father had warmed to Severus a bit after he had sent his ancient copy of *The Winter's Tale*. She would still find herself smiling at the deviousness of that gesture.

They had decided that December 23rd would be as good a day as any other to marry. The holiday would give her time to move her things and have them set up as she liked and give them time to get used to sharing quarters. The Headmaster had had a room added to Severus’ quarters for her and it was beautiful.

One whole wall was a viewing window of the lake and two walls were covered from floor to ceiling in bookshelves. The bed was lovely, if a little intimidating. There were light blue sheer curtains and plump soft pillows and much too much room for one person. It looked like a bed from a smutty romance novel. Somehow, she didn't think it would ever be used the way it seemed to be intended.

Drawing her thoughts away from unlikely and frightening scenarios, she tried to focus on the text in front of her. She had been having increasing difficulty concentrating on her studies with all the talk of not only her own wedding, but also the weddings of all the other adult students. Harry and Ginny planned to marry in January, Ron had already married Lavender Brown quite suddenly, Neville had proposed to Hannah Abbott, and surprisingly Draco and Luna had become engaged.

She only hoped that with all the other weddings perhaps her fellow students wouldn't focus too much on Severus and herself. For all his new-found social skills, Severus was still intensely private and she didn't relish the thought of the comments that would be made. It was bad enough in fourth year when everyone thought she'd been seducing Harry, Ron, and Victor, but to be accused of such actions with a teacher would be much more unbearable.

Finally giving it up as a lost cause, Hermione stood and stretched fighting back a yawn. She had just finished packing her things into her bag when Severus walked in. He nodded to her with a small smile. “Hermione, I'm glad I caught you. Would you be able to accompany me into Hogsmeade for some errands tomorrow?” “Sure, how long will we be gone? I still need to finish my paper for Transfiguration due Monday.”
He thought for a moment and squinted, “There is quite a bit to get done. Perhaps you could work on your paper beforehand. Do you think you could finish by noon?” At her agreement he looked positively thrilled, which made her suspicious. He was way too happy over running errands. She knew he was up to something, but he'd only tell her in his own time. She would find out tomorrow.

Hermione finished her paper with an hour to spare, so on a whim decided to dress up a bit. She wasn't sure what these errands were, but it would be the first time she'd left the castle for any reason other than seeing her parents all year. The eighth years weren't guarded as closely as normal students and she could truthfully leave any day she liked as long as she notified her head of house, but she had no desire to sneak off to Honeydukes like her contemporaries.

She dressed in a long-sleeved mint green dress and some sensible walking boots given the weather outside and then wrapped herself in cloak, scarf, and gloves. Her hair she wore down with a small clip keeping it from her face and she thought to apply makeup, but then chickened out. Once she was satisfied that she looked acceptable, she left to meet Severus at the doors.

She had hoped for some sort of reaction to her appearance, but was disappointed as his face went completely blank, wiping the slight smile from his face. There was a shiftiness about him that almost spoke of nerves, but she couldn't be sure as he wasn't meeting her eye.

He stiffly informed her that their first stop was to see an associate of Lucius' down in Hogsmeade and then stayed silent for the walk down to the village. She'd thought to try to break the silence multiple times, but nerves stopped her each time. Just as they were nearing a charming old cottage at the edge of the shopping district, Severus stopped and addressed her.

“This is it. Anguis Selwyn is a blood supremacist, but he's good at what he does. I wouldn't try to engage him in conversation if I were you, but he knows enough not to insult you in my hearing. I only agreed to use him because Lucius swears up and down that we won't find a good home in the area without him.”, he looked at her warily as he finished speaking. “I understand. I'll let you do the talking.”, she agreed wryly.

Anguis was a thin short man with beady eyes and sparse black hair. His eyes trailed over Hermione in such a manner that left her pulling her cloak tighter and shifting to stand slightly behind Severus. His ogling was lost to Severus, but her reaction was not. He turned to her with a furrowed brow as he asked, “Alright?” She nodded minutely in response, but didn't speak.
Severus introduced them and shook Anguis' hand. The man fawned over Severus and ignored Hermione completely save the occasional look to her legs or chest. They sat as his desk as he opened a portfolio and shifted several papers within until he selected three. He turned them and slid them across the desk to Severus.

“I believe these three are most suited to your needs Master Snape. The first has the biggest cellar in which to set up your lab, the second has a much bigger kitchen and library, and the third has an adjoining mistress suite to the master.”, the man said with slimy confidence.

Severus hummed noncommittally and turned to Hermione, ignoring Anguis. “I believe the third is, shall we say, in poor taste. I'd prefer to eliminate that one. The first is closest to the school, so would make for a better commute. The second seems like it would suit your tastes. What do you think?”

She blushed at the thought of the last home, but smiled as she said softly, “The decision should be yours, though you know how I feel about a nice library.” He chuckled and turned back to Anguis. “Very well. We would like to view the one on Harvest Lane first and then possibly the one close to High Street after.”

Anguis nodded and fished around in his desk drawer for a large set of keys before leading them out of his office to the apparition point. Severus held his arm out to her and he spun them away. When they arrived to Harvest Lane with a small pop, Hermione gasped softly. The cottage was so beautiful.

It was painted a soft green with dark green shutters. There was a quaint little gated fence out front and though the garden looked a bit barren at this time of year she could tell it had been painstakingly cared for. Anguis let them in and began showing them around. Hermione and Severus followed him through the house, neither paying him much attention.

Hermione was in love with the house before even entering it, but the inside was even more beautiful. The dark wooden floors and exposed beams gave the whole place such a warm and safe feeling. Though she wanted Severus to decide, she would be disappointed if he chose another house.

Severus watched Hermione surreptitiously as she looked around in awe. He hadn't seen such an unguarded look on her face in many months. With all of the upset of this bloody law and Weasley being a git, it was really no wonder. He chuckled as she nearly vibrated in pleasure at the sight of the library.

The early afternoon light was streaming in through large windows as she turned a dazzling smile on him that nearly stole his breath. “We'll take this one Mr. Selwyn.”, he croaked. Before he knew what
was happening, he had a giggling armful of Hermione Granger. She looked up at him with such happiness, he felt his eyes sting.

Slamming his shields into place, he cleared his throat and stepped back. He cursed himself as he saw her smile evaporate like so much smoke. He wished desperately to take it back, but the moment was gone and she was smiling much more sedately as she turned towards the broker. “Very good, Master Snape. I shall have the paperwork drawn up and sent to you by tomorrow afternoon.”, the man said with a sleazy smile.

Hermione was quiet as they parted ways from Anguis and Severus thought furiously of how to salvage the day. He was so caught up in self-recrimination, it took him a moment to notice that she had stopped walking with him. He looked back to find her staring at the ground in front of her, her face somber as she looked up at him.

“I'm sorry for earlier. I didn't mean to take such liberties.”, she said in a small voice. He blinked and looked at her stupidly before barking a harsh laugh. “You've no need to apologize you silly chit. I didn't intend to react so harshly.” He rubbed his neck as he continued, “You caught me by surprise. It may have escaped your notice, but I don't have much experience with people being so...happy. With me.”

She sniffed and said airily, “With me as a wife I suspect you'll just have to adapt.” She walked past leaving a stunned Severus Snape, before he shook himself and followed her with a smirk. Their next stop on their list was Gringotts. As they walked in Severus requested a meeting with the head goblin.

Hermione fidgeted as they waited until an extremely sour looking goblin approached them and directed them to an office toward the back of the bank. The sour goblin left them and the goblin behind the desk lifted a brow by way of greeting. “Wands please.”

Both Hermione and Severus placed their wands upon his desk in a tray. He looked at them and wrote something down on a parchment before folding his hands and giving them a predatory smile. “What can we do for you today Master Snape and Miss Granger?”

“Miss Granger and I are to be married. I would like to add her to my accounts and I would like to visit my vault before we leave.”, Severus drawled. The goblin hummed and looked at Hermione in surprise. “Indeed? No doubt a product of this law you humans have made? Well it is no matter to our kind. Very well.”
He pulled out some forms and used his stubby little fingers to push them across to Hermione. He indicated the quill to her right as he said in a bored tone, “These are the standard forms to join a family vault. Your personal vault will still be available for your use. We will need signatures on pages one, seven, and eleven as well as a drop of blood on page fifteen.”

Hermione looked confused as she read the forms. “Will we be adding you to my vault?” He smiled tightly and replied, “No. That won't be necessary Hermione. I have more than enough to support us. Your earnings are your own.” He waited for her to react badly, but she just sighed and picked up the quill. She muttered as she signed the various pages and then used the blade on the desk to prick her finger. “It would do me no good to argue with you, would it?” “None whatsoever.”, he agreed with a crooked smile.

After the paperwork was finished, the head goblin had Griphook lead them to Severus' vault. He taught her how to lower the wards he had in place and they entered. This vault was much larger than her own and brimming with interesting things. “Don't touch anything without asking first. I have a few dangerous items here.”, he muttered distractedly and she snatched her hand back from the book she had almost picked up.

He opened a chest and began filling a bag with items from within, but Hermione couldn't see as his back was turned. After a moment he finished and shut the trunk back with a soft thunk. He then walked over to an open chest filled with coins and filled two pouches. The first he placed in his robes and he held the second out to her.

When she made no move to take it, he huffed and jingled it. “It's for wedding expenses. Your mother, Narcissa, and Minerva will be kidnapping you soon to shop, though I wasn't supposed to inform you of that.” Hermione grudgingly took the pouch with mumbled gratitude.

He smiled tenderly at her and said, “Well then. Now that we have all that done, would you care to have dinner before we return to the school?” She smiled in response and said cheekily, “Only if you let me pay.” His face was exaggeratedly scandalous as he replied, “On the first date? I'm pretty sure it's a point of male pride that I must pay this time.”

In his joking he didn't realize what he'd said until he saw her stunned face. She asked in a hoarse voice, “Is that what this is?” His eyes widened as he held up his hands and stammered, “No. No, of course not. My apologies.” He saw a flicker of confusion and hurt before her shields slid into place.

The rest of the evening was much more subdued. Severus tried to pull her into conversation a few times, but he could tell her mood had soured. He kicked himself mentally for being such a fucking
fool. He had been enjoying her company so much that he let the fantasy of it all get away from him and his stupid tongue had hurt her.

Of course she wouldn't want to think of this in such a way. She'd never see him in a romantic light after the atrocities he had committed on her person. He had probably made the whole situation a lot more painful for her because he couldn't be satisfied with her friendship. He really needed to learn not to be such a selfish bastard, at least where she was concerned.

For Hermione's part, she spent the rest of the evening so consumed by her own thoughts that she didn't notice the dark expression on Severus' face as he mutilated his food and castigated himself. She wasn't in the habit of lying to herself, so she was quite surprised to realize she was disappointed that he didn't consider today a date.

“Of course he wouldn't see it as such you ninny”, she thought to herself caustically. What kind of perverse freak was she anyway to hope for that? He was her teacher, twenty years her senior, and after everything they'd been through? No, he'd never want that. She shouldn't either. Should she?

The walk back to Hogwarts had been strained, as had their parting. He'd nodded to her courteously and then all but fled to the dungeons. Now as Hermione lay in her bed in Gryffindor Tower, she found it hard to even contemplate sleep. What kind of Freudian defense mechanism was she experiencing?

Honestly, she had always admired her professor's intelligence and skill, but she'd never thought of him as a man before that night. She'd not really thought of many other people in that sense either though. True, she had had a small crush on Lockhart and she had dated Victor for about a week and dreamed of dating Ron, but that all felt much safer than how she felt now.

Just weeks before her wedding she shouldn't be this confused about her intended. She shouldn't be being forced to marry someone she didn't love either, but that was beside the point. Could she learn to care for him eventually? It was a possibility. It was almost a complete impossibility that he would ever return the sentiment though. She also wasn't in the habit of being a masochist, so she put thoughts of any possible romance from her head and blew out her candle to sleep.
Anguis is Latin for snake for anyone wondering where the name came from.
To Primp a Granger

Chapter by seiko_udoku (Halcyon_Fairy)

Chapter Notes

If you spot any errors, my spellcheck on my open office is giving me a fit. This chapter would have been posted yesterday otherwise.

The day after the invitations went out, Severus was visited by a rather grim faced Molly Weasley. With an inward groan he invited her inside. If he'd thought she was there to call him a lech or bemoan the fact that he'd stolen her son's hoped for bride, he was mistaken.

She sat staring into space for a moment, before her eyes settled on him once more. Hesitantly she spoke, “Are you sure about this Severus? I understand why it is you're marrying Hermione, but don't you want to try to find your own happiness?”

He visibly flinched as he asked, “And just why do you think I'm marrying her?” Her expression softened further as she said, “I was livid when I got the invitation. I thought- Well it doesn't much matter what I thought. I came to meet with Albus and he told me that he believed Hermione had been hurt during the war and that you knew that. He said you don't plan on forcing her to-”

“Of course I don't plan on bloody well forcing her. I understand the Wizarding world as a whole doesn't think much of me, but just what kind of monster do you take me for madam?”, he hissed.

She wrung her hands as she said, “No, no you misunderstand. I know you wouldn't hurt Severus. I had originally thought you had seduced her, but to harm her? I could never see you forcing yourself on anyone. I only meant that Albus had explained the nature of your upcoming marriage.”

She was puzzled when her statement caused him to stiffen further. She had meant to reassure him, but perhaps she had somehow offended him. Sighing, she returned to the reason for her visit. “I'm sorry for offending you Severus. I only meant to say that after everything, you deserve to be happy as much as anyone else.”

“Molly I understand the sentiment, but I don't want to marry some witch I don't know and there aren't any witches that I do know that I'd prefer over my current situation. I'm not only doing this for her, though I admit that is the main reason. If I marry her, I won't be pressured to find common
ground with someone else. I have her friendship and for the first time in my life, I feel content. That is enough for me. It's more than I ever dreamed of.” he said solemnly.

“Okay Severus.” She gave him a sad little smile and patted his thigh, leaving shortly after. He sat there staring off into space for a long time after that. It really surprised him how many people suddenly seemed to care about his own happiness. Even James Potter's brat had seemed to think he should move on and find someone to love. The cynical part of his brain said that was so he wouldn't have to think of the greasy dungeon-bat lusting after his mother, but no he seemed to actually want Severus to be happy.

Hermione agreed to meet “the mothers”, as Severus had begun to call Minerva, Cissy, and Helen, the day before the wedding in Hogsmeade. Though they didn't tell her what they were doing, she feared she'd be subjected to all the usual feminine rituals that went with any formal event. Narcissa was the only one of the three women who knew the truth of her relationship with Severus and she hoped she could reign in the other two.

She had no qualms with dressing up and maybe getting her hair done, but she had no plans to wax anything or buy any lingerie. It would be a waste of time, money, and pride. She didn't know how Severus would react to her going overboard with the preparations either. She had dressed up in his presence a few times, but he'd either not reacted at all or completely shut down on her. The last thing she wanted was for him to occlude and go stony-faced at the alter.

So it was with a cauldron full of nerves that she met the ladies at The Three Broomsticks. Surprisingly, it was Narcissa who brought her mother. The two seemed to really be hitting it off when she walked up. Minerva looked up with a conspiratorial smile and placed her hand on Helen's, effectively ending whatever conversation she had been having with Narcissa.

The ladies stood and greeted her and Hermione was subjected to hugs all around. It seemed the first order of business was, as she expected, hair. Cissy had an appointment for them at an upscale salon called Domus Virtutum Regina.

Once there, Hermione was separated from the other ladies as they all got different treatments. Though she was uncomfortable at first, the hairdresser was very kind and put her at ease. In a way, she reminded her very much of Luna Lovegood. Though, quite a bit less quirky.

Her hair was washed and conditioned, and trimmed and curled. Products both sweet and foul-smelling were applied and by the time the girl declared her fit for a wedding, Hermione was nearly asleep in her chair. She stretched and turned to look in the mirror, but the girl spelled it to turn away
from her and chided her to not look until she was done.

“But you just said I was done?” Hermione whinged pathetically. The girl laughed at her and said, “Oh no, my dear. Your hair is done, you have a long way to go little bride.” Hermione groaned as the girl left her alone. Moments later her companions walked in along with four witched who worked for the salon.

Hermione was completely mortified by the time she was done being “pampered” at the spa. They had tweezed, waxed, exfoliated, and moisturized her to within an inch of her life. The only one who knew it was for naught had no pity. Narcissa simply said it was “good for her.” Bah. Though when she finally spied a glimpse of herself in a mirror, her breath caught. She’d never saw herself as particularly attractive until this moment. There had been potential at the Yule Ball, but no, not this. She felt like a princess, or rather a bride.

After leaving the spa, the mothers took her clothes shopping. Narcissa helped her pick lovely dress robes for when she and Severus were invited to any events and Minerva helped her choose a few dresses for every day wear. Mortifyingly, her mother insisted on lingerie. The other women both looked fit to burst, but she shook her head minutely at them and allowed her mother to pick several pieces of nightwear.

Hermione returned with her parents to their home for her last night as a single lady. Both she and Severus had vehemently refused any attempts at hen or stag parties. She was so wound up and full of nerves that she scarcely slept at all. She was woken early by the sound of her mother and Narcissa talking excitedly outside her bedroom door.

The ladies entered her room with a brisk knock and came to sit on her bed. Her mum was carrying a tray with juice, toast, a yellow rose, and a folded note with her name written in Severus’ spiky script. She smiled timidly as she accepted the tray. She sniffed the rose delicately, a small smile and a bright blush gracing her features. Setting it down, she reached for the note with shaking hands.

Hermione,

 Though the circumstances are far from ordinary, I hope that you will find today enjoyable. You deserve nothing but happiness and I hope that I am able to, if only in small measures, ensure you recieve it. Please accept this rose as a token of my friendship and esteem for you.

Yours,

Severus T. Snape

Hermione had tears streaming down her face by the time she finished reading his short letter. Severus
really could be a romantic at times. She found herself wishing, not for the first time, that things could be different. In another world, she could love Severus. She would have tried to be a good wife to him, to make him happy, to give him what Harry said he needed. But in this world, he loved a dead woman, she was too damaged to even consider loving anyone, and they were both victims marrying the tool for their assault.

Though Severus called himself the one to assault her, she always pictured Voldemort as her rapist, as well as his. He had been just as unwilling and in a way she almost thought it was worse for him. Putting aside those thoughts, for they could wait and Severus had went to such trouble to make today a happy occasion for her, she smiled and took a sip of her juice.

After eating her toast, or really picking at it until her mother was satisfied, the ladies began their preparations for the day. There were many hours of bathing and primping ahead of her for her early evening wedding. Despite the circumstances that led to her current situation, Hermione found herself excited about her wedding.

Severus had felt like a caged animal nearly all week. He was both eager to marry Hermione and dreading it. He felt immense guilt over his infatuation of her and any happiness he felt over their coming bonding was tainted by the knowledge that she would not be experiencing a similar feeling. She probably felt sick at the thought of sharing a living space with him. He couldn't blame her if that were the case.

He had gotten little sleep over the last few days and he was sure that he'd worn the new rug down in the sitting room. Narcissa had helped him decorate the house for Hermione as part of her wedding gift, but he spent the whole week moving things repeatedly. She had placed the cushions just so on the sofa and he moved them three different ways, before putting them back just as Cissy had them.

He felt sick to his stomach and was afraid he would vomit during their vows. He'd not slept much all week and he found himself irritable and jumpy. He had bitten his fingernails to the quick and caused his fingers to bleed. Cissy healed him while tsking.

He spent hours in front of the mirror in his new dress robes that were finer than anything he owned. He put his hair in a queue. He then ripped it out with a growl. He pushed his hair behind his ears, but then ruffled his fingers through it. He very nearly cut his hair, but threw his wand down and grabbed the firewhiskey instead.

Finally, the 23rd of December arrived. Today, he would marry a beautiful young witch whom in the comfort of his own head he admitted to loving. Today, he would rescue Hermione from the slimy hands of any wizard who would try to force her to bear children “for the greater good” before she was well and truly ready. Today, he would take away another choice from an innocent girl who had already had too much taken. Today, he would start his life-long task of making Hermione Granger
feel safe, protected, cared for, and happy. Today he would begin to mend the offenses he dealt her. At any cost and by any means necessary.
Chapter Notes

In flower lore, Daffodil represents unrequited love, uncertainty, and a sort of quiet regard in lighter colors and the bright yellow ones signify new beginnings, respect, chivalry, hope, and good fortune.

Hermione apparated to a clearing in the woods just as the sky had begun to go a brilliant pink. Fairy lights twinkled all around the bride dressed in flowing amber robes. Her curly hair flowed freely down her back with yellow and white daffodil blooms interspersed throughout. She smelled faintly of Jasmine and Ylang Ylang, a gift of perfume from Narcissa. Her mother had bought her a delicate silver anklet and she wore no shoes, as was customary in a wizarding hand-fasting.

As she began to walk forward, the musicians began to play. The haunting notes of River Flows In You wafted through the air as she stepped into the forest, following the lights to her groom. When they caught sight of each other, they both momentarily froze. Severus' breath caught in his chest at the sight of his beautiful bride. Hermione smiled demurely and resumed her journey toward Severus.

Severus was dressed in green robes so dark they were almost black. His cravat was the same shade of amber as her robes and his hair was pulled back into a queue with a black ribbon. His feet were bare as Hermione's. He had a soft expression on his face that made Hermione's chest ache.

When she reached him, Severus held his hand out to her and she placed hers in it. They smiled at each other shyly before turning to Albus. He smiled brightly as he spoke, “Welcome dear friends. We are here today to join Hermione Jean Granger in wedded matrimony to Severus Tobias Snape. Rather than the usual vows our happy couple has decided to make their own. Severus you may go first.”

Severus' hand trembled in Hermione's as he looked to her and spoke softly, but with surety. “Hermione Granger I vow to give you all that is mine. I vow to protect you from any hardship and to comfort you through any pain. I vow to be a loyal and steadfast friend to you. May our union bring us both strength and happiness.” A soft blue glow formed around their joined hands as he spoke.
Albus twinkled and turned to Hermione, “And now you, my dear.” Hermione squeezed Severus' hands and sniffed, ignoring the tears spilling down her eyes. Her voice when she spoke was full of an emotion Severus could not place.

“Severus Snape I vow to be a faithful companion to you. I offer you my kindness and friendship. I vow to keep your confidences and guard your back. I vow to put you before all others and always stand by your side. May our union bring us both peace and comfort.”

As Hermione spoke Severus' face flashed between shock, confusion, and happiness. As the blue glow grew in intensity and then faded into their skin Hermione looked into Severus' eyes and was startled to see tears. Before they could spill down his face he blinked and sniffed deeply, forcing them away.

Their attention was drawn away from each other as Albus spoke once more, “And now Severus, you may kiss your lovely bride.” Severus looked startled and hissed, “Albus I hardly think-” “The binding must be completed with a kiss, Severus.”, the headmaster said quietly. Severus looked to Hermione with a pained expression.

Hermione, ever the Gryffindor, squeezed Severus' hands once more before leaning forward and ghosting her lips over his. He leaned forward minutely and her lips melded sweetly to his. The kiss lasted only a moment, but was soft like candy floss and melted just as quickly. They stared at each other, both hearts beating rapidly. Neither bride nor groom heard the loud cheers of congratulations until, like a soap bubble popping, the moment was broken.

The reception was a lovely affair. Molly had outdone herself making both Hermione and Severus' favorite foods. How she'd learned of his sweet spot for Italian, he blamed on Cissy. They were accosted by every guest in turn with felicitations and various forms of physical contact. Severus had nearly fallen over himself with surprise when Harry Potter had patted him on the back and said “you're family now Severus.” He had blushed as Helen Granger had hugged him tightly.

Severus sat with a full belly waiting for the last few guests to finish eating before it was time to cut the cake. He had hoped to allow Hermione the privilege alone, but George Weasley who had observed the gaiety around him with the somber air of someone deep in mourning had called quietly, “Hey Snape aren't you going to help your bride?” The tent had fallen quiet at the first words spoken
by the man all day.

He looked to Hermione and she smiled quizzically. He sneered, “Putting me to work already. I can see this marriage will be laborious.” and the tent erupted into laughter as he stepped behind Hermione and placed his hand lightly over hers on the knife. His other hand ghosted over her hip as he whispered, “Is this alright?” Hermione, heart racing in her throat, nodded.

Both bride and groom sported matching rosy cheeks as they cut the first slice of cake to laughter, applause, and cheeky comments. Just as Severus plated the first piece and handed it to Hermione, he felt a presence behind him. His wand was turned on one frightened George Weasley holding two slices of cake over their heads before he even registered the threat.

He breathed a sigh and flicked his wand, causing both slices to rain down on the trouble-maker. Everyone laughed uproariously, jester included as Severus blew on the tip of his wand and put it back in his sleeve. “I see marriage hasn't softened you yet Snape.”, George said ruefully. Hermione shook with mirth as she swiped some frosting off of George's nose and ate it saying, “I keep him on his toes.”

After the cake was eaten and thrown about a bit more, Severus held his hand out tentatively to Hermione. “Would you do me the honor of sharing a dance with me, Hermione?” She smiled sweetly and accepted his hand. Hermione was surprised when a Muggle rock song started playing. He smiled crookedly at her as he said, “I hope you don't mind.”

Hermione could smell Severus' cologne as he pulled her to him. He smelled of Sandalwood, Vetiver, and something wholly Severus. He placed his free hand high on her waist and there was a respectable distance between them, yet Hermione's heart was hammering away and she could scarcely breathe. She wasn't exactly afraid, but nervousness was her predominant emotion.

As the singer crooned about his “baby” and her smile, she studied Severus. He had two spots of color high on his cheeks and he was looking out across the dance floor. She could see that he was deeply embarrassed to be dancing with all of their guests watching, but there was a slight upward curve to his lips indicating his pleasure.

Feeling brave, she placed her head lightly against his chest. He faltered momentarily in leading her in
the dance before continuing and his heart was beating just as quickly as her own. She couldn't stop
the broad smile that fought it's way to the surface as she whispered, “Severus?” “Yes?” “Thank you
for showing me such a lovely time tonight.” “The pleasure was all mine, Hermione.”, he croaked.

As the evening wound to a close, Severus offered his arm to his new bride and apparated her to their
new home. As he opened the door and led her inside, he saw her go rigid with nerves. His joy from
the wedding ceremony slipped away immediately as he turned to her with dread. “Would you like
some tea?”, he offered.

She shuffled in place, looking at her feet. “Not particularly. I'm a bit tired honestly. I think I'll head to
bed if you don't mind.” She didn't look up at him once as she spoke and his heart clenched painfully.
“Yes. Yes of course. It's been a very long day. Goodnight Hermione.”, he said and then strode into
the library, closing the door softly behind him.

Hermione had the strange feeling that she had somehow hurt Severus. She made to follow him to the
library, but just as she went to knock she felt his wards go up. The slight buzzing she heard near the
door told her that he had silenced the room, so she assumed her intrusion would be unwelcome.

Feeling confused, tired, and a bit empty, she went off to bed.

Severus berated himself as he poured a generous amount of whisky into his tumbler. He knew they
weren't marrying out of affection, but he had deluded himself during the course of the bonding and
reception into believing she no longer feared him. She had touched him more than necessary and had
not flinched from him once. She had become his friend, but the friendship was not without
complications.

He didn't doubt that she trusted him with her life. She probably didn't even really believe he would
hurt her again, but subconsciously her mind kept her on guard around him. Her body remembered his
cruelty in his treatment. No amount of kindness would make her feel truly comfortable alone with
him. How was he to keep his vow to make her feel safe when he was the thing making her feel
apprehensive?
Severus sat in the library until nearly 3 a.m. Getting pissed and feeling like the biggest arsehole. Finally he became disgusted with his pity party and levered himself up unsteadily. He made his slow assent up the stairs, being careful not to make so much noise that he woke his wife. As he passed her door he paused and listened, but heard nothing. There was no glow of candlelight from under her door, so sighing, he continued to his room.

As he turned the knob and entered the smaller of the two bedrooms, he almost died of shock to see Hermione curled up in his bed. Unsure what he should do, he just stood frozen in the doorway. The soft glow from the hallway must have woken her, because her eyes opened and she sat up groggily.

She smiled at him sleepily and his heart leapt at the sight of her wearing a soft pink gown and looking at him in such a way. As she awakened more fully, she stiffened and pulled the covers up over her chest to hide her nightclothes. “Severus, what’s wrong?”, she asked nervously and he wished desperately that he hadn’t drank half a bottle of firewhiskey in one go.

He cleared his throat and asked, “Why- Why are you in m' room Hermione?” The last traces of sleep left her face as she flinched. “Your room? I thought this was mine. Oh Merlin. I'm so sorry Severus.” She jumped up and nearly tripped on the bedclothes in her haste. “I'll just go to the other room. What time is it?” She cast a tempus and grimaced. “Merlin Severus, it's going on 3 o'clock. Well we can talk about the rooms in the morning.”

As she made to go by him and out the door she stopped and eyed him curiously. “Have you been drinking Severus?”, she asked with a pained expression. “Yes, I have.”, he said simply. Her face crumpled and she hid behind her hands. “No, no why are you cryin' Hermione. Don' cry, please. I made sure not to make you cry today.”, he babbled desperately.

“You told me you only drink when it's really bad. When you can't handle the day's events. I shouldn't have let you marry me if it's this hard on you. Gods, but I'm so selfish. I didn't even know you were upset.”, she wailed behind her hands. He cautiously pulled her hands away and said, “Hermione, look a' me.”

When she did, he leaned forward unsteadily. “I'm so sorry Hermione. I was'n drinkin' because I regret marryin' you. I- I- felt guilty. I couldn't handle the guilt.”, he said timidly. “Why on earth would you feel guilty?”, she asked shrilly. He flinched and looked away.
After taking a few sobering deep breaths he answered, “Because you can't even be alone with me without being afraid. I'm going to have to subject you to my presence daily, Hermione. I feel guilty, because this isn't the wedding night you deserve. You should be laughing and drinking champagne with weasley, not clutching your covers when your drunk abusive husband stumbles into your room uninvited.”

Her face hardened as he spoke and he knew that he'd said something wrong, but didn't know what. Her magic crackled around them as she summoned her little beaded bag. She dug around for a moment before pulling out a small vial and thrusting it into his hand. He looked down and saw that it was a sobering solution.

He downed the potion with a grimace and then handed the empty bottle back timidly. Her face had gone blank, but her eyes sparked with suppressed anger. She pointed to the bed and ordered, “Sit.” He didn't hesitate to obey her. She had every right to be angry with him. He would listen to whatever she had to say and accept whatever consequences she deemed fit for his actions tonight.

When she spoke, he had to strain to hear her. “What I have to say is important. Don't interrupt me. I never want to hear you talk like that again, do you understand? I could have never have made things work with Ron. Don't use him against me again. Even if it hadn't happened, I wouldn't have married him. Also, don't twist the situation like that Severus. You didn't “come into my room drunk”. I was in YOUR bed, remember. Lastly, you are not abusive! When have you ever WILLINGLY hurt me? Being forced does not count.”

Severus sat stunned throughout her tirade before quietly saying, “I'm so sorry Hermione. I only wanted today to be perfect for you and I screwed it up.” She shook her head and sat next to him. “No, you didn't. But you should talk to me. Instead of holing up in the library, I wish you had told me how you felt. I was nervous when we came here, but not- not afraid, just nervous.”

They sat in silence for a while before Hermione heaved a sigh and laid her head on his shoulder. Before he had time to pull away, she breathed, “Today was lovely. Even my daydreams of my wedding day weren't that perfect. Thank you, Severus. Did you enjoy it?” He cleared his throat and whispered, “Yes, very much so.”

She sighed and straightened and he instantly felt the loss. “I wasn't lying about being tired. If you're
alright I think I'll go to my room now.” He nodded and smiled his little crooked smile saying, “Goodnight Hermione. Sleep well.” She rose from the bed and moved to leave only to stop and turn.

He looked at her curiously as she studied him. She then leant forward and placed a soft lingering kiss upon his cheek. “Goodnight Severus. Sweet dreams.” Long after Hermione left Severus sat staring into space. Eventually he shook himself and lightly touched the spot that she had kissed. He rose and dressed for bed in sleep pants. He shook his head in fond exasperation as he fell asleep thinking of his sweet wife.
Severus woke slowly and stretched, inhaling the sweet smell of Jasmine and Ylang Ylang still present on his pillow from Hermione sleeping there. After making use of the loo across the hall from his room, he dressed and headed down the stairs.

He could smell coffee and bacon and he could just barely hear Hermione humming the muggle song from their wedding somewhat off-key. As he stopped in the threshold of the kitchen, he crossed his arms and smiled. He watched her beating a batter, presumably for pancakes, as she swayed slowly and her humming turned to quiet singing. “When I see you smile, I can face the world. Oh-oh, you know I can do anything. When I see you smile, I see a ray of- oh hello there.” Her singing cut off as she turned around.

“I didn't hear you come down.”, she said ruefully “Are you hungry?” He smiled his little crooked smile, eyes filled with mirth, as he nodded and poured himself some coffee. “I thought you hated coffee.”, he said with amusement. “I do. But you don't.”, she said quickly as she picked up a glass of milk.

He leaned against the counter and watched her as she went back to cooking. When she had finished, he helped her set the table and sat across from her. She smiled shyly as she made herself a plate and then picked up her fork and speared a blueberry. “I like the decor you chose.”

“I'm glad. I worried that you would want more input, but Narcissa assured me that she had grilled you thoroughly to figure your tastes out.” She laughed as she said, “She did at that. I feel a little ashamed that I didn't catch on to her motive. I thought she was trying to figure out what to get me as a wedding gift.”

“And your room is adequate?”, he pressed. She set down her fork as she looked at him searchingly. “Yes, it is....but Severus you didn't have to give me the master. I'd be just as happy with the smaller room.” He waved her off as he sipped his coffee. He grimaced and added a bit of cream before saying, “I have no need for the extra room. I usually only spend time in my room when I'm sleeping. I know you don't wear much cosmetics, but I was given to understand by Cissy that every wife needs a vanity to, if nothing else, brush her hair in front of.”
She huffed a laugh and mumbled, “Slytherins.” “What's that muggle saying? If you can't beat them, join them?”, he drawled. “Hah. I'm about as Slytherin as father Christmas.” He smiled indulgently and leaned across the table. “Speaking of Christmas, what are your plans for today?” “I have no plans.”, she said slowly.

“Good. I need your help. I need you to teach me something, Professor.”, he said seriously. She giggled and asked, “What are you on about?” His looked a bit unsure as he said, “I've never celebrated the holiday before. I had hoped that you might help me decorate the house today?” Her heart ached at the thought of Severus as a child not decorating a tree or singing a Christmas song or baking with his mum. Her face softened as she breathed, “I'd love to, Severus.”

After they finished their breakfast, Severus led Hermione into the living area where he cancelled the invisibility charm he had on one corner of the room. A large fir tree sat in the corner surrounded by shopping from an eclectic mix of places. There were bags and boxes from Harrods, Wiseacre's, Marks & Spencer, Honeydukes, and even Wizarding Wheezes. She raised an eyebrow at the last and turned to Severus with an incredulous look.

“I wasn't sure what to get. Cissy bought the things from muggle London and I got the rest.”, he tried for nonchalance, failing as color stained his cheeks. “I'd have loved to see George's reaction to you going to his shop.”, she said with a shake of her head and a chuckle. “He thought it was a prank. He was convinced I was a polyjuiced Potter. Once he realized what I was there for, well lets just say, I'm sure the story will go around with a laugh.”, he huffed, somewhat put out.

“Well, first things first. Do you own a muggle radio?”, she said effectively changing the subject. With a nod, he accio'ed a small ancient scuffed up radio and handed it to her wordlessly. With a smile, she plugged it in and tuned it to a station playing Christmas Carols. Clapping softly, she rubbed her hands together and looked over his purchases.

Halfway through sorting the decorations from the wrapping paper and a small pile of gifts for the Hogwarts staff and a few others, she paused and turned to see him watching her intently. “You're meant to be joining in, you know.”, she laughed. He looked away in embarrassment and then strode forward to stand next to her. As she pulled a sweater sporting a happy little elf out of a box from Fenwick, she smiled deviously.

“Who is this for, Severus?”, she asked innocently. “I thought you might like- that is to say, you don't have to wear it. It's just available as an option.” She spun around and pulled her wand on him in one smooth move. He stepped back, alarmed, raising his hands. “Are you angry?”, he asked confusedly.
She laughed and transfigured his waistcoat into a dark green sweater with a grumpy looking gentleman on it. He looked down and asked, “Does that say 'Bah Humbug'? I am not Ebenezer Scrooge!” She giggled helplessly as she put her own sweater on over her blouse. “That's much better. Now all we're missing is....don't tell me you bought hats?”, she asked with way too much enthusiasm.

He pointed mutely to a bag from Harrods that she tore into with enthusiasm. After stuffing a hat on her own head, she pranced over and plopped the other down on his. Out of breath with giddiness, she rested her hands on his chest and said, “There, that's perfect.” She stared at him for a long moment with a broad smile, until snapping out of it and taking a large step back.

Even as his heart rate slowed, Severus felt his ears burn as he flushed. He had never wanted to kiss someone more badly than in this moment. He opened his mouth to speak, but she saved him the embarrassment by continuing on with her task with an airy “that didn't just happen” attitude. He followed suit.

By noon, their new home was all decked out with all manner of Christmas cheer. Hermione was half-way through teaching Severus to make her mother's famous Christmas biscuits when there was a knock at the door. Severus wiped his hands on a towel and looked at his wife covered in confectionery sugar and flour. “I'll get it.”, he said with true amusement.

Severus didn't know who he had expected, but he was startled when he opened the door to find Harry Potter. “Mr. Potter, come in. To what do we own the pleasure.”, Severus said with lingering cheer. Harry did a double take at Severus' tone as well as his attire, but answered without comment, “Molly sent me 'round to make sure you and Hermione were coming tomorrow. I didn't want to interrupt your honeymoon, as it were, but Molly can be pretty persuasive.”

All traces of a smile left Severus' face at the mention of a honeymoon and he said, “She's in the kitchen. She was just teaching me to make sweets.” They stepped into the kitchen as Hermione was placing the baking sheets into the oven. Without turning she called distractedly, “Who was at the door, Severus?” Severus looked at Harry in amusement and answered, “The bane of my existence.”

She turned with a smile and rolled her eyes. “Harry! I just saw you yesterday. Miss me already?” “I had to make sure you hadn't killed Professor Snape for the insurance money yet. The ink isn't dry on the paperwork yet.” This exchange caused a loud bark of laughter from Severus. “I'm pretty sure, Mr. Potter, that the rest of your friends are worried for Hermione's safety more than my own.”

Harry waved the comment away and said, “Nah, everyone knows 'Mione is the scheming one in this
relationship. Anyway, I came by to make you vow to attend the burrow tomorrow. Molly is adamant
that you both be there.” Hermione looked at Severus questioningly and said, “Oh I don't know
Harry. Why don't you go explore the sitting room and Severus and I will make tea for these biscuits.”

“Would you like to go?” he asked quietly as Harry left. “It would definitely be putting you into the
deep end of celebrating the holiday. I don't want you to be uncomfortable though. Would you be
okay with that many Gryffindors again so soon?”

He smiled slowly and confided, “I think I could tolerate it for your sake. Yesterday was...lovely. If
they behave themselves as well tomorrow it could be...enjoyable.” She smiled as she set the tea
things on the tray with the biscuits. As she walked into the sitting room, she said over her shoulder,
“Well don't expect George to behave and you won't be disappointed.”

Harry laughed as he turned from the bookcase and said, “Did you actually think George will be
good, Professor?” Severus looked at Harry for a moment and then drawled, “I have an early
Christmas gift for you Mr. Potter. It is however...conditional.” Harry looked at him curiously as he
accio'ed a small dusty wooden box.

He looked at Hermione for a moment before addressing Harry. “You may have the contents of this
box provided that should you have any questions you ask them privately, You don't go around
spouting accolades about my giving it to you, and.” He paused and looked uncomfortable as he
continued, “You stop calling me Professor. Seeing as you are my wife's closest friend, I suppose I
can endure being addressed more familiarly.” Hermione smiled beatifically as Harry answered
solemnly. “You have my word, Severus.”

Harry took the box and trailed his fingers in the dust upon the lid asking, “May I open it here?”
Severus nodded and Harry reverently lifted the lid to find a bundle of letters tied with string, various
photos of his mum and Severus, a cutting of long red hair, a small black stone, and a white linen
scarf that smelled strongly of citrus and roses. Harry brought it to his nose and inhaled the scent that
he remembered vaguely.

Harry fingered the lock of hair and looked at Severus questioningly, but surprisingly not accusingly.
“Later, Mr. Potter, I will tell you whatever you would like to know.”, Severus said slowly flicking
his eyes to Hermione so quickly Harry almost missed it. Curious. Did Severus not want to discuss it
in front of Hermione?

Harry nodded his understanding and cleared his throat. He pulled an envelope from inside his robes.
“I almost forgot the other reason for my visit. I have your pictures from yesterday. I hope you don't
mind I made a copy of the ones with Ron and I with you ’Mione.”
She took the packet and opened it curiously. “Oh, how lovely.”, she breathed quietly. Severus looked to his intertwined fingers as she perused the photos and Harry watched them both. She looked through them slowly with a small smile, pausing longer on ones she liked better. Finally, she held one up to Severus, snapping him out of his reverie.

He took it gingerly and both Hermione and Harry were surprised to see the gentle expression in which he looked at it. The magical photo had been snapped as they had their first dance. She laid her head on his chest and his expression was one of wonder as he smiled down at her and then continued leading her across the floor. He watched the picture loop a few times before handing it back to Hermione.

The two stared at each other for a moment, before Harry broke the tension by announcing his departure. “So you'll both be there tomorrow, yeah?” They both agreed and Hermione saw Harry out. Once outside on the landing, Harry addressed her seriously. “You realize he has feelings for you?”

“What? No, Harry we're just friends. There will never be- there can never be more. We're very good friends and he understands what I went through at Malfoy Manor.”, she stressed. Harry looked like he wanted to say more, but just shook his head. “Alright. See you tomorrow Hermione.” He was gone with a soft pop, leaving Hermione to ruminate on the porch until she grew cold and went inside.

Once back inside, Hermione felt much less cheerful than before Harry arrived. She heard Severus puttering around in the kitchen, washing up the mess they had made, but couldn't bring herself to join him there. She needed time to think, so she slunk off to her room. Once she shut the door behind her, she slid to the floor. Resting her head upon her knees, she thought over what Harry had said.

If it were true, how did she even feel about it? She cared for Severus deeply, but she'd always seen it as a platonic friendship. She wasn't even sure if she'd ever want a physical relationship with anyone after what had occurred a year ago, but if she ever did would she even be able to be intimate with him?

She pulled out the packet of pictures Harry had given them. In almost all of them, he was watching her. His expression was always protective, attentive, and if she looked hard enough maybe a bit possessive. He looked at her the way a groom would look at his bride. She stared at the picture of their wedding kiss for ages watching his surprise at her daring and then his tenderness as his lips touched hers.
She couldn't doubt that he had feelings for her while watching this picture repeatedly. But then, he was a master of deception. He was well known for being a bastard, but she knew that was a mask. Who was to say this was not also a mask. He was playing a part yesterday and he played it a bit too well.

Tears slipped down her face as she watched him whisper in her ear as they cut their cake. He had been the consummate gentleman. He hadn't crowded her, but had shown her just enough affection to make the day perfect. The dream wedding every girl hoped for. But it wasn't real. He had done all that for her, and yet instead of happiness, it was all ashes.

As her tears began to trickle out faster, she fought for calm. He had only wanted to make her happy and yet she sat ungratefully crying on the floor. How selfish she was. She couldn't seem to stop gasping for air and she worried he would hear, so she did the only thing she knew to do. After all, her husband had never had a happy Christmas and she had to deliver one.

As Hermione came back down the stairs, Severus could immediately tell something was amiss. Though she was smiling at him, it didn't hold the energy of warmth that it had before. It took him a moment to realize she was occluding. His chest ached as he thought of what he should do. He'd not seen her occlude so completely in so long, it hurt to see it now.

Finally, he decided for straightforwardness. “What's wrong Hermione?” She looked momentarily surprised before smiling brighter and saying, “Nothing's wrong. I think I'm a bit tired from all of our efforts at merry-making. Would you like to order take-away for dinner?”

He stared at her for a moment before nodding. “That will be fine. Do you like Indian? I can apparate to get it.” She seemed relieved when he didn't press her and agreed saying she'd like prawn curry and extra naan. He looked at her intently, but then left with a curt nod.

After he left, she slumped onto the couch and slowly lowered her occlumency shields. By the time he arrived back home, she was a bit nervous, but not overly emotional. As they sat eating their dinner in silence, Severus looked up at her worriedly. “You're not going to tell me what's wrong are you?” “Nothings wrong, I was just feeling a bit overwhelmed, that's all.”, she replied while taking a sip of her water. He studied her awhile before huffing and setting his fork down.

He stood and began clearing the table, leaving her plate as she wasn't finished, and began washing the dishes by hand. His posture was stiff as she watched him from the table. She was annoyed with herself for ruining his Christmas Eve, but didn't know what to do to make it better. Grasping for straws she blurted, “Would you like to read a story together?”
He turned to her incredulously and asked slowly, “A story?” “Yes. It's tradition. You read Christmas stories on Christmas Eve. My parents would buy me a new Christmas book every year and we would curl up on the sofa and my Dad would read it.”, she explained bashfully. She was beginning to doubt the intelligence of her suggestion until he said slowly, “I don't own any Christmas books, I'm afraid. Have you brought any with you?”

She smiled, relieved, and nodded. “Yes, I have a few. I'll go fetch them if you want to meet me in the living room. Oh! We'll need hot chocolate. It's not complete without it.” As she dashed off, Severus stared after her in confusion.

She had been so closed off earlier and now she had a nervous energy that set his teeth on edge. She was avoiding his eyes and blushed fiercely when he addressed her. He wondered if Potter had said something to upset her, but no. If that were the case, she'd not be avoiding him. She had no trouble venting to him about her friends before they came to share a living space, so he doubted she would now.

He had just set the tray of cocoa down on the table as Hermione bounded into the room carrying a tall stack of books. Yes, a few. Well he supposed it was in Hermione Granger's mind. With a mental laugh he motioned for her to list them off to him. “Well we have the classics: A Christmas Carol, How The Grinch Stole Christmas, The Night Before Christmas, and The Nutcracker. We also have newer fare such as The Polar Express and Silver Packages.”

When the titles were obviously lost to him, she gave a brief synopsis of each. He smiled and said, “Bah. Humbug.” while tapping A Christmas Carol. She giggled and handed it to him. She curled up on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. He merely raised a brow and sat.

He wondered how he should feel about her wanting him to read. She had said her father normally did. Did she seem him as a father figure. The thought made him nearly as nauseated as the thought of his own complex feelings for her. No, she probably just wanted someone to read to her and he was the only one present. He shook off his errant thoughts and sat next to her stiffly.

“I HAVE endeavored in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humor with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me.”, he began with a small smile. As he continued to read, he was surprised by how much he enjoyed the tale. He had had little time to peruse muggle literature before and he found it to be a pleasant diversion now. Severus was so engrossed in the tale that he scarcely noticed as Hermione lifted his arm and curled into him as he read.

As he finished the tale, saying Tiny Tim's famous line, he looked over at his wife. She was fast asleep with a small smile playing at her lips. He gently brushed her hair back from her face and inhaled her sweet scent. Even if this were all he were ever granted, he could be content. Her trust and
her friendship were all he needed.

As he shifted and prepared to rise she whispered in her sleep, “Do you love me?” and all traces of contentedness left him. His heart raced as he thought of what answer she would prefer. He knew how he felt about her, the emotion was a constant pressure over his entire being. She wouldn't thank him for his regard, however. She most likely would retract her friendship if she knew.

He was saved from answering when she hummed softly and burrowed deeper into the cushion, making him realize she was asleep. He finished rising and positioned her more comfortably. He spread a quilt over her form and then extinguished the lights. As he tread up the stairs to his room, his heart finally calmed itself.

Severus woke early the next morning to the sound of Hermione singing *Have Yourself A Merry Christmas* somewhat off-key in the shower. He smiled to himself as he dressed. He decided to give his wife a heart-attack and dressed in just his black trousers, a white oxford shirt, and the sweater that she had transfigured. In a moment of lunacy, he added the blasted hat.

As he set her tea in front of her chair and sipped his own coffee she came bounding into the room with all the enthusiasm of a golden retriever. “Merry Christmas Severus!”, she chirped as she picked up her tea and took a sip. Not sitting like a rational adult, she came bounding over and pulled him up by his arm, “c'mon we have presents!” He reached for his mug before following her with a tolerant eye roll.

Hermione sorted their presents and handed a small pile to him. He was surprised when he saw how many there were and not all from the Hogwarts staff. He opened the ones he knew first. He received a pair of canary yellow socks from Albus, a running gag for many years now. From Minerva, Filius, and Pomona he received books. Poppy gave him a pair of gloves and Rolanda a bottle of Champagne with a note to share with Hermione. Save Albus, he'd not received gifts from his colleagues in years.

As he looked over at Hermione, he saw her meticulously removing the wrappings and setting them aside before gingerly opening her gifts. She had only opened two so far, a pair of gloves identical to the ones he received from Poppy and a box of chocolate covered strawberries from Rolanda. When she saw him looking at them, she blushed and moved them aside.

To spare her further embarrassment, he returned to his own pile of loot. He picked up a lumpy package from Molly Weasley with some trepidation and was pleasantly surprised to find baked goods and a black sweater with a silver S stitched onto the front. Potter had given him a framed copy
of the photo of their first dance, which he promptly hid behind himself. Ronald gave him a box of chocolates, Ginevra had gifted him a bottle of red ink, which caused him to guffaw, gaining his wife's attention.

He held up his prize with barely restrained glee. She laughed and picked up her next gift. As he watched the smile slid from her face as she glanced into the bag. She set it aside without removing the item and he noticed that a few other gifts had shared this treatment. At his questioning gaze, she blushed brightly and tore into the wrapping of the next gift forgoing her earlier care.

After all of the gifts were opened, Severus pulled out a small box and handed it to her. “I hope it's to your taste. It was a Prince heirloom belonging to my mother.”, he said nervously. She gingerly untied the ribbon on the box and opened it to reveal a delicate chain with an intricate pendant shaped like a potions bottle. On closer inspection she saw that it was a real potions bottle with a molten gold liquid inside.

Disbelieving she asked, “Is this-” “Yes it's Felix. Not a large dose, mind you, but if you should use it I know of a potions master who might be convinced to brew you more.”, he said with a mischievous glint to his eye. She beamed at him and murmured, “Thank you. I'll use it wisely, I promise.” She raised her hair and looked at him expectantly.

He cleared his throat and moved to clasp the necklace for her. She breathed in sharply as his knuckles grazed her neck. He removed himself from her person quickly and she smoothed her hair back down. “Thanks.”, she sighed as she looked at him. After a moment, she pulled out his own gift and handed it to him. “I'm afraid it isn't nearly as nice as this.”

His hands shook as he unwrapped the silver package wrapped in green ribbon. As he moved the tissue aside, he fingered the soft material within. It was a blanket as black as his teaching robes and as soft as a cloud. He smiled as he pulled it out. Noticing another parcel wrapped in tissue, he picked it up to reveal a plain black picture frame. He smiled as he realized she had gifted him the same picture as Potter.

“Thank you Hermione.”, he breathed. “I could not have had a happier Christmas.” She looked ready to say something, but shook her head and stood. “We should get to the burrow before Molly sends out a search party.”

The celebration at the burrow was boisterous and wonderful. Severus chatted with Bill Weasley for the majority of it and watched Hermione flit from person to person laughing and singing Christmas Carols. The Weasleys seemed genuinely pleased by his presence and he had to admit to enjoying the gathering quite a bit. After dinner the younger attendees spread out between Quidditch and a muggle board game while Severus, Author, Molly, Helen, and Richard sat sipping coffee in the kitchen.
“I’m surprised you two came, you know.” Helen said quietly to Severus. “Why is that?” “Well when Richard and I got married we didn’t come up for air for quite a while.”, she laughed. At his uneasy look, Richard interjected. “Leave the boy alone Helen. Molly wouldn’t have been the only one cross if they didn’t show up.”, he grumbled.

Molly herself watched the exchange with no small amount of confusion. “Severus, did you not-” “Molly, I really must thank you for the sweater you gifted me. I would have worn it if I’d not already been obligated to wear the one my wife made.”, he interrupted with a warning in his eyes. As understanding dawned she looked pained and then said, “Oh you’re most welcome dear.”

As their little coffee group headed back to the living room, Molly touched Severus' arm. “They don't know.”, she stated. “No. Hermione doesn't think they would understand.” She looked at him calculatingly before adding, “And she doesn't know.” Severus took a step back, somewhat alarmed.

Before he could deny whatever she thought to accuse him of, she patted his shoulder and said, “Oh you poor dear man.” This had him confused, but she continued undeterred. “It must be very hard for you to feel the way you do. I bet if you told her, she could open up to you. Who knows, maybe she feels the same.”

He put on his old persona and rose to full height. He glared at her and spat, “I'm not sure what you're talking about, but my farce of a marriage is no concern of yours past whether I treat the girl with kindness or not. I don't have any feelings past friendship for Hermione and she sure as hell would never welcome them if I did.”

He strode from the kitchen, but came up short at the sight of Hermione on the other side of the door. She grimaced and said, “It's getting a bit late, shall we go?” His brow furrowed as he tried to think of a remedy to the situation he had just caused. Hermione had none of the confidence and cheer she had earlier in the day and he could hear Molly sniffling behind him.

Pinching the bridge of his nose he sighed wearily, “Could you allow me a moment. I'll be right out and then we can leave.” As she agreed, he turned back around and walked up to where Molly sat. Quietly he said, “I apologize. I had no right to speak to you that way. I am. Unaccustomed to anyone prying into my private affairs and I have had accusations thrown at me quite a bit over the past few months in regards to Hermione.” She shook her head and answered, “No, Severus. You were right to be angry. I shouldn't have pried. I just want to see her happy.”

Severus took a deep breath and sat across from her. “I understand the sentiment and if she ever finds herself attracted to someone I'll not stop her from...pursuing it, but it won't be me. It could never be me.” Finally, understanding dawned and Molly looked horrified. “You!”, she hissed. Severus hung
his head and awaited her judgment. He had no defense. It had been him.

She surprised him by asking, “But why?” He stiffened and replied coldly, “I was following orders.” She shook her head and asked, “But why would you marry her after? Why would she agree?” He looked to the tabletop and whispered brokenly, “I. Don't. Know.” As she opened her mouth to say more, Hermione burst through the door. Her eyes were full of anger as she growled, “That's enough. Come on Severus. It's time for us to go.”

She hauled him bodily from the room as he heard Molly apologizing and calling them back. She pulled him all the way to the apparition point before looking up at him with tears in her eyes. “Let's go home Severus.”, she said hoarsely as she wrapped her arms around him and waited for him to apparate them.

As they popped into their living room, he used his knuckle to wipe the tears from her cheek. “I'm sorry Hermione.” She laughed hysterically and asked, “What on earth do you have to apologize for? Molly Weasley just- She just- You have no right to apologize!” He looked at her in confusion and she continued, “Severus Snape, you promise me right now that you're done apologizing for something I've already forgiven you for. As for marrying me, if you're regretting it it's too late I'm afraid. You're stuck with me until that ink dries on your insurance policy.”

He couldn't help himself. He laughed. He laughed until he cried and then he laughed some more. Somewhere along the way she joined him until they were both wiping helplessly at their faces. When he had no breath to laugh any more he said as solemnly as he could manage, “I promise, Hermione.”
Over the course of the next few days, Hermione and Severus learned to live together. They took turns cooking. Severus was much better at the endeavor as it turned out, but Hermione took to learning with zeal like in everything. Hermione unpacked her things that Severus and Narcissa hadn't managed to get their grubby mitts on i.e. the things she had at Hogwarts.

They found themselves much more relaxed in one another's company by the time the break rolled to an end. They had spent the remainder of the holiday cooped up together, ignoring new year's eve invitations, and reading. When they found themselves back at Hogwarts, their little bubble of serenity popped.

Hermione paced their quarters with nervous energy and Severus plied her with tea and small amounts of calming drought. The news of their marriage would be common knowledge by this point and the other students would be returning in a few hours. Hermione was not looking forward to the hazing she was convinced she would receive.

“You could drink your Felix if you're that concerned.”, Severus suggested worriedly. She waved him away saying, “I wouldn't waste it so frivolously. Besides, one lucky day won't stop them from saying nasty things the next day.” He watched her continue to pace restlessly.

When dinner arrived, Hermione chose to sit with Severus at the high table. Severus had tried to get her to sit with the Gryffindors, thinking that they would accept her better if she did, but she had told him her place was with him now. Truth be told, she didn't socialize much with the younger students and the eighth years, Ginny and Luna would surely understand. All save maybe Neville, she thought with no small amount of hysteria.

All chatter ceased as Hermione walked in holding Severus' arm. The sound of their boots reverberated loudly upon the stone floors as they walked to the high table. As they passed the tables, conversation bubbled up behind them. Hermione waved to her friends with a small smile and continued onward. When they reached their place at the high table, Severus pulled her chair out and then his own.

Albus allowed the students a moment to gossip, before rising and calling their attention. He smiled upon the student body and cast a sonorus charm. “Welcome back to another term at Hogwarts. This term promises to be full of surprises and excitement. The Forbidden Forrest naturally remains
forbidden, The Gobstones club will be accepting new members all week from three to four, and Mr. Filch would like me to remind you all that all Wizarding Wheezes products are still banned.”

He turned to Severus and Hermione and smiled mischievously before turning back to the student body and saying, “You may have noticed more of our numbers have been married off over break in compliance with our illustrious government's new law. We congratulate all students who have passed this milestone. If you have any questions or concerns about how this will affect your education you may see your heads of house. Now, dig in.”

All through dinner Hermione could feel eyes upon her, but she refused to look at the other students. She cut her food into minuscule pieces, but ate very little. After an acceptable amount of time had passed, Severus led her back to their rooms. She tried to settle down and read, but her mind refused to calm long enough for the words to be absorbed.

After a few moments, she was saved from the attempt by a knock at the door. She made to get the door, but Severus stilled her and said, “I’ll get it. It may be a Slytherin needing something. You continue to read.” The last was said with a dubious look at her book and she smiled in wry amusement.

Severus opened the door to find a gaggle of students. “Yes?”, he said with stiff politeness. Neville Longbottom answered for the group, “Hello sir. We’d like to visit with Hermione, if she's available.”, he said with a calm confidence that he hadn't possessed until after the final battle. Severus inclined his head and replied, “Let me check for you.”

At Hermione's eye roll and nod, he opened the door fully as Lovegood, Longbottom, Draco, Ginevra, Ronald, and Harry traipsed in. Severus shut the door behind them and said, “I’ll make some tea, shall I?” The students turned to him disbelievingly and he rolled his eyes turning to the kitchenette.

“Hello all.”, Hermione giggled as she transfigured enough chairs for everyone. Harry sat close to her on the couch and threw his arm over the back and said conspiratorially, “This lot assailed me as soon as dinner was through. They all wanted to come see your new quarters and wish you well, but didn't know where to find you. Well, save Malfoy and Ron, but as the chosen one, I was obligated to lead them.”

Hermione whacked him upside the head with a grin and said, “The prophesy is fulfilled, you're no longer special. How was everyone's holiday?” “Oh no you don't, Granger.”, Draco laughed. “This conversation is focused on you.” She smiled sheepishly and sighed, “Well, whatever you have to say, out with it.”
“Well everyone save Luna and I got to go to the wedding, so I demand to see pictures.”, Neville said with mock indignity. She laughed, but became nervous at the thought of sharing her closely guarded pictures. Severus hadn't even asked to see them all, so she'd kept them in her room. Would her friends see what she saw when they looked at them. Would they think them madly in love? Would she be more upset if they did or didn't?

Severus saved her from answering immediately by arriving with the tea tray. “Budge over Potter. That's my wife, find your own.”, he growled as he set the tray on the table. Harry laughed good-naturedly and made room. “I don't intend to give her a lap dance, Potter, make room.”, he huffed causing everyone to laugh as Severus bumped Harry with his bum to move him. Hermione smiled at him gratefully.

After they were all situated, with Hermione having a bubble of space with no one touching her, Neville stared at her expectantly. She sighed in resignation and *accio*’ed the envelope of pictures. She hesitated before opening it and sorting a few out, handing the rest to Neville to share with everyone. The pictures of their dance and kiss were just so personal.

Harry eyed her curiously as he noticed which pictures were missing, but said nothing. As Luna and Ginny cooed over the pictures, Neville stared at Severus intently. Severus ignored him for long moments before sighing heavily, “You have something to say, I take it?” Neville smiled ruefully and said, “I'm glad for you sir. I know most of it was an act, but you really seem much happier now.” It was on the tip of Hermione's tongue to say "Who's to say it's not an act now?", but she refrained as Severus Answered. "I will admit that I enjoy Hermione's...companionship, but don't think I'll have gone soft in regards to potions, Longbottom. No wedded bliss would delude me into thinking you can be trusted near a cauldron.”

This caused more good natured laughing all around and one harsh disbelieving bark from Hermione herself. Thankfully, no one heard her safe Severus, who eyed her warily before continuing to banter with her friends. Ron made the comment that he'd already gone soft in regards to himself and Harry and Severus whacked him in the head just like old times.

Her friends' laughter rang in the silence as Severus closed the door behind them. He turned and stared at her intently with his arms crossed from across the room. Shaking his head and uncrossing his arms he asked, “Want to tell me what that was all about?” “Not particularly.”, she replied non-nonchalantly.

He shook his head and began gathering up the tea things. She rose to help him, but he waved her off. Quietly, he said, “I'm trying to be whatever it is you want from me, but I don't think I know. What am I doing wrong, Hermione?” She instantly felt wretched for causing him to feel this way and cried, “Nothing! You've done nothing wrong. I'm sorry. This whole thing has just been really difficult, but I'm not trying to take it out on you. If I'm honest...”
When she didn't continue speaking, he prodded, “Yes?” Shakily she said, “If I'm honest, you're just too good at acting. I have no way of knowing what you actually feel and what you're portraying for the benefit of others.” He looked at her in confusion and asked, “What is it you want? Do you want me to tell everyone why we really married? You said you didn't want them to know, though quite a few have guessed.”

She shook her head as tears began to flow down her face unbidden. “No, please, I'm sorry. I don't mean to feel this way. But look at how you're looking at me! I'm so confused Severus.” She thrust the pictures she had hidden from her friends into his hands and he stared at them mutely. His face had gone white and his expression was lost and a bit hurt.

“I'm sorry that I'm causing you such torment. I only wanted to make things easier for you. If you just tell me what to do to make it better, I will. Anything.”, he said quietly. She placed her hand upon his chest and said, “I think you're trying too hard, Severus. You don't have to be seen as some adoring, doting, husband. You can just be yourself.” He searched her face before asking brokenly, “And what if I WANT to be a doting husband? Would it be so abhorrent to allow me to care for you Hermione?”

Without responding, she wrapped her arms around his waist and cried. He stood frozen, afraid to touch her, before slowly bringing his arms up to cradle her gently. He stroked her back lightly for untold minutes, until her sobbing subsided. When she calmed and pulled away, she finally answered him, “No, it wouldn't. I'm so sorry Severus. Please forgive me.” He shook his head and wiped a lingering tear from her eyelash. “There is nothing to forgive.”

There were no more major upsets for the newly wed couple over the course of the next few weeks. Surprisingly, not many students said anything too nasty about Hermione and since she still had blackmail on Rita Skeeter, The Daily Prophet hadn't run a smear campaign either. As they relaxed into a routine of schoolwork and teaching, their earlier argument was all but forgotten.

Hermione had learned to be at ease in her pseudo husband's presence and he in turn tried to give her more space. As the weeks bled away, Hermione became comfortable in her new life. She found herself becoming more tactile with Severus, but he didn't seem bothered by it. She would lie on the couch with her feet in his lap while they read or touch his arm in passing in their quarters and occasionally kiss his cheek goodnight.

She saw this as considerable progress on her part and even spent some nights in bed wondering if
there could ever be more between them. Would he welcome such a thing? She wouldn't ask for his heart, she knew which witch it belonged to. She was no competition for the silken red hair and porcelain skin of Lily Potter. Perhaps one day they could be a physical comfort to one another however.

As February snow bled away to the first new green of March, a letter arrived in the great hall addressed to Master and Madam Snape. Severus usually plucked up any mail before she could and then handed her own to her, but he was attending to an errant Slytherin who had been caught placing dung bombs in the corridors this morning. So it was that she opened the letter from the ministry with curiosity.

All the blood drained from her face as Hermione read the missive. She made hasty excuses and fled to her rooms, classes be damned. What was this? What did it mean? It obviously wasn't the first message of it's kind if the large words FINAL NOTICE were to be believed. Why had Severus not mentioned it? If they didn't comply, they could spend time in Azkaban.

By the time Severus came to their quarters at lunch to see why she had missed her morning classes, she was a nervous wreck. As he opened the door, she launched herself from the sofa. “Did you know about this?” she asked in a small voice. Without taking the letter from her, Severus closed his eyes in pain. “I'm sorry you had to see that. Don't worry, I will continue to take care of it.”

She held the letter out and said, “I don't think you can. It says it's the final notice.” He looked alarmed and accepted the proffered parchment. He read the letter quickly and cursed under his breath. Striding to the hearth, he flooed the headmaster. “Albus can you arrange someone to cover my afternoon classes? I need to attend the Ministry on urgent business.” At the headmaster's agreement, Severus spun away from the floo to look at Hermione.

He walked up to her and lifted his hand, but stopped short of her cheek and dropped it again. “I will have this sorted by the day's end. Don't fret while I'm gone.” And with that he strode purposefully from the room, leaving Hermione to worry. If that letter were to be believed, she would be forced into having sex with Severus well before she was ready.
For those of you who didn't see this coming, I sincerely apologize. The Ministry couldn't allow them to be married in name only and not pop out babies though. The whole point of the law is to have more magical babies.
When Severus returned to Hogwarts that evening, he had a splitting headache and a much stronger hatred of the Ministry and Kingsley himself. He had basically shrugged and told Severus that they could comply, dissolve their marriage and be appointed Ministry approved spouses, or go to Azkaban until either the law was repealed or they obeyed it. Severus didn't hex the minister, but it was a close thing.

He had hoped to pay another fine or possibly bribe someone into overlooking their continued defiance of the law, but Kingsley had said there was no way it would go unnoticed. He had even asked if he alone could go to Azkaban, but if he did Hermione would be forced to marry someone else. For all he knew that might be the choice she made. He would present her with her options, such as they were, and let her decide how they moved forward.

He opened the door to find his wife curled up on the sofa staring at the dying fire in the hearth. He heaved a sigh and went to pour himself a full glass of firewhiskey. She glanced at him and closed her eyes as if in pain. “So we have no choice then?” “There is always a choice, Hermione.”, he replied as he handed her a glass of brandy.

Her laugh was bitter as she quaffed half of her drink. He cleared his throat and sat across from her. “You could petition to be remarried, though the ministry will choose for you.” “I can't- At least with you- I know you'll understand. You won't hurt me. I'm just not-”, she finally gave up trying to articulate and took another gulp. As the drink warmed her, she allowed her head to fall back on the couch.

“I honestly thought they would keep accepting penalty funds indefinitely. The Ministry is nothing if not greedy.”, he sighed. She took another sip and asked, “How long do we have?” He looked away from her and swallowed. “End of the week. Five days.” At her gasp he looked back at her with tear filled eyes. “Please understand, I didn't think for one second that this would happen. I would never
“Oh Severus, I know.”, she sniffled. “This isn't your fault. You had no way of knowing just how
fucked up those bureaucratic arseholes could be.” She laughed at his stunned expression caused by
her language. Becoming more serious, she leaned in close to him and shakily raised her hand to his
face. Her fingertips ghosted under his eyes and collected the tears threatening to fall and he leaned
slightly into her touch.

“Do you think-”, she rasped, “That we could work our way up to it? Could it be- Different? I know
that you probably want this as little as I do, but could we try to make it.” She trailed off not quite
brave enough to finish her sentence. His fingers enclosed hers gently holding them to his face as he
confessed, “I would like that. I don't think that I could- I can't- Like that again.”

Hermione looked at him quietly for a moment, until slowly leaning forward until her breath ghosted
across his lips. She searched his eyes as she breathed shallowly. For his part, Severus couldn't
breathe at all for the pain in his chest as she hovered millimeters above his lips. With agonizing
slowness, she closed the gap between them and kissed him lightly, chastely. This kiss was a greeting,
a question.

His answer was to tenderly cup her chin and move his mouth slowly against hers. She could feel him
tremble as they kissed timidly. After a moment, he pulled away and pressed his forehead against her
own. “You deserve so much better than this, better than anything I can give you. I am so sorry for all
that you have suffered at my hands.”, he whispered.

“Don't- Severus, what's done is done. We can't change it and your guilt won't fix it. Just....I want you
to show me how it's supposed to be.”, she breathed. He looked startled at her request, but then
nodded and said, “I will, but for now I think we've both had a trying day. We should get some sleep.
Goodnight Hermione.” Before leaving the room, he leaned in a placed one more delicate kiss upon
her lips. “Goodnight, Severus.”, she whispered to the empty room as she touched her lips.

The following day on their way to breakfast Severus informed Hermione that he would be in his lab
brewing the whole day should she need anything. She had been a bit disappointed when he didn't
kiss her good morning, but she could see that he was distracted. True to his word, she didn't see him
at lunch or dinner. When she returned to their quarters that evening, he had just stepped out of the loo
in pajama bottoms and a black tee shirt.
She stared at him for a bit too long and he shuffled his feet in a decidedly UN-Snape like fashion. “I could put my teaching robes back on if you prefer.”, he suggested. “No, I've just never seen you out of them. I was just surprised is all. I mean you have arms.”, she quipped. He smiled and rolled his eyes. “Yes, I assumed you could tell since I also have hands and they're generally sticking out of my sleeves.”

“I'll just go freshen up, shall I?”, she said with a nervous grin. “Wait, I have something for you.”, he said as he handed her a vial of bath oil. She opened it and sniffed. It smelled of lavender and chamomile. A decidedly relaxing soak. She smiled gratefully at him and went to prepare her bath.

When she emerged, Hermione found Severus in the sitting room drumming his fingers on the couch and staring into the fire. There was an assortment of items on the table in front of him. At her raised brow he said, “I thought you might like some options about how we do this. I have an array of potions and other items that may make it easier.”

She curiously looked over the potions first. There was Severus' own brew of contraceptive which he had already informed her was untraceable, lubricating potion, an arousal potion, a lust potion, calming drought, a sleeping potion, and polyjuice potion.

She picked up the latter and asked without looking at him, “would this make it easier?” He sucked in a breath and said quietly, “It may. I'm sure I can procure a sample from whomever you desire.” Fearing she already knew the answer, she turned towards the fire and asked resignedly, “Who would you like me to be?”

She was startled as he exclaimed, “What? No. Not for you. You're lovely, Hermione. The polyjuice is for me to take.” She turned and looked at him in confusion. He had called her lovely. She wasn't so plain that he needed her to look otherwise? She found that hard to believe, but it was a kindness she wouldn't rebuff. She shook her head and set the potion back down.

“I don't want you to take it.”, she admitted quietly. “But why? Surely you don't want to look at me and-”, he trailed off pursing his lips into a thin white line. “I would rather look at the man I trust than someone I don't know. I don't have anyone that I want, so it would just feel wrong.”, she admitted before drawing the conversation back to the potions on the table. “I'd prefer not to use the sleeping drought or lust potion either, but I won't deny you if you do.”
He shook his head and said ruefully, “The only one I'm adamant about is the contraceptive potion. The rest...I just wanted you to have options.” She sighed in relief and reached for the shopping bag sitting on the table. Her relief was short lived as she pulled out handcuffs, a blindfold, and a small red orb. Though she didn't know what the latter was for, she understood the concept of the first two.

Lost for words, she merely held them up in question. He stammered and explanation. “I thought you might feel better if you were in control. If I couldn't move or see, then maybe it would be less traumatizing for you.” “And what does this do?” she asked quietly holding up the red object.

“It's a magic suppressant. I would have to willingly bind my magic, but then I would be unable to use it until you freed it.”, he said without meeting her eyes. She gasped and sat next to him. “No Severus! I don't want any of this! Why would you- Do you really think that I would do something so cruel to you?” He shrugged and mumbled, “Self protection isn't cruelty. If it would make you feel safe, I would gladly do it.”

“It wouldn't. It would make me feel like a monster. I told you last night what I wanted, but I guess I wasn't clear enough. Severus, would you make love to me?”, she requested. He looked taken aback before clearing his throat and croaking, “If that is what you desire.” “It is.”, she confirmed earnestly.

His eyes softened as he held out his hand to her. “Come to my room, Hermione.” She placed her trembling hand in his and followed him silently into his room. She'd never had reason to go into his room here at Hogwarts and was surprised to find it a more masculine copy of her own room. Where she had cerulean bed curtains, his were navy. His bed was just as big as hers and where she'd had white and blue bedclothes, his were navy and chocolate. His view of the lake was slightly smaller, but just as breathtaking and his walls were lined with books. She was starting to think his collection rivaled Hogwart's library.

He stopped in front of the bed and tilted her chin up. “If at any point you feel unsafe, you are to tell me and we will stop. Do you understand?”, he instructed. “Yes.”, she breathed shakily. He studied her a moment before lowering his mouth to hers. His touch remained feather light as his fingertips trailed from her chin to cup her neck and play with her hair.

When she felt his other hand at her waist, her breath quickened. She reminded herself where she
was. She wasn't at Malfoy Manor. There was no one to put a show on for. Severus wouldn't hurt her. Never again, he'd promised. He caught the subtle shift in her posture and pulled back.

“Alright?”, he asked. At her nod he moved to place his lips upon her neck.

A helpless whimper escaped her as he suckled on her pulse point and she had to hold onto him to keep her knees from buckling. “My sweet wife.”, he purred in her ear. His fingers dipped into her shirt to caress the skin of her back and she moaned. As his fingers trailed higher and splayed across her back, she arched into him.

Severus carefully kept his lower half away from his wife and moved his lips from her neck towards her shoulder. “Severus?”, she moaned shakily. “Yes?”, he drawled against her skin. “may I leave my shirt on?”, she stammered timidly. He pulled back slightly to look her in the eye and said somberly, “Yes Hermione. I'll meet any request you make of me.”

She nodded and kissed him sweetly. He guided her by the waist to sit on the bed and kneeled in front of her. He slowly removed her socks and began massaging her feet. This caused her to groan and blush brightly. He chuckled as he continued to rub. With mischief in his eyes, he brought her foot to his mouth and kissed her arch.

Mewling loudly, she asked, “Wh-what are you doing?” He smirked and replied, “Making love to you. Worshiping you as you deserve. Do you not like it?” She shook her head and answered breathlessly, “I li-like it.” He chuckled darkly as he suckled on her big toe, causing her to squirm. “And will we be removing these tonight, Hermione?”, Severus teased while sliding his hand up her pajama bottom.

“Y-yes. Anything, but my shirt is fine.”, she said huskily. He arched a brow, but didn't comment. He ran his hand lightly up over her bottoms until reaching the waistband. He paused giving her a moment to object. She tensed, but didn't ask him to stop. He watched her closely as he slowly slid his fingers into the band and began to move it downward. Her breath hitched, but she didn't seem to be in distress.

As he brought her pajamas down, he rose and began kissing along her belly. This caused her to giggle nervously. He grinned and asked, “Ticklish?” At her nod, he avoided that spot and moved lower to right above her knickers. He kissed her from one hip to the other and then began kissing and nipping at the outside of her thigh. He worked his way slowly down one leg continuing to her foot again.
Once he reached the bottom he came back up the inside of her leg, just as slowly. By the time he reached the apex of her thighs she was panting and clutching the sheets. She whimpered when he skipped her sex and began his journey down the outside of her left leg. When he reached the middle again he placed his hands lightly on the waistband of her knickers and asked, “And this?”

She looked at his shyly and nodded once. He removed them slowly, revealing her beautiful quim. He was pleased to see she was already glistening with need. He climbed back up to lie next to Hermione and began kissing her neck while trailing his fingers along her body. He shifted and began kissing her lips tenderly as his fingers drifted down her stomach.

When his fingertips met her clt gently, her breath hitched and she moaned lightly. As her pleasure became more evident, he kissed the shell of her ear causing her to moan loudly. He continued to kiss and nip at her ear and neck all the while tenderly caressing her hardened nub. Her body slowly began a different type of stiffening and then, suddenly, she was keening and bucking against his hand.

He continued to kiss and nuzzle her neck, moving to her temple as she came down from her first climax. After a moment, he whispered, “That's my sweet girl. How do you feel?” She turned her head to him with tears running down her face and his heart froze. Then she smiled shyly and said, “That was- I never dreamed that it would feel like that. Thank you Severus.”

They lay quietly for a while, him cradling her and caressing her hair and her running her fingers along his chest until she broke the silence. “Severus may I make a request?” she asked slowly. “Anything,” he breathed. She shook her head and said, “You are allowed to tell me no.” “What is it you would ask of me, witch?” he asked ignoring her statement. After a long pause she whispered, “Would you allow me to pleasure you?”

He sucked in a breath and she felt his heart-rate quicken. “That isn’t necessary.” She lifted her head to look at him. “Was it necessary for you to pleasure me? I’d assume not, since we’ve still not consummated our bond.” He rolled his eyes at her impertinence. “Why do you wish to touch me?” She looked pained as she said, “You aren't the only one who wants- I want to make you happy too, you know. It isn't fair that you spend all of your time and energy trying to please me and expect me to not want to return the favor.”
“Oh little witch. You owe me nothing and yet I owe you everything, even my life. I would ask nothing of you, save your smile.”, he rasped. “And if touching you were to cause my smile?”, she asked cheekily. He huffed a laugh and rolled onto his back. “Then who am I to deny you. I am but a slave to your whims.”

She giggled as she turned and leaned over his chest to kiss him. After a few chaste presses of her lips to his, she licked the seam of his lips. When he gasped, she took the opportunity to explore his mouth. Her tongue was at first timid in it's quest, but as he began to respond with small breathy noises she became more bold. She ran her hands over his chest and shoulders as she flicked her tongue playfully against his.

When she went to place her hand inside his shirt, he pulled away. “I doubt you will find me appealing.”, he warned. She blushed, because had she not hidden her own scars from him? She smiled sweetly at him and said, “You can keep it on if you like. May I touch you or would you prefer I avoid your chest?”

He searched her eyes for a moment, before rising and removing his shirt with one swift movement. His torso was lined with scars both magical and muggle in origin. As she reached out to touch one, he shuddered violently. “Have I hurt you?”, she asked in alarm. He shook his head and rasped, “No...it felt. Good.”

Feeling emboldened, she leaned forward and placed her lips lightly against the scar, causing him to moan throatily. She spent the next few moments acquainting herself with every inch of him she could reach. As her mouth latched onto his nipple he let out a hoarse cry that sent shivers straight to her core. She swirled her tongue around it before kissing her way down his torso.

As she dipped her tongue into his navel she began to slide her fingers into his sleep pants. He shivered as she slowly pulled them away, causing him to spring forth. She'd almost forgotten how big he was. She'd only seen one other erection and it had been on a boy of fifteen. She finished pulling his pajamas down his legs and off of his feet and then she laid her hands nervously on his thighs.

Even that innocent contact ripped a moan from him. She looked up to see him watching her with glassy eyes and a strong blush staining all the way down his chest. Her heart was beating rapidly in nervousness, but there was also a small spark of excitement. This powerful, unflappable, wizard was reacting this way to her touch.
She felt a thrill as she realized, SHE felt powerful. She wasn't afraid that at any moment he would harm her. Logically, that had never been her fear. But her body however, had always been very aware of him. She'd always felt tense, waiting for something. The tension visibly melted from her as she gently grasped his member.

He was hot and silken, neither something that she had ever associated with the Potion's Master. She gave an experimental squeeze and he let out a long hiss between clenched teeth. She looked back to his face and saw he was rigidly in control of himself. Curious, she gave him a slow pump. Though his breath hitched, he didn't move a muscle.

Suspicious now, she twisted her hand and pumped his a few more times. She could see that he was grinding his teeth and his eyes were unfocused with need, but yet he still didn't move. So much control. There was a part of her that felt grateful that he could police himself so full...and yet. There was a part of her that wanted him to lose that rigid control. She wanted him to experience the same level of pleasure that he had just given her.

She leaned forward and placed a soft open-mouthed kiss upon the head. This was met by a choked sound and he panted, “Don’t.” She looked up in confusion. “Do you not like that?” He shook his head and rasped, “You don't have to do that. Ever. Again.” Ah. So that was it.

Hermione couldn't help but smile at how sweet Severus was as she leaned forward and swiped her tongue from the base to the tip. “Ahhh Hermione!” he moaned. His sounds only encouraged her as she began placing sloppy kisses all over him. She felt his thigh muscles flexing under her and knew she was on the right track.

She pumped him with her hand a few more times while kissing him before popping the head into her mouth. This caused him to curse under his breath and she hummed as she started to bob her head shallowly. Her tongue swirled around and dipped into the slit, lapping up the bead of pre-cum there.

As he began to pant through his clenched teeth and his hands fist at his side, she began to take him deeper into her mouth. This caused him to grab at her shoulder as he whimpered, “Hermione s-stop. I'm going to-” She didn't cease her movement however and with a startled cry Severus came deep into her mouth.
She released him with an audible pop and swallowed the tangy liquid in her mouth. She looked at him to gauge his reaction as he lay panting with his eyes screwed shut tightly. He opened them to look at her intensely and whisper, “Come here.”

She moved to lie next to him and he gently enveloped her in a hug. They lay there for a long time, him just holding her, and she was almost asleep when she heard him sniffle quietly. It took her a moment to realize that he was crying. He wasn't moving save his hand stroking along her spine and he was scarcely breathing, but as she listened she knew.

She moved her hands out from between them and returned his embrace, startling him somewhat as he flinched. Quietly she spoke, “Severus? Are you alright?” He nodded, but didn't speak for some time. She rubbed his back soothingly. After a while, his body relaxed.

“no one has ever- I've never- Every time before now has been on orders.”, he breathed quietly. “Technically, I suppose this was on Ministry orders, but-”  “NO! I wanted to do that, Severus!”, she said vehemently. He pulled back and searched her face for the lie, but found none. “Why would you want-” “I want to make you happy Severus. You didn't deserve to be used any more than I did.”, she interrupted and then added quietly, “You do know that don't you?”

He closed his eyes and without answering her said, “Thank you, Hermione.” His eyes slid back open and he eyed her shyly before asking huskily, “May I kiss you again?” As she smiled and said “I'd like that.” he dipped his head to hers and kissed her sweetly. They lay kissing and holding one another for quite a while before he pulled away and placed one final kiss upon her forehead. As she drifted off to sleep in his bed, Hermione felt safe, protected, cared for, and dare she think it? Happy.

When Hermione woke the next day and rolled over to greet Severus, she found the bed empty. As she stretched the sleep away, she felt that the sheets were cold. He'd been up for a while then. She smiled to herself as she recalled the previous night. He may not love her, but she knew that he cared deeply for her. That was enough. To have the regard of such a loyal and honorable man was humbling.
She knew that they hadn't finished their objective the previous night, but they'd made great progress. She had been touched and touched him in return and it had left her giddy, not afraid. They had three days in which to consummate their marriage, but that thought didn't inspire the fear that it had yesterday. She trusted him, more now than before.

As she smiled and put her pajama bottoms back on, she padded into the sitting room in search of her husband. He wasn't to be found there however. She searched the kitchenette and loo as well, but it seemed he had left their quarters. Shrugging she went to take a shower.

When she emerged, he hadn't returned so she donned her robes and went in search of him. As she approached the hallway to his office, Pansy Parkinson blocked her path. Unlike Draco, she had not turned over a new leaf. Though Hermione had seen little of her since their return this school year, Pansy was just as nasty to her as ever when their paths did cross.

"Hello Mudblood.", she spat. “I'm surprised Snape lets you out of bed to attend classes. Tell me do you get outstandings in the bedroom or do you fail to impress him there as well?” As Hermione flushed darkly and moved to pass her, Pansy shoved her causing her to fall on her bum. “Tell me, how old were you when you first sucked his cock? 13? 14?” When Hermione didn't reply, Pansy bent down so that their eyes were level. “Did you like The Dark Lord watching you? And all the others? My father said you didn't seem nearly as upset as a good little Gryffindor should.”

Hermione's occlumency shields snapped into place and her magic crackled angrily around her. Just as she reached for her wand, Severus' voice snarled dangerously behind them. “What on earth is going on here?” As he approached, Pansy smirked at her and straightened. “I was just offering to help Madam Snape up. She wasn't watching where she was going and ran into me.”

Severus looked to Hermione disbelievingly, but she nodded and rose woodenly. Her hair fell forward to cover her face and her whole body seemed to draw in on itself, but he could hardly punish Parkinson for something Hermione wouldn't admit to. He halfway wished he'd not made his presence known so that he'd know what they'd been discussing.

“Very well. I can see to Madam Snape from here.”, he said dismissively. As Pansy pranced away, Severus turned to look at Hermione. She refused to meet his eyes as she said, “We should get to breakfast before we're late.” As she moved to pass him, he reached out to her and she flinched harshly away from him.
Pulling his hand back as if he'd been burned, he looked away. “I'm sorry.”, she said thickly and he noticed that her occlumency shields were fraying. What had that Parkinson chit said to cause her to occlude? Or was she regretting what occurred last night? He had no way of knowing and he didn't know how to fix the situation. She obviously didn't welcome his touch at the moment, so he did the only thing he could do. He pulled away to allow her space and said quietly, “No it's alright. Let's go shall we?”

All throughout breakfast, Hermione was subdued and Severus wasn't the only one to take notice. At Minerva's questioning glance, he shrugged helplessly and shook his head. As they rose to leave, Severus asked, “Are you alright to attend classes? I'm sure your other professors wouldn't mind you taking the day. The classes are more for show than anything.”

Apparently this was the wrong thing to say, because she gasped and tears spilled down her face. As she fled the hall, he wasn't sure what he'd said wrong, but he found himself on the receiving end of more than an accusatory glance from professor and student alike. Feeling utterly wrong-footed, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and left the hall himself. His first impulse was to go after her, but she obviously wanted to be away from him. He instead headed to his classroom, where for the first time since the war ended he took his aggressions out on his pupils.

Severus, who had no wish to be glared at further, skipped both lunch and dinner in the great hall. When Hermione let herself into their rooms later that night, he was sat on the sofa waiting for her. His brow was furrowed and his body was rigid with tension. His elbows rested on his knees and his hands were clasped so tightly that his knuckles had gone white. He'd spent hours thinking of what he should say. What he should do, to make her feel more at ease. To get her to open up to him.

There wasn't much he could do though, was there? She had snuggled into him so sweetly just last night and today she was back to flinching from him. He didn't blame her, but the guilt of the whole situation was crushing him. She set her satchel down by the door and came to sit next to him.

“So this is where you've been. Did you eat anything since breakfast?”, she asked as she tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. He was shocked at the gesture. Just this morning, she'd flinched away from him and now here she was willingly touching him. He couldn't keep up. Shaking his head he answered lowly, “No, I've not been hungry.”
She tsked and said, “I’d thought as much. I’m sorry about this morning. I brought you a sandwich and some crisps.” She pulled out a small plate and enlarged it, handing it over. When he made no move to eat it, she sighed. “Pansy said some nasty things to me. Apparently her father was there that night. She knows what happened before. I wish it hadn't affected me so strongly, but her words brought back a lot of repressed emotions.”

He set the plate on the table and turned to her. “You're allowed to feel however you feel Hermione. You don't have to apologize or justify it. I only wish that the bloody Ministry weren't making this harder for you.” She gave him a wan smile and stood. “I'm going to go take a bath. Meet you in your room?” As she turned to go, he grasped her hand.

“We have three days. We don't have to tonight, Hermione.”, he urged. Her smile grew a bit as she replied, “I don't want her to win. The light won remember? I can't let the darkness keep me hostage forever.” “Forever? Hermione you went through a horrendous trauma a little under a year ago. You're such a strong, brave girl, but it's alright to have your moments of weakness as well. I won't hold it against you.”

“I know Severus. I want you to keep helping me overcome it. I'm not just being head-strong to get this over with. The way you made me feel yesterday was- You help me feel alive again. I want to experience that again.” As she spoke she walked closer until she was standing between his knees. His mouth went dry at her words and he swallowed before saying quietly, “I would like that more than anything.”

He looked up at her longingly as she caressed his cheek with her fingertips before turning to go bathe. As the door shut behind her with a soft thud, she leaned against it and willed her heart to calm. Merlin how he had looked at her. He looked at her like she were an idol to be worshiped, a treasure to be coveted.

Shaking herself, she stripped and started the bath water. The bath oil was still on the counter where she left it and she added a few drops with a smile. Fuck what Pansy Parkinson thought, fuck what anyone else thought, she was beginning to have serious feelings for her husband.
When Hermione emerged from the loo wearing nothing but a long sleeved top and a pair of knickers, Severus felt himself go hard immediately. Her long legs were bare all the way to her ankle, where a delicate silver chain rested. His eyes trailed slowly up from her feet, past her delicious legs, lingering on her sweet little navel, flicking over her tight fitting white top that was very nearly see through across her chest, up her elegant neck, to meet her smug eyes.

“Have you had your fill of looking at me, husband?”, she asked with a laugh. “Never.”, he said huskily as he stalked forward and claimed her lips. She gasped as he lifted her and carried her into his bedroom. He placed her gently on the bed and began worshiping her body for a second night in a row. He felt like the luckiest bastard in the world.

As he kissed his way down her body tonight, he didn't stop when reaching her sex. Instead he placed a soft kiss on her clit, causing her to cry out. He grinned at her and is head descended. He licked her from her core to her little pearl until she was panting with need. Just as she thought she might explode, he pulled away. She whimpered as he came to rest beside her.

“One day you can cum on my tongue, but not today Hermione. I want to try something else. Do you trust me?”, he asked breathlessly. At her answering nod, he rolled her on top of himself, moving her legs so that she was straddling him. He placed his feet flat on the bed and his hands loosely on her hips.

“You're in control now, Hermione.”, he breathed. And she felt in control. He wasn't pinning her down. he wasn't forcing her to do anything. She shifted her hips experimentally and groaned at the sensation of his silken pajamas against her folds. She smiled down at him and asked, “I'm in control am I?” At his nod she ordered, “Take this off.” indicating his shirt. He leaned up and did as commanded with a boyish grin.

She leaned down and began suckling on his neck and moving her hips slowly. As his erection came into contact with her bum, she froze. “You're still in control.”, he breathed soothingly. She looked him in the eyes as she rocked back against his erection. His breath hitched, but he didn't move. She shimmied a bit and then rocked back again, causing her core to brush against him.

When she found the spot she liked, she began to slowly moved her hips until she fell into a natural rhythm. Soon they were both panting and she leaned down to whisper in his ear, “Do you like this Severus? Does it feel good?” “Yessss. Merlin, Hermione.”, he hissed. Just as he was about to inform her of his oncoming orgasm, she reached inside his pants and grasped him.
She tugged on him once. Twice. Three times and he spurted all over his own stomach. The sight of which caused her own undoing. She remained grasping him as she threw her head back and grinded against him, mewling sweetly. As her movements became jerky and then stopped she collapsed bonelessly atop him.

After she caught her breath she whispered in his ear, “That was amazing, Severus.” He shuddered and wrapped his arms loosely around her. “You are amazing.” She huffed a laugh and rolled off of him. He immediately missed the feel of her and had to stop himself from reaching out to pull her back. As she stared up at the ceiling she confessed quietly, “I don't know what I would do without you Severus. You've quickly become the most important person in my life.” He bit his tongue to stop his first reply and said, “I will always be here for you. Goodnight Hermione.”

The next morning Hermione woke late as she had a free period first thing on Thursdays. She was surprised to roll over and find Severus still in bed. She knew he also had a free period, but assumed he would rise early like he always seemed to do. As his eyes opened to look at her she smiled and reached out to stroke his hair.

“Good morning.,” he rasped, leaning in to her touch. Her smile grew. “Good morning dear.” At his raised brow she laughed. “You're feeling cheeky, I see.,” he huffed as he leaned in to kiss her. She moaned and rolled over to mount him. As his morning erection brushed against her she smirked and purred, “And you seem to be in good spirits as well.”

He groaned deeply as she ground herself against him. “Merlin, woman! You're going to be the death of me.” She leaned down and placed a few trailing kisses upon his neck before whispering in his ear, “Can we try something else this morning?” “What did you have in mind?” She smiled and reached inside his pants, pulling him out. She then began rubbing herself along his length. In an embarrassingly short amount of time, he felt himself get close. As if sensing this, she lifted her hips and placed the tip at her entrance.

Before he could ask if she was sure, she rocked forward causing the head to enter her. He clutched at the bedclothes to keep from moving as she remained still. Slowly she began to lower herself onto him. Their eyes locked as she removed the hand that had been supporting him and sank the
remainder of the way down. She sucked in a breath as he became fully seated and he found himself unable to breathe.

She stared at him in wonder, unable to move. “It feels-”, she breathed. “It doesn't hurt at all.” “It isn't meant to.”, he replied gravely. She smiled as tears came to her eyes and she began to slowly rock forward. As her heat clutched at him, he began to draw close again. “I won't last much longer.”

She took his hand and placed it upon her clit and began to undulate her hips more quickly. “I'm so close.”, she whined. As he rubbed her nub gently, she broke apart. She began to pulse and her walls milked his release from him. As their climax rocked through them their bond solidified. They looked at one another with tears in their eyes. Neither had ever experienced anything so lovely.

As the afterglow faded, Hermione awkwardly climbed off of him and pulled the comforter over herself. As she sat facing him expectantly, he found himself at a loss for words. What did one say to the person they loved after an earth-shattering experience when said person didn't return the sentiment? Shaking the painful thought away he said quietly, “It's done. Hopefully they will leave you alone now.”

Apparently that's not what you said, because her sweet smile melted away. She nodded seriously and said, “Yeah so that's that, then.” As she turned from him and began putting on her knickers, he grasped for something to say, anything, to keep her from leaving, but found himself at a loss. She didn't look at him again as she left, softly closing the door behind her.

Severus flopped back onto the bed and indulged himself in a small temper tantrum taken out on his pillows and then began to cry. How was he to go about being around her now? How was he to stand next to her and not reach for her hand? To share quarters and not kiss her goodnight? Of course they were just working their way up to performing the task, but the last few days had felt suspiciously like courting. Now that it was over, of course she wouldn't want to continue on.

It's not as if he blamed her. Look at all he had done to her. Look at him. What could he possibly offer her? His old, skinny, scarred body? His greasy hair and crooked teeth? How about nightmares about his previous transgressions? Who was he kidding. He was surprised she could stomach his touch this long. What did he think would happen? She'd suddenly fall hopelessly in love with him? What a fool was he.
As he lay choking on his sobs, a knock came at his door. “Severus? Can I come in?”, she called quietly. He looked around panicking. He didn't want her to see him pathetically crying, but before he could think of what to do she opened the door. She took one look at him and burst into tears. She ran to him and buried her face into his chest. “Please don't cry Severus! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.”, she cried. Bewildered he asked, “What could you possibly have to be sorry for?” “I know you didn't want to sleep with me. It must have been so hard on you. Here I was only thinking of my own fear and hurt and I was hurting you too.”, she wailed.

“No, Hermione.”, he said quietly. “You have done nothing wrong. That's not- It's not- I've never felt like this before. No one has ever been so gentle and kind with me and I know I have no right to make demands of you. I won't make any demands of you. But the thought that it's over- That I won't have your sweet kisses-” He was cut off as she leaned up and kissed him.

When she pulled away, his eyes were closed as if in pain. She wiped the tears gently from his face and whispered, “I'll still kiss you. I thought- I thought you were washed of me after it was over earlier. I know that we aren't- I know that you don't feel that way about me, but if I can be of any comfort to you- If we could bring each other pleasure, that's enough for me.”

His heart hurt so much at the thought that she didn't know of his love for her, but she wouldn't want it. If his body was worth her attentions, he wouldn't ask for more. He would bring her any small amount of pleasure and comfort he could. He wouldn't burden her with his feelings. “Thank you, Hermione.”, he said thickly as he leaned in and kissed her tenderly.
Sorry it's been so long loves! I had a hell of a week. My company dissolved, so I had to help clean up and pack up and get the heck out of dodge. I have an interview with one of our sister companies Monday, so hopefully I'll still be gainfully employed. Anyway, I hope you enjoy the chapter.

Hermione spent the remainder of the day on cloud nine. No, her husband wasn't in love with her, but he held her in a certain regard. He had touched her gently, whispered sweet things in her ear, confessed to wanting her kisses. That was more than enough for her. She knew she was smiling like a loon all day, but couldn't quite manage to stop.

Both Harry and Ron had noticed and asked her why she was so giddy. She'd never been the type to lie, especially not to her best friends, but she held no qualms in this instance. She told them that Severus had lent her a priceless tome on Ancient Runes and they'd accepted her explanation at face value. She'd had trouble focusing on her studies during classes for reminiscing about Severus placing his lips in the most delicious and depraved of places.

At meals, she had had to avoid looking in his direction for fear of somehow broadcasting to the whole school that they'd slept together. For his part, Severus seemed to sense her mood and didn't try to engage her in conversation. When she returned to their quarters that evening after studying with Harry, Ron, Lavender, and Ginny in the library until curfew, her euphoria dimmed somewhat.

For the first time since their coupling, she felt herself having doubts. Was she to return to his bed or her own? Did she want to sleep in his bed every night? Would he expect sex every day? What if she didn't want to? What if she did, but he didn't? What if-

“Hermione”, Severus called evenly, “You're thinking too much. Sit. I'll make us some tea.” Hermione did as instructed somewhat nervously. Severus seemed to already be aware of her unease, but how was she to broach these topics with him? She'd never been in a relationship before and had no experience discussing such issues. And come to that, were they even in a relationship or just an...agreement of sorts. They'd come to some sort of understanding this morning, but she didn't really comprehend what it meant.
As Severus set her teacup before her and sat opposite her chair, he lifted his own cup and took a sip. He seemed so calm, compared to her. How could he just sit and drink his tea as if major decisions didn't need to be made? She left her tea untouched as she watched him sip his own and stare into the fire. Finally with a sigh he turned to her.

"Are you ready to ask all of your questions yet little Gryffindor?", he asked with a quirk of his lips. She felt her face burn as she nodded. "Wh-what will you expect from me now? After-" He smiled kindly and set his tea down, leaning towards her on his elbows. "I told you Hermione. I expect nothing from you but your smile."

"That's all well and good", she huffed, "But how will I know what you want?" His smile faded as he replied seriously, "I want whatever it is you want Hermione. If you want to cuddle by the fire with a book, that's what I want. If you want to kiss for hours, that's what I want. If you want to refrain from touching, if you want to be left to your own devices, if you want me to make you feel alive-" The last was said in a choked whisper.

She searched his face for a moment before asking timidly, "Do you want me to sleep in your bed or mine?" He shook his head at her obtrusiveness. "Where do you want to sleep?" "could- Could I sleep in your bed. -But just to sleep?" His heart broke at the fear in her eyes. Did she really think he would only allow her near him for sex? "Of course you can. I would be delighted to share any type of comfort with you Hermione. We don't have to. Be intimate. To offer one another comfort."

She gave him a relieved little grin as she said, "I'm sorry I think I'm rubbish at this. I don't know how I'm supposed to know what kind of...comfort...you will want." He grinned and replied, "I never knew you to need to be instructed so many times on the same subject. I assure you that whatever it is you want I will neither pressure nor rebuff you in your advances or lack thereof." Laughingly she said, "So what you're trying to say is you're a man and you'll be ready anytime I am?"

He blushed and looked away and she feared she had crossed some sort of line, but then he looked back to her with a heated gaze. "I cannot stress enough that the choice will always be yours. I will be patiently waiting for anytime you. Desire. My touch.” Hermione felt herself blush brightly and she looked away from his intent gaze.
“I’d like to sleep in your room.”, she mumbled in embarrassment. He smiled and nodded before leaning back. “Do you have any other questions?” At the shake of her head Severus stood. “Are you tired now or will you be up for a while?” “Oh I think I might go to bed a bit early tonight. I have a Transfiguration test tomorrow morning.”, she mumbled lamely. They both knew it was a flimsy excuse. Even Hermione could admit that she could sit her NEWTS at any time and pass. He smiled gently at her and held his hand out. With her own shy smile she took his hand and stood. “I’ll just go change in my room. Meet you there?” He nodded indulgently and turned to go to his room.

Hermione decided to wear a blue long sleeved sleep shirt that came to just above her knees because it was both comfortable and modest. She knocked briefly on the open door and he raised the covers for her to get in the bed. Though Severus normally slept in just sleep pants, he also wore a tee shirt for Hermione’s benefit. He tried not to stare at her in her lovely night clothes. He really found it hard to believe that she wanted to share space with him, but he wouldn’t question it.

As she crawled into the bed, he turned to snuff the candle, but her hand on his arm gave her pause. “Severus?”, she asked nervously. “May I kiss you goodnight?” He turned to her slowly and said as calmly as he could manage, “of course.” As she leaned in and placed her lips sweetly against his own, Severus reveled in her touch. The kiss ended much too quickly for his taste, but she then curled up against his chest, causing his heart-rate to spike as he gently placed his hands on her back.

As she sighed and closed her eyes, presumably content to sleep in his arms, he whispered against her hair, “Shall I leave the light on or turn it off?” She sighed, “Turn it off please. Goodnight Severus.” Her breath evened out within moments. For a while Severus found himself watching her sleep. How she could feel comfortable enough to sleep in his presence he did not know, but he treasured her trust in him. Hours after Hermione, Severus drifted off a slight smile gracing his face.

Severus awoke to whimpering and it took him a moment to realize it was coming from his still sleeping wife. As he awoke fully, he could make out words mixed in the little distressed noises. “Severus?”, she asked nervously. “May I kiss you goodnight?” He turned to her slowly and said as calmly as he could manage, “of course.” As she leaned in and placed her lips sweetly against his own, Severus reveled in her touch. The kiss ended much too quickly for his taste, but she then curled up against his chest, causing his heart-rate to spike as he gently placed his hands on her back.

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Casting *Lumo*, he gently moved her away from his chest and stroked her cheek. “Hermione wake up. Wake up darling. It's only a dream. You're safe now.” Her eyes snapped open and she looked at him in sheer panic until her mind caught up to her. She then let out a small distressed cry and launched herself at him. His breath caught as he returned her embrace. He stroked her back soothingly as she sobbed and once she’d settled, he pulled away to look her in the face.
“Would you like to talk about it?”, he asked gingerly. She closed her eyes and whimpered, “It's the always same. It's always memories of the manor. This time it was Bellatrix, but then suddenly she was...you...and it was you pinning me down and cutting my arm up. It changed and then you-you-” “you can say it if you need to.”, he prodded. “You had sex with me and...and you- on the word. You finished on the word.”, she wailed.

Severus was completely lost. Assuming she was still disoriented from sleep, he tilted her chin up to look in her eyes and asked, “What word Hermione?” She looked startled and then her face crumpled. “The word she carved into my arm with her knife.”, she whispered in shame. In dread Severus looked to her long sleeves. Had he ever seen Hermione's arms since that day? No, he hadn't. He had assumed that she preferred to dress as modestly as possible, but now he doubted that reasoning.

“Hermione may I see it?”, he asked hesitantly. Her only response was to shake her head and sob loudly. At a loss for what to do, Severus studied the sleeves of her night shirt. Horror stole his breath as he noticed that her left sleeve was slowly turning dark with blood. “Hermione you're bleeding! Has it not healed after all this time?”, he asked in alarm. “No. It was a cursed knife.”, she replied woodenly.

Ignoring her refusal to show him willingly, he grabbed her arm and shoved the sleeve up to reveal the most distasteful word Severus had ever heard. The sight of that ugly word bleeding upon her beautiful porcelain skin made him fairly sick. He traced the edges of the wound with his fingertips as he thought furiously of what to do for her. Before a solution came to him however, she jerked her arm away and cried, “How dare you! You promised me- You said you would n-never- You betrayed me!”

“Hermione no please-”, he began to try to explain that he only wanted to help her, but she ignored him and jumped from the bed and ran from the room slamming the door behind her. He ran a hand down his face in dismay and then slowly moved to follow her. When Severus raised his hand to knock on her door, he hesitated at the feel of strong vicious wards. Extending his magic to feel them, he was surprised at how nasty they actually were.

If his only intention were to knock, he would be dealt a violent stinging hex, if he tried the knob he would be thrown clear across their quarters, and if Merlin forbid he tried to dismantle her wards he would be subjected to a nasty hex that imitated the effects of a dementor. Deciding to deal with the pain, he knocked. When she ignored him, he repeated the action and this sting was much worse than the first. In frustration he knocked once more and called desperately, “Please! I'm sorry I invaded
your privacy, but I assure you it was only out of concern for you. I give you permission to hex me six ways to Sunday, please just open the door and let me help you. I have a balm that will temporarily stop the bleeding.”

When she didn't answer, he prepared himself to knock again, though he dreaded the accompanied pain. Before he could complete the action however the door swung open to reveal an angry Hermione glaring at him. “the next hex would have been equivalent to a mild cruciatus, you realize?”, she hissed. “A pain I will gladly endure to help you.”, he replied evenly. She rolled her eyes and looked away. “I never wanted you to see that word on my skin. I know about- your history with it.”

Severus swallowed and pushed the old hurt away. “That word is vile, but it does not define you. I would like to study the wound if you would allow it. Depending upon the curse embedded in the blade, I may be able to close it permanently and reduce the scarring.” Her eyes darted to his. “I thought it could never be healed. I thought-” “I'm not sure if I can rid you of the scar completely, but I think I can at least make sure you don't bleed anymore.”, he replied slowly.

She looked away from him, ashamed. “I'm sorry Severus. I know you're just trying to help me, but I really didn't want you to see it.” He sighed deeply and tilted her chin up to meet his eyes. “I understand that and I am terribly sorry for breaking your trust. I have no defense. I don't ask for your forgiveness, but please allow me to help you.” “NO! You didn't- You didn't break my trust. I'm sorry I said that earlier. I was afraid of what you would think of me- of how you would see me if you saw it. I- There's truly nothing to forgive Severus. I should have trusted you more.”,

“Will you allow me then, to treat you?”, he pleaded. At her answering nod, he accio'ed a small jar and unscrewed the lid. He dipped his fingers into the green cream inside and then gently began to massage it into her still bleeding arm. It sent frissons of pleasure up her spine. The wound had only ever caused her pain up to this point, but the way this felt was almost too delicious. As he pulled his hands away from her and then carefully used a handkerchief to clean her arm, she saw that the word was still raw and inflamed, but not bleeding. He then gently pulled her sleeve down and handed her the jar of ointment.

“Should it begin to bleed again, do as I did. It won't take much, but if you begin to run low let me know and I'll make more.”, he said as he turned and went back to his room, shutting the door behind him softly. She stayed in her own doorway crying softly and wishing to be there with him for quite a while before crawling into her own cold and lonely bed.
To Just Be

Chapter by Halcyon Fairy

Chapter Notes

A chapter of pure fluff for Buttons :) Thanks for all the continued comments. It's easier to write when I talk to the people who read my story.

When Hermione awoke again, she contemplated spending the day in bed. It was almost comical how yesterday had started so wonderfully only to end with her feeling an utter fool. Severus had been nothing but kind to her and she had repaid him by hurting him. She didn't want to face him yet. After thinking it over, she decided that, yes, she would skive off all of her responsibilities for the day.

What she hadn't counted on was how this decision would affect Severus. When she didn't emerge to walk to breakfast together, he told himself she simply needed a lie in. When she wasn't spotted at lunch either, he began to worry. He wasn't the only one to notice either if Minerva and Poppy's reproving glances were anything to go by. He finished his lunch hastily and strode purposefully to the dungeons.

After a moments hesitation, he knocked firmly on her bedroom door. A muffled thump and a bit of cursing later and the door opened to reveal a bed rumpled Hermione. He looked at her quizzically for a moment and then cleared his throat. Now that he was face to face with her, he became unsure of himself. He had violated her last night, no matter that she had forgiven him and he had also broken his promise to not take liberties with her person without express consent. Hell, she had denied her consent and he had manhandled her.

He looked away guiltily and mumbled, “Your absence from meals was noted. Shall I fetch you something to eat?” She looked surprised and replied, “Oh! I have a bit of a headache and I thought I'd take the day to rest. You had just said that no one would mind if I did, so I didn't think to ask permission. Are you angry?” His eyes darted to hers as he shook his head, “No of course not. You don't answer to me Hermione. I was simply...worried...about you.”

She smiled shyly at that and stepped forward to rest her head upon his chest. After breathing in the scent of him she murmured, “I also admit to being a bit wary of facing you after last night. I feel as though I did you a great disservice in not trusting you with this. I was so terrified of seeing the disgust in your eyes if you ever saw her mark on me.” As was becoming common these days,
Severus felt his breath stutter in his lungs. “I would. Never. Be disgusted by you. No matter the traumas you have faced or the scars that you bear, you are lovely Hermione.” As he said these words, with his hands fisted at his side, he wanted nothing more than to lift her sweet face and kiss all of her insecurities away. He viciously tamped down on the foolish urge, lest he upset her with more unwanted advances.

She laughed bitterly and pulled herself upright looking into his eyes with an unreadable expression. “I wish you would stop saying such sweet things. Calling me lovely...I know you don't mean them. Your kindness to me...hurts so much...I know that I'm not...I could never be...I don't compare. Nor do I intend to try. You don't need to pretend for my sake. I am happy to call myself your friend, Severus.” As she spoke her voice became uneven until by the end of her speech she was sobbing fully.

He didn't know how to respond. Surely telling her the truth would be a mistake. She wouldn't want to hear of her assailant's sick twisted regard for her. She wouldn't want to know how the very sight of her stole his breath and set his heart afire. And as for comparing? Who could she possibly compare herself to and find herself lacking? Ignoring all of her other words, he focused on that question and the only conclusion he came to filled him with dread.

“Who do you not compare to, Hermione?”, he asked breathlessly. Her face crumpled and she looked away and the dread of her answer crushed him. He knew before she opened her mouth and whispered, the name that would fall from her lips. The knowing still didn't stop the crippling pain that her utterance caused.

“Lily.”

He staggered a step backward as if she'd struck him and caught his balance on the door frame. Twenty years after her death and she still tormented him so. It wasn't enough that she could never return the affections of a pathetic, weird, little Slytherin boy. It wasn't enough to viciously retract the only friendship he'd ever known in order to attach herself to his sworn enemy. Hell, it wasn't enough that he spent seventeen long years in service to Dumbledore and allowing himself to be tortured to almost the brink of insanity. No, no she also had to sully this as well. As if the whole situation were not tainted enough.

When he managed to regain his senses and look at Hermione, she was staring at the floor mutely as tears flowed freely down her face. He cursed himself for being the cause of her pain, he cursed Lily
for haunting him still, mostly he cursed Potter and Dumbledore from spilling all of his secrets even if it did keep his sorry hide out of Azkaban.

He warily stepped forward and tipped her face up with a knuckle. When her eyes finally met his own he said sternly, but not unkindly, “Listen well, for I am not in the habit of discussing Lily Evans casually. It is....difficult for me. No, you do not compare to her and nor does she...compare to you. She was petty, vindictive and unforgiving where you are so far from those things. Yes, I loved her and I love her still. She was the most important person in my life for most of my life. She was the first and only person to show me true kindness without demanding something in return...until I met you. You are my closest friend and I would not have the memory of a woman dead for over a decade before I met you ruin that. I- care for you...very deeply. I only hope this admission does not repulse you.”

Hermione stood staring at him gobsmacked. That was as close to a declaration of love as it got from a buttoned up person like Severus Snape. Did he mean it in that manner? Perhaps he did or perhaps he only meant to say that she was very important to him. Either was, he had made her feel immature for even suggesting that he would compare the two of them. Of course he wouldn't. And she believed every word of what he'd said. He'd never lied to her, even if the truth hurt her and it was one of the things that made her trust him so fully.

Hermione leaned forward and kissed the corner of Severus' mouth and then wrapped her arms around his neck. He stood rigidly still, not daring to move as she leaned up and whispered in his ear, “I care for you too, you know.” Severus tried valiantly to choke back the sob that escaped his throat and as she pulled him closer the last thread of his restraint snapped and he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist.

As he held onto her for dear life and cried pitifully into her hair, joy bubbled up in her chest until she found herself choking on sounds that were a mixture of laughter and tears. He may never tell her, but she was almost positive that he loved her. She was equally sure that her feelings toward him mattered more to him than he would ever verbalize. One day she would tell him. One day she would be brave enough to look him in the eye and say those words. He deserved them and she deserved to be able to say them.

As his cries turned to sniffles, she pulled away slowly seeing his reluctance to release her, but he didn't protest. She gently cupped his feverish face and used wandless magic to gently cleanse away the snot and tears covering him. His eyes darted away in embarrassment, but she held him firmly in place as she kissed his lips tenderly. It wasn't a passionate kiss, nor a terribly sexual one. It was the kiss a mother would give a hurting child. She kissed him again. And again.
They stumbled backwards until she guided him onto her bed. He tensed when he realized her intentions. “Shhh. It's alright. If you don't want this, tell me and we'll stop.”, she breathed. He shook his head in confusion and asked brokenly, “Why would YOU want this?” She smiled tenderly at him as she tucked a strand of his hair behind his ear. “I want YOU, because I care about you. I want to make you feel alive. I want you to make me feel. Do you want this, Severus?”

At his wary nod, pure delight bubbled up in her and she kissed him sweetly again. Her soft tongue darted in and tasted him and she hummed in delight. Her hands roamed him tenderly, slowly, taking in every fold of fabric, every inch of exposed skin. As she began to slowly undo his buttons, he leaned back and moaned quietly into her mouth. The breathy little sounds he made as she slowly divested him of his armor of buttons sent a thrill down her spine.

He lay passively allowing her to explore his body as it was unclothed. Instead of his usual restraint however, he was relaxed for once. The tears he shed had been cathartic and now he lay boneless as she mapped his skin with both her fingertips and tongue. As she kissed his flaccid prick, he moaned in astonishment and raised his head to watch her. His member quickly inflated as she lavished attention on it.

Her lips enveloped him and it was almost as if she were making love to him with her mouth. As he watched her worship him his damnable eyes began to leak again. She looked up at him sweetly as she took him deeply and hummed. He arched up against his own volition and instead of the reproach he expected he saw her eyes light with mirth. She clutched his buttocks with her hands and buried his cock in her mouth. When he felt her nose touch his pelvis, he almost came on the spot.

She continued slowly pulling up until he almost sprang from her mouth, but not quite and then just as slowly plunging down until he was brushing the back of her throat. He whined pitifully, forgoing all pride and she released him with an audible pop. Before he had a chance to feel disappointment, she was moving up his body to straddle him. With a soft sigh, she lowered herself onto his aching prick.

He squeezed his eyes shut against the onslaught of fresh tears, but she gently brushed them away as she rocked forward on him. He knew the sounds he was making were pathetic as were the tears streaming from his eyes, but it was as if something in him had broken at her declaration. She didn't scorn him despite his wretched display. As he opened his eyes and looked on her, he saw that she was smiling lovingly at him as she undulated on him.
“Please”, he cried weakly. “Please may I hold you?” He raised his arms, but didn't touch her until she leaned forward and wrapped her own arms around his shoulders. He cradled her loosely and began to gently thrust up to meet her movements as he buried his face in her neck. As she began to moan breathily, he felt himself draw near. “Please cum for me, my sweet wife.”, he whispered.

And at his soft command, she flew apart. Her movements became clumsy and artless and finally stuttered to a halt as he was on the cusp. He was unsure if he should continue or not, and was completely blindsided when she rolled them so that she lay under him. He'd assumed that she would never want to be in this position again, but as she latched onto his ear and began shifting her hips he realized he had apparently erred.

It only took a few shallow thrusts before he was cumming, calling her name hoarsely. As he basked in the afterglow of such sweet release her throaty chuckle registered. “That was...heavenly, Severus.”

He smiled into her neck and placed a lingering kiss there before lifting himself off of her. She whimpered as he pulled away, but then hummed happily as he pulled her onto his own chest. He never wanted her to feel trapped.

As they both lie there in the peaceful silence he stroked her hair and thought of telling her. Merlin, how he wanted to tell her. He had played it off as friendship, in a way he did compare her to Lily. But in the end it was Lily....Lily who did not compare to his brave, beautiful, brilliant wife. He loved her painfully. He wanted to blurt those words out, but he knew they would shatter whatever this was. He didn't want to lose this small bit of happiness he had been granted. After so much pain, he had this one thing. He wouldn't be greedy. He would gladly accept this for what it was. As he felt Hermione go boneless with sleep, he whispered into her hair, “Yes, it is.”
Several weeks passed in which Severus and Hermione fell into a routine of sorts. They would wake and share a moment of kissing and holding one another before rising for breakfast. They would each take their turn readying themselves in the loo and then head to the Great Hall together. After eating, they would go their separate ways with a brush of hands, hidden under the table and not see each other again until mealtimes. After dinner, they would return to their quarters where they were in almost constant physical contact.

Usually it was her leaning against his side as they read in companionable silence or a brush of fingers as one of them handed the other a cup of tea, but occasionally their touches became passionate. They by no means had sex daily, but they had both become more comfortable with the act and their own desires. He never instigated it, but she had learned to read his moods. He would give her a look or touch her in a certain manner and she in turn would ask for what she knew he desired.

Their coupling was almost always very tender and Severus was always careful with his touches. She ended up in charge far more often than him, but occasionally she convinced him to roll on top of her. Though they had both feared her reaction to such a thing, she never felt unsafe while in bed with him. Well except for the short terror inducing moments after a particularly bad dream, but he had learned how to wake her and soothe her without making her feel threatened.

Hermione had found herself feeling completely safe and comfortable as the days wore on. Of course, with her luck this couldn't last forever. And it didn't. Though she'd not heard another word from Parkinson in weeks, she would catch her eye across the room and see the mockery in her eyes. She knew. What surprised Hermione was that Parkinson didn't seem inclined to share her knowledge with the rest of the school. Surely she knew the power she held to hurt her? But no, Pansy Parkinson was patient. She watched and she waited and when she saw the mudblood let her guard down that was when she struck.

As Hermione was walking to her quarters late Saturday evening after spending the day out in Hogsmeade with Luna, Lavender, and Ginny in preparation for the upcoming wedding between Draco and Luna, she rounded the corner and cursed inwardly. Not far from her door stood Pansy Parkinson, seemingly waiting for her. Hermione steeled herself to try to pass her, but Pansy called out to her patronizingly.

"Ah Madam Snape, I'm glad to have caught you." Hermione sighed in frustration and said, "I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a hurry, but if you need something I can ask Professor Snape to meet you in his quarters for a moment."

"I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a hurry, but if you need something I can ask Professor Snape to meet you in his quarters for a moment."
Pansy snickered incredulously and asked, “Gods Granger do you call him Professor Snape in bed as well? No, I don't need anything from the traitor. I'm here to deliver a message to you.”

She stepped up to Hermione until her own nose was almost touching Hermione's. She smiled an ugly smile and hissed, “My Mistress told me to tell you she misses you. She's come all this way to see you. She's thinking of adding to your lovely tattoo.” At Hermione's gasp and step backward, Pansy's hand shot out and grabbed her viciously by the arm. Before Hermione could even think to draw her wand, Pansy was digging her own into Hermione's scar and casting a spell Hermione had never heard before.

A searing pain enveloped Hermione that was not unlike to the *Cruciatus* curse. A hoarse cry left her and she found herself crumpling to the floor. Pansy still held her by the arm as she tried to regain her senses from the pain, but before she could Pansy pointed her wand at Hermione's head and the world went black as she said, “Can't have you running off and disappoint Mistress Black now can we?”

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By half ten Severus was starting to worry about Hermione. She never stayed out this late and it was unlike her to not notify him when her plans changed. She said she'd be back almost two hours ago. Admittedly he would have noticed even sooner had he not been caught up in reading the new potions tome Hermione had bought him last week, but now that he noticed the time he grew concerned.

Heaving himself up from his desk, he stretched and crossed to the hearth and threw in some floo powder. “Potter's quarters.”, he called tiredly. “Sir? What can I do for you?”, Harry asked in confusion and he heard Mrs. Potter talking to Lovegood, soon to be Malfoy, in the background. “I was calling to see why your wife was keeping mine out so late, but it seems I was mistaken.”, Severus said in frustration.

“Hermione isn't back yet?”, Harry asked in alarm. At his declaration, the ladies stopped talking and came and knelt by Potter. “No and it is unlike her to not inform me of changes in her plans.”, Severus said pensively. “But sir, we returned over an hour ago and Hermione was going straight to your rooms. She refused my invitation here. She said she felt guilty for leaving you alone the whole day.”, Ginny said in a strained voice. Why would Hermione refuse their company and then not go where she said she was?

Severus looked embarrassed at Ginny’s statement, but then looked at Harry seriously. “You know as well as I do that she doesn't like to deviate from her plans and she always makes sure someone knows where she is at all times. It causes her great anxiety to do otherwise.” His worry was every bit as palpable as the young people's on the other side of the fire. “We'll help you find her.”, Harry said.
Hermione woke up on a cold floor in a great deal of pain. Her limbs were on fire and she had a nasty headache, but she couldn't really recall what had happened. She was drawn from her thoughts by a cackle that sent chills down her spine. She'd know that sound anywhere. But no! She was dead. Molly Weasley killed her. Everyone had seen it.

“Hello Poppet. I've missed you so dearly. Thank you for agreeing to come play.” Bellatrix cooed as she came to crouch beside Hermione. Hermione whimpered in fear and cringed back from her. “This must be another nightmare. Please let me wake up! Severus help me!”, she thought frantically.

“Aren't you going to say hello dear? Tsk. Your kind always did have poor manners.” Bellatrix said as she stood and kicked Hermione savagely in the face.

Hermione cried out and rolled onto her back clutching her bleeding nose. She thought wildly of how to get herself out of this situation, but there was no Severus Snape to save her this time. She closed her eyes and called on her Occlumency shields. She needed logic, not emotion. She took a deep breath and released her nose. Looking up at Bellatrix Lestrange, she smiled and said respectfully, “Hello Mistress Black. I apologize for my lack of manners.”

This caused a startled giggle to erupt from her captor. “Ah so a Mudblood can learn.” “Logic. Keep her talking. Her anger equals your pain....Her happiness doubtless will as well, but it may work.” Hermione thought before saying, “Yes unlike the filth from which I come.” At this Bellatrix chuckled and accio'ed a chair from across the room and straddled it.

She fiddled with her wand and said nonchalantly, “I had planned to carve you up and then dump you on your traitor husbands doorstep, but I've thought of something more fun.” Hermione's blood ran cold at her words. What could be worse than being killed and left for poor Severus to find? Surely whatever her plan was now, it would be worse and not better.

“Do you truly hate the mud from which you come or are you saying what you think I want to hear?”, Bellatrix asked softly. Hermione stared at the ceiling as blood dripped down her throat. Swallowing she turned her head and spat, “If it weren't for muggles we could all of us live peacefully. Without them, without the statute of secrecy, there'd be no reason for us to be enemies. Save my blood status, we're not so much different, you and I. You thirsted for knowledge as I have. I've read about you. You were at the top of your class as well before you dropped out to follow him.”

Hermione held her breath and waited for Bellatrix to hex her for her daring, but she just looked at her like a puzzle to figure out. As her searching look morphed into a mad grin she raised her wand and Crucioed Hermione. Her very blood boiled inside her as her limbs thrashed about heedless of the
damage being wrought. A few minutes in, she lost control of her bladder and Bellatrix let up on the
curse.

“If I'm as clever as you say, I wouldn't fall for that line of dragon dung, now would I?”, she asked
reasonable. Hermione couldn't respond for her throat was in ribbons from screaming. The curse
hadn't hurt nearly this much before. What was different? You had to hate to cast the Cruciatus,
perhaps she hated Hermione more now than before. If that were the case Hermione dreaded what
might be coming even more.

Bellatrix knelt over Hermione's shuddering form and whispered an incantation and as a purple light
enveloped her, she lost consciousness. Floating in darkness, she thought of Severus. He was
probably worried sick by now. They had such strict routines that they both stuck to. They knew
where each other were at all times. As she thought of his face creased with worry it slowly morphed,
bathed in purple light. As she thought of her hated Potions professor and what horrible things he had
done to her, she knew no more.

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Severus and all of Hermione's friends had searched Hogwarts for her thoroughly to no avail. They
used the marauder's map to rule out all of her usual haunts and then searched the room of
requirement as well as a few other unplottable rooms Severus was aware of. She simply wasn't
within Hogwarts.

Albus called Kingsley and within moments Aurors were piling through the Floo in the headmaster's
office. They discussed what could have happened and they planned what they would do to find her,
but Severus heard nothing save the roar of fear within his own heart. Where was she? Was she safe?
Had he somehow failed her as he had Lily? He couldn't stay in the headmaster's office another
moment discussing and planning. He had to find her!

Severus ignored the calls of everyone in the room as he stormed down the stairs and out the front
entrance. If she wasn't within Hogwarts, perhaps she had returned to Hogsmeade for some ungodly
reason and forgot to notify Severus. She wouldn't intentionally allow him to worry. She was much to
considerate for that, his wife.

Just as he reached the front gates, Hermione popped into existence. She took a few steps forward and
then looked up at him with a blank expression. It was clear that she was occluding strongly and he
rushed forward to open the gate to her. “Hermione where have you been? Are you alright? Everyone
has been worried sick.”, he said quickly as he searched her over for injuries.
Something hard passed through her expression, but it was gone so quick Severus wasn't sure he hadn't imagined it. She wasn't wearing the cute little jumper and tight muggle jeans she had left in, but a form fitting black dress. As Severus' eyes roved over her, he was shocked to realize that not only was this dress very revealing of her breasts, but her arms were exposed as well.

More shocking still was the fact that her scar upon her left arm was not inflamed or bleeding. In fact, it looked long healed. Before he could question her about this however she stepped forward and brushed past him as if he hadn't spoken to her, as if he weren't there and headed towards the school. “Hermione?”, he called after her only to be ignored.

A sense of dread filled him. Even if she were angry with him for some reason she wouldn't act like this. Something was terribly wrong. Had she been cursed? Her eyes were too focused and unglazed for it to be the Imperious. Just as he went to draw his want to check her over, Severus found himself disarmed and thrown forcefully into a tree.

As he slumped down the trunk winded, she turned and strode forward pointing the end of her wand to the tip of his nose. There was no emotion in her face nor her voice as she said calmly, “If you ever so much as think of raising your wand to me again you will find yourself meeting your long lost love much sooner than you had previously anticipated.” With that, she sheathed her wand and strode to the castle, leaving Severus breathless and hurt on the ground.
As Hermione strode purposefully through the front entrance, Harry stopped in his tracks. She looked nothing like his best friend. Her dark dress swished about her as she walked and her wild hair crackled with her magic. As for her magic, it held a tinge of danger that her warm honeyed magic had never had. This wasn't Hermione, at least not his Hermione. She looked dangerous, she was dangerous.

“Harry.”, she said with a polite nod as she came to a stop before him. “Where have you been Hermione? Professor Snape has been a nervous wreck trying to find you.”, Harry scolded her. At the mention of Snape, her eyes hardened and she spat, “Yes I ran into him on my way in. Why was he looking for me? I'm free to come and go as I please, am I not?”

Taken aback, Harry responded, “Of course you are, but it's not like you to not say where you're going. He was worried about you.” She laughed bitterly at that. “Why should that monster be worried about me or my whereabouts? Hmm?” “Monster?”, Harry repeated dumbly. “Surely I've mentioned what he did to me at Malfoy Manor?”, she asked conversationally.

As she said this Draco rounded the corner looking quite pale. “Hermione, I don't know what happened, but I think you'll regret this conversation later if you don't stop.” “Do you know what she's talking about Malfoy? She's acting strange.”, Harry said plaintively as he turned to Draco. “Yes Draco knows all about it. He was there. He watched.”, Hermione said while looking down her nose at Draco.

Harry turned back to Hermione and as Snape slipped quietly through the front door he asked, “What did he do? He was under cover then. You always said you never blamed him for what happened during the war.” She laughed bitterly and strode up to Harry until her breath was ghosting across his cheek. Her words were like a whip striking tender flesh. “He raped me.”

Harry stumbled back, shaking his head. “No. Why- You wouldn't.” And then catching sight of a stricken looking Snape behind her, he lunged forward. “YOU!” He grasped Snape by the cloak and shoved him against the wall. “You! It was you? I gave you my blessing and asked you to take care of her! You're the reason she can't stand for me to hug her?” Harry was shaking Snape in his rage and twice his head snapped against the stone behind him, but Snape didn't move nor speak to defend himself. He couldn't.
“THAT IS ENOUGH!”

Albus Dumbledore’s voice rang out loudly causing Harry to release Snape, who slid to the floor. Everyone in the search party had heard Harry, if not everything said. Hermione's friends all had tears streaming from their eyes as well as McGonagall and Narcissa. Lucius and Draco both looked fairly ill and Kingsley and the Aurors accompanying him looked ready to arrest someone, probably Snape, but possibly Potter.

Dumbledore turned to Hermione and asked quietly, “My dear why are you airing this now after all this time and in a corridor? I asked you before- You refused to name your assailant then?” Hermione looked up at him and said calmly as a single tear fell from her eye, “As if you had no suspicions? You left me alone with him so it could be repeated and so I could receive this scar! I can't stand it any longer. I can't pretend anymore- I want that monster nowhere near me. Nor you for that matter. After I sit my NEWTS a month from now, I hope to never see either of you again. Your greater good never did me much good. Your excuses excuse nothing of what I endured. The blood on your hands won't wash away simply because you defeated him. Are you really so much better than him simply because the number of atrocities you committed are marginally smaller?”

As her speech left everyone dumbfounded, she turned and strode up the stairs. None of them could meet the eye of another, because wasn't she right? She had suffered and all of them had known it to some extent, but ignored the uncomfortable thought of what exactly it was she had suffered. After a moment, Kingsley turned to Dumbledore with a questioning glance. Dumbledore sighed wearily and said quietly, “He has already been tried. Even should she want to press charges, he has been absolved of all guilt to any crimes committed before the battle of Hogwarts.”

The statement was meant for Kingsley's ears only, but his words echoed of the walls of the hollow corridor. As Ron opened his mouth to contest the statement, Severus said quietly, “I'll go.” Everyone turned to him questioningly and he looked in Kingsley's eyes and said seriously, “I'll not contest any charges she would like brought against me. She tells the truth. If I can do anything to- Her wishes are my priority.”

Kingsley eyed him a moment before saying grimly, “That's all good and well, but Albus is right. I can't charge you for crimes that you've already been absolved of. There is another matter I need to discuss privately between Dumbledore and yourself however.”
Severus looked out the window of the headmaster's office waiting for Kingsley to speak. Potter and Weasley had kicked up a fuss to be invited up as well, but the Minister was adamant that Madam Snape's privacy be preserved as much as possible. What a joke that was, Madam Snape. Would she have her name changed back? She couldn't divorce him due to the law unless she found someone else, but surely they would allow her her name back.

Severus was roused from his thoughts as Kingsley said, “We have a more serious problem than criminal charges I'm afraid. I suppose you might not know this, since after you consummated your marriage to Hermione you've been regularly active, but The Ministry has made it mandatory to have relations with your spouse at least once a month. Unless you divorce and find new spouses, you and Hermione have to be intimate again within the next month.”

This announcement made Severus seethe with rage. “I beg your pardon? How is it you personally know how often I've slept with my wife? Leaving aside the fact that this is a gross violation of our rights, the last time I checked the Minister was not in charge of the Department of Magical Betrothals and Bonds.” “No, you're right of course, but you will recall your visit to my office some months ago? I had asked to be apprised of any....violations before you were contacted via owl again. I wanted to help you both if I could, but it seemed unnecessary because no violations seemed to be made.”

Severus stared at the minister for a moment before speaking hesitantly. “When I visited your office- I had promised Hermione not to reveal our history. Would the ordeal that she has gone through change how the law applies to her?” Kingsley looked regretful before sighing deeply and running a hand over his face. “It WOULD have yes. It's a moot point now though, I'm afraid. The ministry has record that you've been intimate, not just once, but quite regularly.”

The two men stared at each other until Albus cleared his throat and brought their attention to his somber face. The headmaster looked much older than he had just this morning and none of the twinkling remained in his eye as he spoke. “Madam Snape will of course need to be notified of this immediately. The more time she has to decide on how she would like to act, the better. Pippy!”

A small house elf wearing a bright purple tea towel popped into the room and bowed low to Dumbledore. “Master Albus has need of Pippy, Sir?” “Yes Pippy. Could you please go to the Snape's quarters and notify Madam Snape that her presence is requested here?” The elf hesitated and shifted on it's feet before responding, “Pippy will do as Master Albus asks, but Missy Snape is not being there. Should Pippy wait for her?” Albus raised a brow at that and looked to Severus before addressing the elf again.
“It is quite urgent Pippy. Do you know where Madam Snape is?” The elf also looked at Snape and said slowly, “Yes, Pippy be knowing. Missy Snape not be feeling well. Missy be scared of Potions Master and hiding from him.” “What do you mean not feeling well?”, Severus asked in alarm. The elf looked to the headmaster and at his nod she turned to speak to Severus. “Missy Snape has been cursed. She is not remembering being married to Potions Master. She is not remembering she is not being scared of Potions Master before.”

At the elf’s words all three men gasped. Kingsley leaned forward and asked, “Pippy, do you know what curse Madam Snape has been inflicted with?” The elf looked warily to the headmaster before shaking her head. “No Minister. Pippy is a bad elf. Pippy not be knowing how to help Missy Snape.” As she spoke Pippy began to bash her head against Dumbledore’s desk. “No, Pippy. You mustn’t punish yourself. You have done well. Where is Madam Snape now?”, Albus asked seriously.

“Missy Snape be in the Room of Requirement, sir.”


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Harry paced outside the staircase to the headmaster's office. After Snape and Kingsley had went up, he had pulled out the Marauder's Map, but hadn't been able to find Hermione's dot. He assumed she went to the Room of Requirement, but wasn't positive. A suspicious part of him wondered if it had even been Hermione. Snape had admitted that she was telling the truth, the bastard, but even ignoring that she wasn't acting like herself. Just the feel of her magic had made his skin crawl in a way it hadn't since the war.

As he turned to pace the other direction, Ron's hand shot out to halt him. “You've gotta calm down mate. I'm every bit as ready to get my hands on Snape as you, but being wound up like this won't help Hermione.” Harry shrugged off Ron's hand and opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the gargoyle moving aside. Ron and Harry both stepped forward to confront Snape, but were quelled by a look from Dumbledore.

“You'll have to save your discussion with Severus for another time I'm afraid. We have more serious matters at hand just now. We are going to see Madam Snape if you would like to accompany us.”, he said with all of his normal joviality even if it didn't reach his eyes. Ron looked seriously at Dumbledore and said, “All due respect Headmaster, but Hermione said she wants none of you or that- or HIM.” Severus stepped forward until he was toe to toe with Ron and said calmly, “Weasley given any other circumstance and I would gladly comply with her wishes as would the headmaster I'm sure, but Hermione isn't- We've just learned she's been cursed. We need to make sure she's
alright.”

“Cursed? With what? Where is she?”, Harry asked as Ron stood pale-faced looking at Snape. “We aren't sure Mr. Potter. She's in the Room of Requirement. Now we've wasted enough time. If you two are coming, then stop gaping and MOVE.” With a flourish of his robes, Severus turned and strode to the staircase leading to the seventh floor.

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As they reached the portrait of Barnabas The Barmy, Severus walked forward and paced in front of it thinking of Hermione. When the door appeared however he hesitated. She had looked at him with such loathing. A part of him knew that whatever this curse was it was affecting her thoughts of him, but a small insecure part knew that he deserved that look of scorn and much worse.

“Well get on with it Severus. She may be in pain for all we know.”, Kingsley said from behind him. Without much conscious thought, he turned the knob and swung the door open to find Hermione curled up on a sofa hugging her knees. In a flash, she was on her feet with her wand in hand. Her magic sizzled in the air, that dangerous dark tinge permeating it. She said nothing, but her wand was trained on Severus' heart and he now questioned the logic of his being present.

He held his hands up in supplication as he stepped into the room followed by the other men. “We need to speak to you, Hermione. If you'll just hear us out we will then leave you in peace.” The fear on her face was replaced with something harder and she hissed, “That's Miss Granger to you Professor. I find your familiarity repulsive. What is it you want? I've broken no school rules by being out as a legal adult and I've broken no laws unlike you.”

“No, you've done nothing wrong...Miss Granger. We would just like you to come to the infirmary for a quick diagnostic. You see, you're not- You're acting a bit different than normal.”, he finished lamely. She lifted her wand slightly and said with deceptive calm, “I'm not going anywhere with you and if you try to....force me....you'll find yourself in need of Madam Pomfrey's skills.”

Severus looked to Harry helplessly and backed up. “Fine I won't go with you. Go with Potter. You trust him don't you?” She glanced from Severus to Harry and then lowered her wand slightly. “Harry why are you helping him? He hurt me. He- Ron, why are you both-” Ron came forward from behind
Dumbledore and stopped a few feet from Hermione. “Please Hermione. Something’s wrong and we need to get you looked over. I know it doesn't make sense right now and don't think I don't want to kill the bastard for what he's done to you, but we think you've lost some of your memories. I'll take you there personally if you like and I won't let Snape anywhere near you, but please Hermione.”

She looked searchingly from Ron to Harry who nodded behind him and finally gave a wary nod of her own. “Alright Ron, but you and Harry both have to promise not to leave me...and I don't want HIM there either.” Her icy gaze landed on the headmaster and then flitted away. He sighed quietly and said, “As you wish Madam- Miss Granger. I shall await word in my office.”

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Once in the infirmary sitting on one of the cots and waiting on Madam Pomfrey to finish up treating a Quidditch injury, Hermione's stomach churned with fear. Harry and Ron both had told her she was acting strangely and that they both honestly feared that she had been cursed. She had tried asking how she was different or what they thought she'd forgotten, but they had clammed up and told her to wait on the matron to examine her first.

She looked up from her swinging legs as Madam Pomfrey walked up and gave her a tight smile. “Sorry to make you wait dear. Mr. Thornby really is a menace with a bludger. Now lets take a look at you.” As Madam Pomfrey drew her wand and swished it in Hermione's direction she gasped. Red lights flickered around her as the diagnostic was read. “Oh my.” Madam Pomfrey turned and summoned Hermione's chart. She looked between it and her diagnostic results, worry creasing her face.

“You've definitely encountered a curse my dear, but I'm not sure which one. I've never seen anything like this. It seems to be anchored within your mind mostly, but it's also tied into that scar of yours.” Madam Pomfrey paused before adding reluctantly, “It will need to be studied by a Legilimens.” Hermione looked away from her angrily and asked, “Are there any other than the ones known to me that you might contact?”

“No, my dear. It's a very rare skill I'm afraid. Though it isn't dark magic, most of those skilled in it were on the other side of the war. There is always Lord Malfoy of course, but you probably don't remember- ah, no matter. Who of the three would you like the help of?”, Pomfrey asked briskly.
Hermione looked at her expressionlessly for a moment before hopping off the cot and walking wordlessly from the infirmary. Ron and Harry followed quickly behind her. “Oi! Hermione you can't just ignore this. You've forgotten some pretty important things y'know.”, Ron called breathlessly.

“I'm aware Ronald. I just need- I need to think. I don't trust Dumbledore....he allowed....he used us all! As for Snape....I won't suffer his touch again...and Malfoy! It was in his home that I was harmed, his blood that carved me up, his son that called me the same my whole childhood. I doubt he would offer to help me even if I requested it!”

“'You're wrong! Hermione I know you don't remember, but you're good friends with the Malfoys and Professor Snape. Whoever did this to you took important parts of your memory. I wasn't aware that it was Snape- But I knew what happened to you, at least some of it, and Snape has watched over you since then....he loves you, Hermione.”, Harry yelled down the empty corridor halting Hermione in her steps.

She covered her mouth and then began to run. She just barely made it to the toilets before falling to her knees and vomiting. *Snape loved her?* That's just sick! After what he'd done...what he did to her was inexcusable. She remembered his impassive face looking down at her as he thrust quickly into her, tearing her open. His callous hands, no gentleness to them as he gripped her shoulders and pounded into her quickly. How he had shoved her away in revulsion when he finished. Then....as if he'd not hurt her enough...he had kicked her in the stomach and stepped over her like a pile of rubbish in the street.

When her nausea finally abated, Hermione felt gentle hands rubbing circles in her back, others holding back her hair. She turned and threw herself into Ronald's arms. He held her tightly as she cried and cried. Snape couldn't love her! Why? She needed her memories back, so she could know what her friends thought they knew. He couldn't love her, she wouldn't allow it. She'd kill him for the audacity of it. No matter he had spied for Dumbledore, no matter that his role was vital to their victory. He was a monster. She wanted none of him. Right?
The headmaster's office was charged with a tense silence as Hermione, Ron, and Harry sat facing Dumbledore. Snape stood on the far side of the room hunched in on himself and staring at the floor. He hadn't been able to look at Hermione since they parted ways in the Room of Requirement. He struggled to tell himself that her loathing was manufactured by the curse. She had assured him multiple times that she had forgiven him, after all. Guilt had nothing to do with logic however.

As the silence stretched until it were a tangible thing, Hermione stood and strode over to stand in front of Snape. As her shoes came into view he mentally cringed, but his face revealed nothing as he lifted his eyes to look at her. She was Occluding just as strongly as he was and it hurt to see after all these days of warm smiles. She raised her wand and touched it to his throat and he didn't flinch from her.

She continued to stare at him with her wand lying lightly against his pulse. Her eyes narrowed and she dug it painfully into his adam's apple. When he didn't react, but held her gaze calmly, she snarled at him and jerked away turning to face the wall. “Why don't you defend yourself? It's bothered me since meeting you at the gates. Do you think me incapable of revenge?”, she spat.

He swallowed and whispered hoarsely, “To the contrary, I know you capable of whatever justice you see fit to mete out. I won't defend myself, because there is no defense. Whether to maintain my cover or not, what I did to you is inexcusable. If it will give you any satisfaction, I will gladly offer you my throat to slit.”

Before Hermione realized what she was doing, she had turned and struck him hard across the cheek. Harry went to rise, but Ron held him in place whispering, “Let them work it out mate. Besides, he does deserve at least that much.” Dumbledore merely raised a brow at Ron's words before looking away. The look in his eyes left Ron feeling guilty.

“If what everyone says is true, I consider you a friend. Is this true?”, she asked acidly. He didn't turn back to look at her, but nodded once. “Ah. And I've been subjected to a dark curse that has affected my memories, yes?” He nodded once more and she stepped slightly closer. “And do you think I'm the type of person to slit the throats of my friends? How do you imagine I will feel when this curse is gone if what you say is true?”
He looked at her then, his face stricken his shields shattered. His voice was barely audible as he cried, “I apologize. You never tried to punish me before, though I deserve it. I shouldn't have-” “No, you shouldn't.”, she interrupted harshly before adding quietly, “We can discuss it later Professor.” At his title, he winced, but nodded nonetheless.

“Madam Pomfrey says that the curse is mostly focused in my mind, though she's never seen it before. I need the help of a Legilimens and since your knowledge of the dark arts is greater I assume you're the better choice over the headmaster. Will you help me?”, she asked uncertainly. He looked at her solemnly and repeated his pledge to her from so long ago, “If a better option does not present itself, I will always help you Miss Granger.”

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For both Hermione and Severus' peace of mind, the boys went to Snape's office with them. He flicked his wand absentmindedly at the chairs in front of his desk to make them more comfortable and pulled a book from the shelf. “Have a seat and clear your mind. You will need to keep your shields lowered throughout. Take your time to relax and when you feel ready, let me know.” With that he opened the book and began to read.

Harry and Ron both sat as directed, but Hermione stared for a moment. She couldn't recall Professor Snape ever being so polite or considerate. It was unnerving. Recovering herself she sat stiffly between the boys. Clearing her mind was second nature, but every time she tried to lower her Occlumency shields she choked on fear. After a few moments, Harry touched her lightly on the arm. He meant to reassure her, but found himself shoved to the floor violently. “Oh Merlin! Harry I'm sorry you scared me.”, she cried as she helped him up. “No need to apologize Hermione. It was my fault after all. I know better than to touch you, but you've been so much more relaxed since you got ma-” Twin arcs of red light hit Harry as he was silenced just slightly too late.

Hermione looked between Snape and Ron before asking “Anyone want to tell me what you're hiding from me?” Severus cleared his throat and shifted nervously. “I believe it would be better to try to rid you of the curse. Once that is done, you will remember on your own.” Not liking his answer, she turned to Ron with narrowed eyes. “I don't think it's important just now 'Mione. I know you like to know things, but I reckon Snape's right on this one.”

She huffed and faced Snape again. “I'm having trouble lowering my shields. I don't relish the idea of you....in my mind.” He nodded and steepled his fingers. “I understand that this must be extremely uncomfortable for you. Perhaps you should retire and we can reconvene tomorrow morning after breakfast?” She blushed and mumbled, “About that...I somehow remember that my room isn't in
Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath before saying, “Perhaps for now you can stay in Minerva’s guest suite. You would be comfortable with her yes?” She looked confused and then suspicious. “Where is my room Professor Snape?” Unable to meet her eyes, he stared mutely at the desk. “Mione listen it’s late I think it’s a great idea.” “Shut up Ronald!”, she spat before unsilencing Harry. “Where?” He merely shook his head causing her to slam her hands on the desk and lean in closer to Professor Snape. “Tell me now or so help me...”

He cleared his throat, but the lump remained. His heart was beating so loud he was certain Potter and Weasley could hear it. He couldn't breathe. It had been so long since he had felt this level of panic. How was he to tell her? He didn't think he could stand to see her reaction to the knowledge that she shared rooms with the person she presently hated more than Voldemort himself.

Still avoiding her eye, he opened and closed his mouth several times trying to decide what to say. How was it he had faced torture at the hands of that madman, but found himself unable to endure this? In some ways this was more cruel than the physical pain he had endured during the war...even that damn snake didn't hurt quite this way. This was the pain of losing Lily, but in small doses.

His face stayed blank as his eyes began to burn. Gods above, let the earth swallow him now. Just as the first tear spilled down his nose, Harry said, “The dungeons. Your room is in the dungeons. Leave him be Hermione.” She sucked in a breath and stumbled backward. Brightest witch of her age indeed.

“With you?” she asked numbly. At his jerky nod, she stepped back farther. “Because we're- You and I are-” “Yes.”, he hissed brokenly. Hermione pressed her shaking fingers to her mouth, trying to stem off the nausea. “How? Why?"” He finally looked up at her with tears messily covering his face, not caring if her friends saw his weakness. He looked at her and pleaded, “There was a law. Please believe me, I wanted nothing but to help you. I didn't know- If I had known the Ministry would force us, I never would have asked for your hand. I wanted to spare you a forced marriage. I thought, as friends, we could just- cohabitate....But the Ministry-”

Harry and Ron both looked just as horrified as she felt. “You mean it's happened again and I don't remember?” “NO! No, never like that. Never again. It was- You said that it was....lovely.” Hermione felt sick. She had been forced again. After everything she had endured....The war was over, she was supposed to be safe now. She vomited all over her own shoes and when there was nothing left to expel, she heaved pitifully and cried.

Severus' nails bit into his palms as he watched, but he couldn't move. The last thing she would want would be to suffer his touch. Harry and Ron felt no such compunction as they both leapt up. Ron spelled away the sick and Harry murmured in her ear as he held her loosely. “Shhh. It's okay. You're
safe. Everything is going to be okay. Hush now.”

As her shaking subsided, Hermione stood feeling weak as a kitten. She raised her eyes and was surprised to see Snape openly crying. His lip was bleeding where he had bitten it to avoid making noise. His Occlumency shields were absent as his face showed raw grief the likes she had never seen. The sight of it stole her breath and before she realized what she was doing, she flung herself at him.

He sat unmoving save the occasional shiver or quiet sob with his hands clenched at his sides. “I'm so sorry Professor.”, she cried. “Whatever for?”, he asked incredulously. “I don't remember. I'm so sorry for hurting you. Is it possible that you- Do you love me?”, she asked as she tightened her arms around his neck and pressed her face into his shoulder.

“I- yes. I love you. Very much.”, he admitted through sobs.

Neither witch nor wizard heard the door click shut as they were left to privacy. As Ron and Harry looked at one another in the corridor Ron shook his head. “Blimey. I know Snape loved your mum, but to see him like that-” Harry's face was strained as he answered, “We shouldn't have seen that. I don't think he had told her before. I've known- or at least suspected for since before this law came out, but I don't think he wanted to tell her. At any rate let's get to bed mate. She's going to need us tomorrow.”

“Shouldn't we wait. We promised her we wouldn't leave them alone together.”, Ron asked worriedly. Harry shook his head thoughtfully. “No. You know as well as I do that he won't do anything to hurt her and I don't think she feels threatened anymore. I think they need to work this out alone.”

Hermione held onto her professor quietly, unsure what to say or do now. Would she normally answer him in kind? It felt wrong to say those words to someone that, at present, she didn't even know. And on the heels of that realization she stepped back in mortification. She had just flung herself at her own rapist. What the hell was wrong with her?

As she pulled away he closed his eyes in pain. “I apologize Herm- Miss Granger. I didn't mean to-
That is to say, please forget it. It doesn't matter. I will never act upon my feelings. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable.” “You should never apologize for loving someone Sir. I can't answer you now, but when I have my memories back- Please be waiting for my reply.”, she said with a small quirk of her lips. “I will.”

He then wiped his face, his nose making a wet noise, and stood. “I think we should get some rest. Allow me to walk you to Minerva's-” “No. Do I have my own bed?” He looked startled before replying, “You do, but we share common areas. I want you to sleep without fear of-”. “I'm not afraid.”, She interrupted him with a small chuckle. “I'm a Gryffindor remember? Besides I know some pretty severe wards.”

“I know ”, he thought as he led her to their rooms.

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It was just before dawn when Hermione slipped out of her room wearing a set of dark red robes that Severus was certain he had never laid eyes on. He had never seen her dress so...provocatively. He wondered if it were a side affect of the curse. She even wore a bit of makeup and her hair was pinned up exposing her neck. She gave him a small smile as she stepped into the room.

“I didn't realize you would be up yet.”, she said as she sat on the sofa and crossed her legs and placed her clasped hands on her knee. “Couldn't really sleep.”, he admitted quietly. She smiled wryly and replied, “Me either honestly. Every time I close my eyes-” She shook her head and realized who she was speaking to. Severus cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Shall we head down to breakfast?”

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The morning meal was a stilted affair. Everyone of the head table as well as Hermione's friends among the eighth years were aware of the events the day prior. Severus stoically cut his sausage into small bits and ate it as daggers were stared at him though the acid burning in his throat made the task unpleasant. Hermione sat by his side like usual though her chair was a bit farther away than it had been in recent weeks.

Minerva stared at the couple in confusion. She understood that Hermione had been cursed to lose some of her memories, but that didn't explain their relationship prior to the curse. Hermione had told Minerva that she trusted Severus unlike anyone else, that he was a dear friend. How was it that the girl could forgive his transgression against her?
Perhaps she was missing some vital bit of information, information that Hermione herself was now missing it seemed. Though she sat with her husband for appearance's sake, anyone looking at them could see Hermione's discomfort. What was not as plain to see, but there nonetheless was Severus' pain. Minerva wished that there was something she could do for the pair of them. Perhaps in time she could speak to them, after this curse was dealt with.

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As Hermione rose to exit breakfast, Severus wiped his mouth and followed suite. He groaned internally as he saw Potter and Weasley and their wives exit as well. “Hermione wait up!”, Ginevra called from behind them and Severus took a calming breath. He reminded himself that it were only natural for her friends to be concerned after what they'd learned yesterday.

“Oh morning, Gin. We're about to go down to the dungeons so Professor Snape can start working on my curse.”, Hermione said with furtive glances in his direction. It pained him to see her looking so anxious and afraid of his reaction. Ginevra's eyes widened at her form of address for him. Hermione hadn't called him Professor since before their wedding.

“Oh..Uhm...We wondered if we might tag along. Only you seemed so upset yesterday, so...”, she trailed off, leaving the fact that they didn't want him alone with her unspoken. “Oh yeah that's be great....that is if you don't mind professor?”, she asked while wincing. He shook his head minutely and she sighed in relief at not receiving the dressing down she had expected.

As they turned to continue to the dungeons Hermione's steps faltered and he heard her whisper to Ginevra, “What's Lavender doing here?” Ginevra answered with all the subtlety her house was known for. “Oh Lav? I guess you don't remember that you two are friends now. You told her she'd have to get used to you since Ron was one of your best friends and you weren't going anywhere and I guess she did. Get used to you that is. Do you remember that Harry and I are married?”

“What really? I can't believe I don't remember that. Who else is married?”, Hermione asked flabbergasted. “Well Ron and Lav, obviously. Luna and Draco are getting married soon. We were actually out shopping right before you were cursed. Neville married Hannah Abbott. The weirdest marriage, save your own of course, has to be Percy and Rosmerta.” “You mean Madam Rosmerta?”, Hermione gasped. “How?”

Her friends all laughed at her reaction as Ronald chuckled, “That's what I'd like to know. She's way too pretty for the prat and the age gap is even bigger than yours and Snape's.” His words causing the laughter to die off awkwardly, Hermione looked to her professor out of the corner of her eye.
He held himself stiffly and seemed to be in no small amount of discomfort. She wondered how all this must feel to him. Supposedly they had become close friends, hard as it was to believe, and now overnight his friend had lost all kind feelings for him. She couldn't imagine thinking of him as a friend after what he had been forced to do to her and not only the action, but the way he hadn't seemed to feel anything about it.

As they reached their rooms, Severus held the door for Hermione and her friends. He closed the door behind him and took a calming breath. Hermione sat on the sofa between Potter and Ginevra while Weasley and his wife sat cross legged on the floor to either side of them. He felt much outnumbered as he pulled his armchair in front of Hermione. He looked at each of the young people in turn before his eyes landed on her. Just yesterday he had counted them as their friends, but now as the Potters held her hands and the Weasleys sat by her legs, he counted himself a fool.

“My first goal will to be to see what your last memory is and then from there I will try to ascertain whether your memories are merely locked away or obliviated.”, he said. Hermione was looking at him like he might lunge at her at any moment, but he pushed the thought away with the rest of his emotions. What he needed now was focus. Cold, unfeeling logic and focus. She nodded her understanding and he gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, but mas more likely an unsure grimace. "Are you ready?", he asked. At her wary nod, he lifted his wand.

“Legilimens.”
To Seek Retribution

Chapter by Halcyon Fairy

Chapter Notes

Buckle-up buttercup! You're in for a ride....

Once the spell took, Severus probed gently at Hermione's mental shields. He didn't wish to frighten or harm her any more than strictly necessary. He brushed gently, asking for admittance and felt her shudder. She wanted to allow him in, but she was just so afraid. He caressed her shields repeatedly like a father calming a child after a nightmare and finally, finally when he was starting to lose hope, her shields flickered and were snuffed out.

Severus had become accustomed to the landscape of Hermione's mind in the time between her first visit to Malfoy Manor and the fading of their link while he recovered from Nagini's bite. The hellish scene he found himself in now was not familiar at all. Fear, despair, mistrust, and anger swirled around him in torrents and her mind was a cyclone of unpleasant memories. It was no wonder she had trouble dropping her shields. They were protecting her from herself more than any outside threat.

As he pushed forward, he saw bits of memories containing a demonized caricature of himself. Though he had no illusions about how she and others must have seen him during his time as a spy, he was almost certain she hadn't seen him as this frightening. If she had she would surely have pissed herself on sight and cringed away from him much like Longbottom used to.

Her mind's image of him was even more sallow and greasy than the real thing and his eyes were either dead with no emotion or seething with hatred. He stood unbelievably tall, bearing down on her with condescension and loathing. His claw-like hands grasped her roughly and clawed at her clothing. His crooked, yellowed teeth tore at her flesh. His putrid breath hissed revolting things in her ear.

Some of his words, he had never uttered to her or anyone else. Horrid perverse things he hissed as he slammed himself into her body. Others, however...he had. Repeatedly, he heard his own voice purring menacingly.

“Tell me, do you take pride in being an insufferable little know-it-all”

“Do you like this? Does it turn you on to have your greasy Potions professor tear you apart?”

“I see no difference.”
“Though I sincerely doubt you have much to offer.”

“I’m surprised you’re untouched. Tell me, did Weasley not want to sully himself with you?”

“Do not question me again. When we return I will punish you more adequately.”

“Such a wanton little Mudblood. You want so badly to please me. It’s too bad you’re such a plain little thing.”

He shoved himself away from these things and sought out her most recent memories. When he found her memory of the discussion they had just had, he followed it backward. Glimpses of the past few days flew by as he headed deeper into her memories. He felt her revulsion and fear at finding out she had slept with him, that they were bonded. He felt her confusion at his kind treatment of not just her, but her friends as well.

Rushing forward with more determination, he saw the memory of her threatening him in Dumbledore’s office. Her mind shuddered with fear and self-loathing even as she pressed her wand into his neck. He felt the horror aimed at her own person as she struck him. He found himself distracted from his goal and followed the strand of consciousness to her emotions tied to him.

He found himself drawn to what looked like a cell in Azkaban. Through the bars, he could see Hermione curled up on the floor sobbing. “Severus! Please help me. I'm so scared Severus!”, she cried incoherently. “Hermione!”, he called to her, but she couldn't hear him. He grasped the bars only to be zapped with a vicious hex. Unsure of how to help her, he looked around him.

He was in a room lined with doors. A few looked very similar to the one he had just tried to open, but others were vastly different. He walked up to a wooden door that looked very similar to a classroom door and peered through the window. Inside was a Hermione sitting at a desk writing diligently as she read from a text. “Hermione! Can you hear me?”, he called desperately.

Her head snapped up and she smiled as she looked to him. He was shocked to see that she was much younger, possibly as young as fourth year. “Oh Hello Professor. What are you doing out there?”, she asked sweetly. He thought furiously of how to get her mind to help him before saying sternly, “You seemed to have locked me out Miss Granger. I don’t know how you expect me to teach you from out here.”

Her eyes widened in alarm and she hopped up to open the door to him. “I'm so sorry sir. It wasn't my intention to lock you out.”, she said with obvious fear of reprisal. He quirked his lips at her and inclined his head. “Be that as it may, you have locked me out of all the other rooms as well. I'd like you to open them all.” She looked regretful before saying, “I'm afraid I can't do that sir. I can open some, but some of them need to stay closed.”
“Why is that?”, he asked gently as she grabbed his hand and led him to a desk to sit. “Some of them will hurt you. I don't want that....and some of them will hurt me.”, she whispered. He looked at her a moment before speaking. “We're both hurting right now, Hermione. You don't remember me. You're afraid of me. I want to help you.”

Tears started to spill down her cheeks as she crumpled her parchment in her hand. “I'm so sorry I'm hurting you sir. I don't want to, you know. I'm trying to figure out how to fix it, see?” She pushed the crumpled parchment over to him, but he couldn't read the words. They almost seemed to be written in another language. “Read it to me.”, he said.

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He pulled himself gently from her mind and pinched the bridge of his nose. He had spent much longer than he planned within her mind and he was sure she had a migraine to rival his own. He pulled two vials out of his robes and handed her one before downing the other. When the light hurt his eyes slightly less, he looked up to see Hermione staring at him in confusion. “Did you find anything sir?”, she asked hopefully. He blinked before asking tonelessly, “You don't recall what we spoke of in your mind?”

At her hesitant shake of her head, he slouched in his chair and wiped tiredly at his face. Without removing his hand, he mumbled through his fingers, “Your memories are thankfully still there, but they are locked away in various portions of your mind. The intellectual aspect of yourself let me in to her room if you will and we discussed your curse. You were taken by a student, though you don't remember who, to a death eater whom you also can't remember.”

He straightened and looked at her before continuing, “You remembered being tortured and even had some ideas about the curse. You said that both individuals had cast upon your scar on your arm and the death eater had cast the curse upon your mind. You implied that it was a woman, which narrows it down quite a bit. There were only six women death eaters known to me. Three were killed prior to your capture by snatchers, Alecto and Bellatrix are both dead, that leaves the one I am most hesitant to believe would harm you. Narcissa.”

He watched Hermione for any sign of recognition, and sure enough there was a flicker of fear at Bellatrix's name. Whether that was due to past interactions or this newer one he was unsure. He decided against entering her mind again today. She was obviously exhausted and afraid, which didn't make for easy Legilimenizing.

“What makes you say Mrs. Malfoy wouldn't hurt me? I'm supposedly friendly with their family now. How did that come to be?”, she asked pensively. Before Severus could answer her Potter spoke up, “I'm not sure about before the final battle, but they switched sides openly then and fought alongside us. After it was all over you advocated for them to keep them out of Azkaban. During Mrs. Malfoy’s
She nodded slightly and stared off into space for a moment before wincing and clutching her head. Severus leapt up and kneeled before her. “What is it? Did the potion not help?”, he asked in concern. She held up her hand to keep him away and said, “Nooo...It's not that. I feel like I've remembered something I shouldn't. Are you sure all the others are dead? I don't think so.”

He backed up guiltily to give her room and thought for a moment. “If I recall correctly Alecto was bisected by Nymphadora's sectumsempra and Bellatrix was Avada Kedavra'd by Molly Weasley. It's not impossible that Alicia Rookwood or Valeria Yaxley survived their execution from the Dark Lord, but I'm fairly certain Ambrosia Malfoy is dead. She was decapitated during a ministry raid back in the early days.”

Hermione shook her head and screwed her eyes shut. “No, I knew her. I knew her and the student. I'm sure of it. I can hear her voice in my head. It hurts.” Severus lifted his hand to comfort her, but she flinched away and he dropped it feeling like a monster. He should know better than to crowd her. He never had before, he could only blame himself for becoming comfortable with her these last few weeks.

With a sigh of self-disgust he rose and crossed the room to pour himself a glass of firewhiskey. Downing it in two large gulps, he returned to his chair and crossed his legs. “For now, I recommend you raise your shields and that should help block out the voice. I would ideally go in now to try to retrieve the memory, but I think that would be unwise given how exhausted we both are. We will continue tomorrow.”

“No, I'm fine professor. I want- I need to know. Please.”, she begged as she bunched her robes in her hands on her knees. He shook his head regretfully. He hated to deny her anything, but it would do more harm than good to try again so soon. “We at least need to wait a few hours Her- Miss Granger. Go and try to get some rest and we can all meet back here after lunch.”

She sighed and nodded reluctantly. “Yes sir.”, she whispered and left without another word. It felt so wrong to have her address him in such a manner. It felt wrong to have her be so obedient to him. He fought down his nausea as he raised a brow at the remaining students. “Well? What is it?”

Lavender cleared her throat and leaned forward nervously, “What didn't you tell her? We can tell you weren't- completely open with her.” Severus rolled his eyes and growled, “Bloody Gryffindors. Would you leave well enough alone if I said I'd rather not discuss it yet?” They looked to one another before Ronald spoke up, “Is it regarding Hermione's immediate safety?” “No.”, Severus answered in a tight voice. “Then it can wait, Snape. Harry why don't you and the girls go on ahead. I need to speak to him alone.”
The other Gryffindors agreed and left Severus pinching the bridge of his nose. He had a feeling he knew what this was about and though he deserved to be castigated about his mistreatment of Hermione during the war, he didn't relish the idea of it being Weasley who did it. He supposed he had no right to complain though, so he looked calmly to the ginger man and waited for a bollocking or hexing depending on Weasley's daring.

What he wasn't prepared for was for Weasley to look contrite himself. “I know you don't like how we Gryffindors have to get in everyone's business and lay everything out in the open, but please bear with me. This needs to be said and Hermione can't at the moment. You're being too hard on yourself, Snape. She didn't blame you for what happened during the war and that wasn't just what she said. She meant it.

She may not have told you, but I wasn't the only marriage proposal she rejected. I'm sure if she didn't trust you and care about you on some level, she would have never accepted you. Don't get me wrong, it makes me sick to think of what you had to do to her- but that's just it, you were forced as much as she was. When Hermione comes out of this, she's going to be dealing with a lot of guilt for how she's treated you since being cursed. Try not to let her actions now hurt you too much, because it's just going to hurt her more in the end. There, I'm done. Feel free to hex me for my cheek.”

Severus sat dumbfounded when Weasley finally finished his little speech. He didn't really know what he expected Weasley to say exactly, but he'd have never guessed any of that. Well, save the part about being sick at the thought of what he'd done and he couldn't blame him since it made him fairly ill as well. After a moment of Weasley staring expectantly at him, Severus blinked and shifted uncomfortably.

“Normally I wouldn't appreciate your candor, Mr. Weasley, but in this instance I am...grateful. You are correct of course. Hermione will undoubtedly blame herself for everything once this is over and I am loath to add to that guilt. I will endeavor to...lessen that burden.”, Severus said tonelessly.

Ronald looked relieved and smiled as he rose to leave. As he reached the door he turned and added cheekily, “And now that we've had this heart to heart, you can call me Ron now, yeah?” The door slammed shut just as Severus' stinging hex zapped where Weasley's arm had been. He must be going soft to allow such impertinence.

Hermione walked aimlessly down the halls trying to sort herself out. With no destination in mind, she just walked. She was so caught up in her thoughts that she wasn't paying any attention to where she was going and before she realized what was happening, she slammed into someone. Stumbling
backward, she fell on her bum to look up at the nasty smile of Pansy Parkinson.

“Well, Well, Well. Hello mudblood. Tell me are you enjoying my mistress' gift?”, she crooned. Hermione jumped to her feet and had her wand pointed at Pansy's throat in a flash. “YOU!”, she screeched. “It was you. What did she do to me?” Pansy only laughed and inspected her nails. “Perhaps you should force me to tell you? Though I doubt you have the...courage. You're too weak to be a true Gryffindor, though no other house should rightly claim your kind. Personally I think you'd fit in just fine with the house elves.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes and hissed, “Tell me, have you ever experienced cruciatus first hand? Your mistress allowed me it's pleasure on multiple occasions. I think I could indulge you. All it takes is a bit of hate and I seem to have quite a bit to spare you.” Pansy's eyes widened and she laughed again, “I'm not afraid of your empty threa-”

Hermione smiled viciously as she whispered, “Crucio.” Pansy staggered back and within seconds, fell to the ground. She thrashed about, cracking her head against the stone floor as Hermione looked on in fascination. Who would have guessed how good this felt. She had often heard that the dark arts were seductive, but she'd never known this is what they meant.

She looked up from Pansy's contorting body to look her in the eye and all the pleasure she had felt evaporated. Pansy's face was covered in tears and snot and her nose had begun to bleed. Suddenly the rushing in her ears caused by the seductive curse ceased and Pansy's voice filtered back into her consciousness. “-please, please. I'm sorry- Please stop.” Hermione ended the curse in dismay and took a step back as the girl wailed loudly from the floor.

Panic seized her as she heard boots hitting stone as someone ran towards them. She felt such relief when Ron rounded the corner. Her face crumpled as she said, “Ron- Ron get Professor Snape. I don't know what to-” He looked sick as he croaked, “What have you done?” She shook her head and said hysterically, “There's no time for that now. Get Professor Snape now!”

Instead of heeding her demands, he took a step forward to look at the shivering girl on the floor. His eyes darted up to her and he shouted, “What have you done, Hermione? Do you realize you could be put in Azkaban for this? They'll know it was an unforgivable when they treat her.” She was shaking her head in denial of her actions and mumbling to herself. “-realized it was her. I remember now. It was her, her and Bellatrix. I didn't even remember casting the curse, but Oh! It felt so good....until it didn't anymore. Until I saw her face. She can cry just like- She can bleed and hurt and cry just like me.”

Ron took a step forward hesitantly and took her wand from her limp fingers. After a moment's thought, he accio'ed Parkinson's as well. He then turned to look at Hermione and said slowly, “Look you stay here, 'Mione and I'll get Snape. Don't move....and don't touch her. I'll be right back.”
With that he took off towards her rooms with Snape. She slid down the wall and hugged her knees as she stared at the girl lying broken before her. Her eyes were unfocused and her breathing was ragged. Every so often her breath would hitch and then she would sob halfheartedly. Hermione supposed she didn't have the energy for more than that. Dear Merlin, what had she done. Even now there was a seductive voice telling her to finish the job with her bare hands, while another voice hysterically cried for this to be a nightmare. How could she have done this?

She broke from her internal war as the sound of hurried steps approached. Snape took in the scene quickly and then blinked slowly. When his eyes reopened, they were dead like she remembered before all this happened. Strangely, she felt guilty for being the cause of it. He shook his head for a moment and then strode forward.

“Weasley, for now take Hermione to my rooms and don't let her out of your sight. Get some tea and calming drought in her. I'll deal with this mess. Give me their wands.”, he said apathetically. Ron nodded and grabbed Hermione by the arm. She wanted to protest, but felt it unwise. For all she knew, she'd be in Azkaban by dinner and inmates didn't get to decide where they went or hold onto their own wand.

Severus sighed as he lifted the girl into his arms. Truthfully he had no love for the brat and had no wish to be so gentle with her, but she had been more than punished by Hermione. He took her to his potions lab and was quite thankful he didn't meet anyone along the way that he would have to Obliviate. He had no intention of allowing his wife to go to jail, because the wrong person happened upon them.

She moaned pitifully as he set her down gently upon his worktable and cast a cushioning charm. He poured a pain relief potion down her throat and then, reluctantly, he dropped three drops of Veritaserum on her tongue. He waited for both potions to take effect and when her eyes took on that sheen that he knew all well he began to question her.

“What is your name?”, he drawled.

“Pansy Parkinson.”

“Why did Hermione curse you?”

“Many reasons.”

He huffed and hissed, “Did you curse her first?”
“Not today.”

Suddenly, he had a thought. “Did you abduct her?”

“Yes.”

“On whose authority?”

“Mistress Black”

He furrowed his brows in confusion. Both Narcissa and Bellatrix had been blacks, but they had both married. Unsure who she meant, he asked, “What is your Mistress' true name?”

“Bellatrix Black Lestrange.”

“How did she survive?”

“I don't know. She contacted me a few months ago, but hasn't divulged that information.”

“What curse did she use on Hermione?”

“Cruciatus.”

“What other curses did she use?”

“The mind's torment curse mixed with a selective memory charm and the negative influence hex.”

Severus swore and paced in front of the girl. He had his suspicions from being in Hermione's mind, but had hoped against it. That particular curse caused the victim to relive any negative memories repeatedly until it wore away at anything positive within them. If left untreated for too long, the person's personality would be irreparably changed.

Leaving aside the distress that thought caused he asked, “Where is your mistress?” “She's staying at an abandoned factory in Manchester.”, Pansy replied. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Where in Manchester?” “Some dump called Spinner's End.” Severus wiped his face tiredly and asked his final question. “Did you help her willingly?”

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After Obliviating Parkinson, Severus took her to the hospital wing and called Albus. He was glad when the older wizard didn't argue with his plan of action. For once he was glad for Albus' bias towards Gryffindor. His wife didn't deserve to go to jail for actions that she wouldn't have taken in her right mind.

As he left the infirmary, he made his way reluctantly to his rooms where Weasley and Hermione waited. He dreaded what was to come. If he were to help her with these curses, he would have to
hurt her first. He'd sworn he was done doing that, but if he didn't act that would hurt her as well. He really wanted to break this curse sooner rather than later, because if the ministry pushed them to sleep together while she were still unwilling he wasn't sure he wouldn't take his own life instead.

Opening his door, he was surprised to find his wife's head resting in Weasley's lap. The boy held a finger to his lips and pleaded, “She's just drifted off. We can let her sleep for just a bit, yeah?” Severus nodded and poured both himself and Weasley a drink. As he handed Weasley his, he took a seat across from them. He studied them as he sipped his drink. Curious how jealous he was of Weasley for being allowed such innocent contact. Pitiful.

They sat in silence for quite a while before Weasley finally spoke up, “You'll keep her out of Azkaban, yeah? She doesn't deserve-” “I will.”, he answered simply. “Miss Parkinson has been obliviated and Albus has agreed to keep this quiet. I questioned the girl....she has been working with Bellatrix.”

“What? How is that possible? My mum killed her with the killing curse. There were witnesses.”, he said in bewilderment. “Be that as it may, Parkinson indicated her under Veritaserum. Even more alarming is the fact that she has placed multiple curses upon Hermione. It won't be...easy to break them.”

As Ron opened his mouth to reply, Hermione stirred in his lap and snuggled his leg. This caused Severus to scowl and Ron lifted his hands in supplication. “I'm sorry. She was crying...upset...I just wanted to calm her and she eventually fell asleep.” Severus said nothing as he glared at Ron and drank the rest of his drink. Feeling the effects of all the alcohol he had imbibed recently, he withdrew a vial of sobering solution from his robes and drank it.

He shook his head and said, “I think I'll take her to bed. She'll be more comfortable there. I shall wake her for dinner if you would like to come back to check on her.” Ron nodded and stretched as Severus lifted her from his lap. As he reached the door Severus cleared his throat and said, “Thank you, Ronald.” Ron smiled and replied, “S'no problem. Not quite comfortable enough to call me Ron yet, huh Severus?” Snape's glare was scarier than his earlier stinging hex and Ron fled the room.
To Complicate Matters

Chapter by Halcyon Fairy

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been longer than normal. I'm also working on a love potion fic. The plot bunnies attacked me, sorry.

Hermione mumbled as he carried her to the bedroom and for a heart stopping moment, he thought she would wake, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and stilled again. When he got her to the bed, he was at a loss as to how get her lose without waking her. The last thing she'd want to wake to was him holding her. He laid her down, but her arms tightened and she pulled him closer.

He had a small panic attack as she placed her lips against his throat and mumbled, “please stay” but then she released him, rolling over. This had him stumbling from her bedroom for another drink. At this rate he'd be a right alcoholic, but this was a new form of stress he was unaccustomed to. He wasn't sure how much more he could take before cracking.

As he wiled the hours between lunch and dinner away, Severus tried to figure out what his next step in helping Hermione should be. The curses used against her were causing her to relive her negative memories and emotions without the balance of anything positive. He would need to enter her mind again to help her unlock her good memories, but to do so he would need her absolute trust.

How he could possibly gain her trust, he had no clue. How he'd earned it in the first place was still a bit of a mystery to him, but he did know it would be harder this go around since she didn't remember any act of kindness he had ever shown her before being cursed. He supposed being as honest and open as he was capable of was a good start, but that would be...difficult with her friends in the room as well.

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When Hermione awoke, she expected to be on the couch but she was in her own bed. Whoever had carried her in had removed her boots and tucked her in. She smiled, thinking of how sweet Ronald could be at times. Even though she had lost him to Lavender due to this law, he was still willing to let her cry all over him and then carry her to bed.

That was something that she didn't understand and she'd have to have someone fill in the blanks
about. Why had she and Ron not made a go of it? Did he lose interest in her after finding out she'd been used by Snape? He had clearly shown interest before she had been tortured at Malfoy Manor, but all of her memories after that were hazy and apparently not to be trusted.

Sighing wearily, she rose and brushed through her hair. When she felt presentable after her midday kip, she opened her door to find Snape staring at the floor. He looked up when she emerged from her room and stiffened. He clearly was as uncomfortable as she was with their situation. A part of her wanted to reassure him and try to make him understand that she didn't hate him, but another, darker, part of her reveled in his pain. He had caused her quite a bit, so shouldn't he suffer as well?

Shaking away those thoughts in disgust she asked, “Is Ron gone, then?” “Yes, I was just about to wake you. It's almost time for dinner. Would you prefer to eat here or the Great Hall?” She looked at him questioningly before replying, “I think the Great Hall. And yourself?” “Yes. Yes, I'll be going as well. I just need to go to my room for a moment and then I'll accompany you.”, he stammered.

Confused by his nervousness, Hermione stared after him as he all but fled to his room.

Once the door was shut behind him, Severus gulped down another sobering solution and closed his eyes in mortification. Idiot! Of course she wouldn't choose to eat alone with him. He had been so caught up thinking that she must be so exhausted from recent events that he forgot her mistrust of him. Even if she didn't seem as afraid that he would pounce on her given the opportunity, she still most likely despised him.

He took a fortifying breath and then reemerged from his room to find Hermione holding the picture from his desk in the sitting room. It was the copy of their first dance that Potter had gifted him for Christmas. He stopped a few feet from her and waited for her to look up.

“It was one of your favorite pictures from that day. I believe you have the rest in your room. You had mentioned putting them in an album, though I'm not sure if you had yet or not.”, he said simply. She looked up at him with such a lost look. “The people in this picture clearly care for one another. I wish I remembered whatever feeling had me looking at you like this. As it is...” He nodded as she trailed off before motioning for them to go to dinner.

However instead of moving she continued staring at him. “What will be done with me? Pansy- I really hurt her.” He took a small step forward and shook his head. “Nothing. I took care of it. You wouldn't have done it if not for this curse.” “You don't know that!”, she interrupted. “I'm so angry! I'm not sure if it's just the curse or not, but I do know I'm dangerous right now. I hit you, I cursed her, who knows what else I'll do?” His expression softened as he answered, “You're not to blame, Hermione. We'll break your curse soon and until then your friends and myself will make sure nothing else happens.”

As she opened her mouth to answer, Hermione suddenly had a strong bout of dizziness and
staggered. Severus’ arm shot out and caught her around the waist as she clutched her head. Flashes of memories flitted through her mind. Smiles passed between Snape and herself, her crying and him comforting her, the death eaters laughing as they took turns torturing her, the sound of Snape retching through a bathroom door. Then all she knew was darkness.

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As she went limp in his arms, Severus scooped her up and ran for the floo. Barely pausing to throw in some floo powder and call out the infirmary, he ran in and staggered out the other side. “Poppy! Poppy help!”, he called, completely distraught. He didn't know what was happening, but he did know it couldn't be good.

As Poppy came running out of her office she made a small noise of distress and directed him to set her on a bed nearby. She immediately began scanning Hermione while simultaneously directing her dict-o-quill too quietly for Severus to hear. As she completed her scans, she turned to him with a grim expression and motioned him away from the bed. As she pulled the curtain around Hermione, his anxiety hit the roof.

“She'll be fine, but it looks like the curse is beginning to become unstable. The only conclusion I can come to is that, with her skills in occlumency, she's fighting it from within her mind. If only we knew more about the end curse....knowing what elements went into it's making helps, but I have no basis of treatment for this. Perhaps we should consider St. Mungos.”, Poppy told him gravely.

“No, I refuse to have her stuck in the Janus Thickey ward to rot away while those incompetent fools try to bumble out an answer. I'm more qualified to help her than anyone there.”, he said with finality. She nodded and answered placatingly, “Alright Severus. It was just a thought. There isn't much I can do for her, save wait for her to wake up and give her a calming drought if she's upset.” He nodded and moved to go inside her curtained area. “I'm aware. Thank you Poppy.”

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Hermione needed to move, but found herself lying on a stone floor. The floor was covered in blood and other bodily fluids and her face was wet with tears. Her bones ached like the sensation after a particularly vicious Crucio and her flesh felt as if it had been shredded. She couldn't remember why she needed to get up, but she knew it was urgent.

She had such a sense of wrong, deep in the pit of her being. Someone needed her, someone- But that's as far as her thoughts got before she felt the fog settling back in to her mind. Her consciousness drifted out of the small, cell-like room and she opened her eyes to stare up at the infirmary ceiling.
She blinked a few times and turned her head to the side with much effort. There beside her bed sat Professor Snape. Why?

“Professor?”, she asked weakly. His head shot up from staring at the floor and then he went tense. “How do you feel, Miss Granger?”, he asked warily. She took stock and answered, “I'm a bit sore and...I feel like I- I don't know what happened. Why am I here, sir?” He was taken aback by how...polite she was being. She was speaking to him like she did before- before. He looked at her a moment without answering her before clearing his throat.

“What is the last thing you remember Miss Granger?”, he deflected. She thought a moment before responding in a small voice, “I don't know. I know who you are and where I am. I HAVE memories, but I'm not sure what the newest one is.” “Do you know the date?” At a shake of her head to the negative, he asked, “The month?” Again she answered to the negative and he asked warily, “The year?” “No.”, she rasped.

He sighed and sat back in his chair, tapping his finger on his lips before straightening and saying, “I'm going to ask you some questions. Answer those that you can to the best of your ability, don't fret over anything you can't answer.” He accio'ed a quill and parchment wordlessly and at her nod poised himself to write.

“What is your full name?”

“Hermione Jean Granger.”

He stared at her a moment with an unreadable expression before writing such down. “What is my name?”

“Professor Severus Snape.”

“Where are you?”

“Hogwarts infirmary.”

“How old are you?”

“I-I think- Am I fifteen?”

His eyes widened and he wrote down her answer without acknowledging her own question. “What year are you?”

“Fourth? No maybe fifth? I'm not sure, sir.”

He looked very confused by her answer before continuing, “What do you know of the second wizarding war?”

“I- Should we be discussing that sir? I may know more than I should speak about to you.”

He closed his eyes wearily and looked in her eyes as he said, “The war is over. Mr. Potter won.”
Her brow furrowed in confusion before she nodded. “Yes...yes I remember that now. Vaguely. What happened to me sir?”

He looked torn before answering honestly, “You were cursed by Bellatrix Lestrange.”

A small gasp escaped her before she asked tremulously, “But I'll be alright, won't I?”

Without hesitation he nodded. “Yes, I'll see to it personally. I think that's enough for now. You obviously don't remember anything very recent. Get some rest and I'll go report my findings to Poppy.”

As he stood to go, her hand reached out to clasp his fingers. He looked down at her in shock before she released him quickly. “Forgive me sir. I only-” As she trailed off and looked away he prodded, “Yes?” She looked back to himsearchingly before murmuring, “Thank you for helping me. Could you tell me something please?” He nodded warily and she screwed up her courage. “I remember- 

That is, have you- Have we kissed before?”

At her question, he sat down hard. “Do you remember that occurring?”, he asked cryptically. She nodded and bit her lip before elaborating, “I remember dancing with you and I remember....it must be a side affect of the curse...or a dream...sorry to say something so outlandish, sir.” She trailed off in mortification as he face turned a lovely shade of pink and she looked away.

“No...it wasn't a dream, Hermione.”, he said softly as he reached out hesitantly and tucked a curl behind her ear to better see her face. She startled and turned to face him once more, her mouth forming a small o as she stared at him in wonder. The look she gave him stole his breath and he was forced to look away. “ahem. It's a bit of a complicated situation. I understand you probably have many questions, but I would like to ask that you hold them for now....I'm not sure that I'm capable of-” He cut off as her hand reached out to grasp his. “It's alright. It can wait.”, she said as she gave him a small, sweet smile.

He felt his face flush and he stood abruptly, jerking his hand away from her own. “Well, as I said you should get some rest. I'll send messrs Potter and Weasley to check in on you after dinner.” He then turned and left the infirmary as quickly as he could without running leaving behind a bewildered Hermione.

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Despite all of the rest Hermione had over the past few days, she found herself quickly dozing off. When she awoke again, it was dark out and Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lavender were piled up in the floor talking quietly. Harry was the first to notice her wake and he jumped to his feet to sit on the end of her bed. “Hey there. How do you feel?”
She stared quietly at him for a moment before looking away and mumbling, “Very confused actually.” Ginny made a noise of sympathy and Lavender patted her blanket covered foot from her spot in the floor. “That's understandable.”, Ron said diplomatically. “D’you remember anything new?” She looked at the redheaded man for a moment, noting that he, like everyone else in the room, looked older. After a moment, she nodded. “I did, but I think it's private. I need to speak to Professor Snape.”

None of her friends seemed very surprised by this and Harry even smiled as he responded, “He had an idea about a potion that might help you. He said he'll be brewing for at least another hour. I'll ask him to come see you after if you like?” She nodded and then asked in confusion, “Is it normal? That he and I- talk?”

Lavender laughed lightly at this and answered before anyone else could, “I'd say you do more than talk. Before the curse, I'm pretty sure you two were in love.” “Lav!”, Ginny admonished her, smacking her arm. “What? I think it's better to tell her so it's not a repeat of last time.” She then looked at Hermione and said seriously, “This isn't the first time you've lost your memories and last time you were really angry with Snape. I think you should try to be careful not to hurt him, he's...sensitive.”

Hermione was dumbfounded by Lavender's description of the situation. She looked nervously to Ron before asking Ginny, “We're in love?” Ginny stared daggers at Lavender before nodding reluctantly. “Yes, I think so. I know he's crazy about you and you....well you at the very least see him as a close friend if not more.” She looked like she wanted to say more, but then looked away abruptly.

Hermione stared at her lap taking in all that they had told her in no small amount of confusion. Suddenly she looked up. “How old am I?” “Eighteen.”, Harry answered softly. She thought for a moment before nodding. That was better than being fifteen while being in a relationship with a teacher, but still not great. Wait. Come to that, no one had specified that they were dating. Perhaps they were attracted to one another, but not dating. She knew she was definitely attracted to him. She was surprised that looking at Ronald no longer caused the butterflies she expected.

Her friends stayed and talked to her for a while longer, before heading off to their rooms. She had noticed that both Ginny and Lavender wore rings on their fingers, but had decided not to comment. Apparently they were all still in school and living here, but all of them, herself included, save Ginny were eighth years. She supposed as legal adults they could live here married.

She sat reading a surprisingly trashy romance novel that Madam Pomfrey had lent her when Professor Snape walked back in. He smiled as she hastily hid her illicit reading material. “I see some things don't change. Though if I recall correctly, you hated then ending of that book. Our Mr. Duke turns out to be quite....free...with his attentions.” She huffed and said, “Why would you ruin it for me? I haven't gotten that far yet.”
He chuckled at her and said, “You've already read it Herm- ahem. Miss Granger.” His face lost all traces of humor as he straightened. She was dismayed to see him become so serious again. “Hermione is fine. Do I call you by name as well?” He nodded reluctantly and fished a potions phial out of his robes. “I had an idea earlier when I was studying the curses used to create the curse used upon you. Though it may not be connected to those things, but it may help with the pain in your scar.”

“Scar?”, she asked in confusion. His face was stricken for a moment before falling completely blank. “Yes. I had forgotten that you wouldn't remember. You have two scars. The first was caused by Dolohov and the second by Bellatrix Lestrange. Bellatrix...hurt...you during the war. She used a cursed blade on you and it still hurts and bleeds. Though when you came back from her this time it seemed to be healed up, the dark magic is stronger now than before. This potion should help to draw it out a bit.”

“Where?”, she asked with dread. He studied her for a moment unsure now if he were doing the right thing. Seeing the scars would cause her undue distress, but if he refused to tell her, she would look for herself. Breathing out through his nose, he stepped forward. Setting the potions phial on the bedside table, he conjured a mirror and gently moved the top of her infirmary robe so that her scar was partially visible while still maintaining her modesty.

She let out a small pained noise as she took the mirror and looked at the top of her scar. She touched it tenderly and started to ask, “How far-” “It cuts across your chest and stops a few inches above your navel.”, he said quietly. Guessing how he might have that knowledge caused her to blush brightly. Ignoring that for the moment, she steeled herself and asked, “And the other scar?”

He sat on her bed and took her right hand in his own. “I want you to understand that these scars don't define you. You are so beautiful Hermione. I don't want you to-” “Where is it, please?”, she interrupted. Her heart beat furiously as she thought of how bad it must be to make a private man like Professor Snape say such a thing. He looked pained as he grasped her other arm and turned it over. “Oh!”, she cried. “Oh...no. How could- how could anyone be so cruel?” She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. He gently wiped them away and whispered, “I plan to look into ways to reduce the scarring, but we need to handle this curse first. Please don't cry, love. I'm so sorry I allowed this to happen to you.” She startled at his words and he stiffened as he realized what he had called her. As he moved to pull away, she grasped his hand and held it against her face.

“Oh!”, she cried. “Oh...no. How could- how could anyone be so cruel?” She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. He gently wiped them away and whispered, “I plan to look into ways to reduce the scarring, but we need to handle this curse first. Please don't cry, love. I'm so sorry I allowed this to happen to you.” She startled at his words and he stiffened as he realized what he had called her. As he moved to pull away, she grasped his hand and held it against her face.

“I don't remember everything, but please tell me, were we....in a relationship?”, she asked shyly, refusing to release his hand. He leaned closer and said lowly, “Yes.” At her happy little sigh he reluctantly pulled back. “But you must understand it's more complicated than that. Things happened during the war....once you regain your memories, you may feel differently about me.” He hung his
head in shame causing his hair to fall forward, too cowardly to tell her what he had done to her.

“Right before I was cursed....How did I feel about you then?” He stood and paced for a moment before admitting in frustration, “I don't honestly know. Everything has been so complicated. I know that you cared for me, but not to what degree.” She smiled and said clearly, “Severus.” When he stopped pacing to look at her her smile grew and continued, “I love you.”

He stood like a deer in the headlights for a moment before snorting incredulously, “You cannot mean that. Even if you think you do now, you'll feel differently with all of your faculties intact.” Her smile only grew as she shook her head. “I won't change my mind. I don't remember specific events, but I know how I feel about people. For example, my last memories I had of Lavender were that I hated her and that she was a cow. I woke up thinking of her as a close friend. My last memories of Ronald were....starkly different than how I feel now. I don't think I've ever felt for anyone else what I feel for you.”

“I'm sure you haven't. I've hurt you in ways you couldn't even imagine Hermione.”, he cautioned. A flash of recognition passed through her eyes and she looked confused. “I have some memories...well I think they're memories, but maybe they're just dreams. Have I been to your home before?” He cringed and nodded without meeting her eye. “I remember being hurt and you helping me. I remember being quite put out at you, because you kept blaming yourself for something, but I don't recall what.”

He barked out a bitter laugh and ran a hand anxiously through his hair. “I blamed myself for my own actions Hermione. You were captured by snatchers and I-I did something unforgivable to you.” “Obviously you didn't, since I forgave you. I know you didn't want to do whatever it was. I'm sure-”

“I RAPED YOU! Don't you understand? You can't explain away my sins because it's more convenient that way. I caused you more harm than Dolohov or Bellatrix or anyone else. I took something so precious from you. As if that wasn't enough, I then forced you to marry me so that I could repeat the action monthly for the rest of your life.” By the time he finished shouting he was panting and tugging at his hair.

Hermione just stared at him uncomprehendingly. “I don't understand-” He dropped his hands and took a deep breath, allowing his shields to snap into place. “There's nothing to understand. I-” He was cut off as the curtain snapped open revealing an angry Harry Potter and disappointed looking Dumbledore. Severus stiffened further at their appearance, but fell silent as they entered.

“I think you should take a walk to cool your head Professor Snape.”, Harry said coolly. His magic crackled around him dangerously with barely suppressed rage. Severus nodded guiltily and left without another word. Harry stared after him, but Dumbledore walked forward and patted Hermione on the hand. “What you need to understand, Madam Snape, is that Severus blames himself more for
the events of the war than you ever did. Shall I tell you what I know of those events, so that you can
decide for yourself if you blame him now?” At her wary nod, he pulled the chair close and said,
“Very good.”
To Protect You, I Must

Chapter by Halcyon Fairy

Chapter Notes

I apologize for how long it's taken me to update, but I'm really not satisfied with this chapter even now. Anyway, thanks for anyone still willing to read this after such a long wait, you're the real MVPs. I already have the next chapter halfway finished, so hopefully it won't take as long.

During Professor Dumbledore's retelling of the last year or so Hermione felt herself swing wildly between heartache at what she had suffered, sadness for what Professor Snape must feel, anger that they were still being toyed with after everything that had already occurred, and a small spark of hope. After all that had happened, she and her Professor-cum-husband had some degree of tender feelings for one another. Perhaps she could still glue the pieces of herself back together one day.

When Albus had finished filling her in on all of the events bringing them to this day she had quietly requested time alone to think. The elderly wizard could not deny her. He thought to send Minerva to check on her later on in the evening. As he took one last glance at the girl curled in on herself in obvious pain, he wished not for the first time that both she and her husband had been spared the horrors they had endured. Admittedly, he held some blame in the mess of hurt feelings and confusion that they were in now.

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Shortly after Dumbledore began speaking quietly to Hermione, Harry slipped silently from the room in search of his misguided professor. After consulting the map, he found him in his office. He set out determinedly towards the dungeons. As he drew closer, he was startled to hear crashes from within. Just as he thought to knock, he heard the sound of glass breaking.

Blaming his foolhardiness on his house, Harry forewent knocking and went to work at dismantling Snape's wards. He had almost succeeded when the door was wrenched open and Severus' wand was thrust forward under his nose. Snape relaxed slightly at Harry's presence, though Harry was unsure who he had expected instead.

“It is customary, Potter, to knock and ask admittance to one's office before breaking and entering.”, Snape spat with more venom than he'd shown Harry since before Voldemort's death. Harry ignored both the wand still raised to his person and Snape's waspishness and brushed past him into the office.
He was surprised by the amount of damage the man had wrought upon his office in such a short amount of time. All of his gruesome specimens that had always adorned the wall behind his desk were shattered beyond repair. Green and red liquids oozed down the walls where the jars had obviously been thrown and everything that had been on Snape’s desk had been shoved to the floor. Everything save one very telling thing.

A picture of Hermione laughing in Snape's arms as he smirked at George covered in wedding cake sat untouched on the corner of the desk. Harry picked up the photo and sat uninvited in a chair across from Snape's desk. He smiled sadly at the photo as he took in his beautiful friend, his sister, showing true joy for the first time in so long.

“I don't know what you thought you'd gain from that display earlier with Hermione, but I thought you'd grown past hurting the people you care about when you're scared.”, Harry said quietly and the reference wasn't lost on him. Lily. Severus knew that he should be furious at Potter's insolence, but he also knew he was right. He was afraid that she would rip all of her kind sentiments back with the return of her memories and he had lashed out. She didn't deserve it. He'd once again proven himself to be an inept arsehole and hurt her needlessly.

Suddenly all of Severus' vitriolic energy was gone and he collapsed into his chair, refusing to look up at Potter. After a moment passed without him answering, Potter pulled out his wand and for a heart-stopping moment Severus thought he'd hex him. However, the wizarding savior merely began righting his rooms with efficient and impersonal flicks.

When he had completed the job, he looked to Severus who still remained silent. Sighing heavily like some disappointed father, Potter leaned on Severus’ desk and steepled his fingers. He considered Severus for a long moment before shaking his head and saying wearily, “You've got to learn to stop punishing yourself like this. If not for yourself, for Hermione. It's obvious that you care more for her than yourself. Can't you see that you're hurting her? She needs you Severus. This isn't something that Ron or I or even Dumbledore can fix. Only you.” Again, Severus knew he was correct.

As Severus stepped into the infirmary to check on Hermione, he initially thought her to be asleep. However as he hesitantly approached the curtain to her bed, he heard soft voices. He paused outside, spying was par for the course at this point. His breath caught in his throat as he heard his wife sob. Minerva cooed nonsense to calm her.

“I just don't see how the Ministry thought this law was a good idea Professor! After everything we went through in the name of freedom from those vile people- There weren't any ministry bureaucrats
dodging curses that day. They were all safely tucked away. I shouldn't even be married at my age! It should have been my choice. Even if I- no matter how I feel- He'll always believe I'm making the best of a bad situation.” It seemed she'd run out of words as she sobbed bitterly. Minerva continued to murmur to her, but it was clear she was at a loss.

It was also clear that who she needed reassurances from now wasn't her head of house. Severus steeled himself and cleared his throat. “Hermione, may I come in?”, he asked quietly. He heard her breath hitch and Minerva answered clearly flustered, “Just a moment Severus.” He heard some movement and a whispered incantation or two and then Minerva bade him enter.

He had expected to find his wife looking decidedly different than she currently was. She sat primly in her hospital bed with her hands lying clasped on the stark white sheets and though she was a bit pale her face was composed and there were no signs of her very vocal distress only moments ago. Ah the power of beauty spells and Occlumency.

He inclined his head to Minerva and then addressed Hermione. “I'd like to speak to you alone, if you're comfortable with that.” “Of course I am. Thank you for everything Minerva. I'll see you tomorrow.”, she answered and squeezed the older woman's fingers to make it less of a dismissal and more of a request. “Yes. Have a good night, my dear. I'll see you at breakfast.”, Minerva said fondly as she bent to place a kiss upon Hermione's head. She then turned to Severus and looked at him searchingly before grasping his arm and leaning in to say, “Go easy on her, my boy. She's not as thick skinned now as she was during the war.”

Severus found himself unable to answer as she swept from the infirmary. He stood staring at Hermione for a long time before she cleared her throat nervously and said, “I'd feel better if you sat down, Severus.” He looked stricken for a brief moment before his face went blank and he sat stiffly in the chair that Minerva had vacated. It took her a moment to realize how that must have sounded to him.

“Oh no, not because- I just didn't want you to be uncomfortable, I- I'm sorry.”, she babbled as she wrung her hands guiltily. “No, it's fine Hermione. About what I said- There is no excuse for how I spoke to you earlier. It was the truth, but you didn't deserve to be told in such a manner and I-” “No! It wasn't true.”, she cut him off firmly, but not unkindly. “It may be true that you were forced to...have sex with me against both our wills, but you didn't rape me. If anything Voldemort did. And you didn't force me to marry you and you know it. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall filled in most of the blanks for me.”

Severus regarded her for a moment before looking away and mumbling, “Regardless. I still owe you an apology. I was...unprepared for your reaction. Though we've become close, you'd never- we'd never discussed any feelings we might have for one another. I apologize for reacting with poor grace.” She didn't respond right away, but reached out to place her hand upon his knee. When he looked up in surprise, she gave him a small smile and said, “It's alright Severus. I know this can't be
easy for you. It's a bit confusing for me, but it must be much harder to be the one who can remember everything.”

Rather than acknowledge her statement, he withdrew a potions phial from his robes. “I failed to actually give this to you earlier.”, he said sheepishly as he handed it over. She gave him a rueful smile and tipped the potion into her mouth. After swallowing the bitter liquid, she coughed and returned the now empty bottle. “Thank you. How long will it be before we know if it worked or not?”

He tipped his head to the side in thought and looked to her arm. “It should already be evident if it's going to work properly or not. May I?” At her nod, he pulled back her sleeve to reveal her left arm. They both gasped in shock to see the ugly scar had faded almost completely, leaving only a few light silver marks where Bellatrix had dug deeper in her excitement. Severus smiled up at Hermione and reached his hand out towards her chest before clenching his fist and grabbing the mirror for her.

He handed it to her with a blank face and stood to turn away clearing his throat. “I'll give you some privacy to inspect the other scar. If you could just inform me of how well it's worked.” “No, Severus.”, she said as she reached out and grabbed his hand to tug him back around. She looked him in the eyes and spoke firmly, “I trust you and I know you've seen it before. Could you hand me my wand please?”

He retrieved her wand from the bedside table and sat back down in the chair, his whole body vibrating with tension. She smiled bravely at him as she cast a spell to cut her hospital robes straight down the front. As she peeled the fabric aside to reveal completely unblemished skin, he released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and looked away with a slight smile. “Thank Merlin. I knew theoretically that I'd gotten the formula correct, but I- No matter. It worked. I should leave you to get some rest. Poppy will be releasing you first thing in the morning and we can then continue work on your curse.”

Hermione beamed at him as she repaired her garment and replied, “Thank you Severus. I'll see you in the morning.” His eyes skipped over to her and his lips quirked into a bit of a shy smile as he whispered, “Goodnight Hermione. Sleep well.” As he turned and strode from the infirmary, her eyes were already falling shut and she drifted off with a smile of her own.

**SSHGSSHGSSHGSSHGSSHGSSHG**

The next morning Madam Pomfrey ran a few tests to make sure that Hermione had her strength back and then released her just in time to head down to her quarters to get ready for breakfast. The problem with that was that she didn't exactly remember where her quarters were, so Luna was enlisted to walk her down. On the walk there, Hermione and her blonde friend talked about a few things where her memory was lacking.
She was reminded once again as to who had married whom, what NEWTS she was currently studying for, and the surprising number of Slytherin friendships she had made. She found it hard to believe, but Luna assured her that she now saw the Malfoys as a second family and that her parents adored her husband. Luna even tried to convince her that Harry and Ron were on friendly terms with him, but she thought perhaps that was more Luna being hopeful.

Soon enough they arrived at the portrait and Luna said the password before turning to Hermione. “Would you like me to wait and walk you to breakfast or would you prefer to walk with Professor Snape?” Hermione was grateful to have such a considerate friend. “I think I’ll walk with Severus. You go on ahead.” As Luna skipped away with a satisfied smile, Hermione took a breath and entered into her shared rooms, unsure of what to expect.

She looked around the sitting room and smiled. It was just the cozy, inviting kind of sitting room she would want for herself and she could see Severus being comfortable here as well. She wasn't sure which door led to her own bedroom and they were all closed, so she called out to him. He strode in from his own bedroom and gave her a small smile of greeting.

“Good morning. I need to get dressed for breakfast, but I didn't know which room was mine and I didn't want to snoop.” she said awkwardly. He looked pained for a moment, but then replied gently, “You're not barred from any of the rooms. This is your home, Hermione. Your room is through there.” She thanked him and slid into the room he'd indicated.

Though she couldn't remember her time in this room, it made her feel calm and safe. Much like her feelings on people bled through even when she couldn't remember actual memories, it seemed her feelings about things also remained. Baring in mind that he'd said this was her home and since this room was her own, she took a moment to look around.

She browsed her bookshelves for a moment, intrigued to find many titles she'd never read and wondering if she actually had and forgotten. She then went to her bureau and looked for something appropriate to wear today. She chose a lovely olive green set of robes with a demure cut. As she finished tying the sash in place, she noticed the top of the bureau.

There was a framed photo of Severus and herself dancing at their wedding that put a shy little smile upon her face, a blue photo album with silver lettering on the cover which read “Our Story Starts Here”, and a small black lacquered box. She trailed her fingers over the cover of the album before decided to open the box first.

Inside was a few pieces of jewelry she recognized as her own, a couple that her mother must have passed on to her, a set of hair combs, what was obviously her wedding ring, and a beautiful chain necklace holding a small potions phial with a small house insignia on it that she was positive she recognized as belonging to the Prince family. She picked it up for closer inspection and was shocked
to note the potion was Felix Felicis. On a whim, she put on both the necklace and the ring.

She then turned her attention to the photo book. As she opened it, her breath caught in her chest and a small gasp escaped her as she looked at the photo of their wedding kiss with the annotation “A Kiss For My Prince”. She obviously had feelings for him, it was painted in every line of her. As she watched herself shyly initiate the kiss over and over, a few tears rolled down her cheeks. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she turned the page.

There were pictures of them walking through the forest talking and smiling, cutting the cake and Severus turning to flick his wand at George, Severus smiling a private little smile when she wasn't looking, Severus laughing with her and her friends, Severus offering her his arm and then pulling her close to apparate them away. She turned the page, expecting to find it empty, but there was a picture of them both wearing Christmas sweaters in front of a tree and laughingly singing some carol or another.

The book was blank after that so she closed it and sat on the bed, lost in thought. She was startled out of her reverie a few moments later by a knock at her door. “Hermione, you've been in there a while. Is everything alright?” She banished the traces of tears from her face and went to open the door. She smiled up at him. “Sorry, I was looking through my things.”

He blinked in surprise and leaned in to reach out and touch her necklace, meanwhile glancing down to her left hand. “If only you'd been wearing these that day.”, he murmured. “I’d thought Bellatrix had somehow taken them from you. Where were they?” “There was a jewelry box in my room.”, she answered helplessly. His eyes clouded in thought for a moment before he straightened and cleared his throat. “Well no matter, you have them now. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t remove them any time soon. Your ring has many enchantments on it to protect you in future as well as a locator spell keyed to my own ring.” She nodded and answered faintly, “I'll keep them on, I promise.”

He nodded to her and offered her his arm, “Well, shall we.” She smiled shyly up at him and placed her hand on his elbow. Just as they reached the bottom of the stairs leading up out of the dungeons, Pansy Parkinson called out to them from behind, “Professor Snape!” She hurried up to them and looked to Hermione hesitantly.

“Madam Snape”, she said with an embarrassed nod before turning back to Severus. “I wanted to thank you again for helping me. I can't believe I walked around under an unforgivable with no one noticing for so long. Madam Pomfrey finally released me to attend classes starting today.” “That is good to hear, Miss Parkinson.”, he replied with a slight inclination of his head. She then turned her attention on Hermione, who had been watching the exchange warily.

“I also wanted the chance to apologize to you, Madam Snape.”, she said formally as she bent at the waist to bow to Hermione. “I know that Professor Snape removed a good deal of my memories of
what's happened since the war for my own safety as well as yours, but I know that I can't have been pleasant to you. Not that it would be much changed from our interactions from before the war...But I have held a great deal of respect for you since....what I'm trying to say is—"

“I forgive you, Pansy.”, Hermione interrupted her quietly. “Before...we were children, caught up in a war that wasn't ours to fight. Now, we don't have to play those roles anymore. I'd like to start over. And it's Hermione, Pansy.” She stuck her hand out towards the girl still bent in a submissive bow and Shocked eyes darted up to meet her own. Then Pansy straightened and her face shone with relief as she grasped Hermione's hand. “Thank you, Hermione.”

After breakfast, Hermione found herself seated in her sitting room with Severus, Ron, Harry, Ginny, Luna, Lavender, and Draco. Severus had argued that all of their presences weren't required to protect her from him and Hermione had been poised to agree before Harry calmly interrupted saying that they were his friends too and that they wanted to be there for both of them during this difficult task. Severus had looked shocked, but then nodded, meeting no one's eye.

Hermione steeled herself as Severus looked into her eyes and whispered, “Legilimens”. Suddenly, she found herself back in the dark room on the floor. No! She needed to be there for Severus. She knew from what he'd told her that there were dozens of rooms separating her mind and she wasn't sure he would be able to find her again.

As Severus entered her mind, he strode for the door he knew held her student aspect. She had helped him previously and now that he knew a bit more about the curse and who had cast it, he was certain the next step should be to converse with her. He was surprised however to find that door to house a wholly different Hermione.

As he drew closer and peered into the small window, He saw Hermione dressed in tight fitting leather pants and a very revealing corset top, all black. Something about her screamed danger and as she looked up and met his eyes, he stumbled back. This was the one who had returned from Bellatrix. There was a dark hatred in her eyes that stole his breath. Before he could go further from the door, she lurched forward and reached through the small window to grasp his robes.

Catching him completely off guard, she hissed, “Let me out so I can kill that bitch for what she's done! Please Professor Snape!” He jerked out of her hold and stepped a few feet back before asking her, “Who is it you wish to kill exactly?” The icy laughter that answered him sent chills down his spine before she spat, “Bellatrix of course! Look at what she's done to me! I survived all that was done to me, just to have her awaken this in me. She tainted me with darkness in a way that even Voldemort and the others couldn't.”
He shook his head in denial. “No. I'll not let you sully your soul by killing her. I made a vow to protect you Hermione and I intend to honor it. I'll make you whole again and I'll make sure that she can never harm you, or anyone again.” She laughed bitterly as she pounded her fist upon the door. “And what of your soul. Have you not been sullied enough yourself? And is it not my right to decide?”

He looked at her for a long moment before turning, preparing to exit her mind as he felt his energy draining. “Unlike you, there's nothing left pure in me. I must do this. If you were to lose that last bit of innocence, I could not bear it.” As he drifted from her mind, he heard not only that dark Hermione's howl of rage, but many, many other voices crying out in pain. Of all the voices calling after him, one echoed in his mind painfully long after he ended the spell.

A young Hermione, innocent and brave, calling out hoarsely through her tears, “Please don't do this! There is good in you and you'll kill it off if you do this in my name.”
Chapter Notes

A/N: I felt like the chapter was going to be a bit long, so I cut it off in a bit of an undramatic way. New chapter will hopefully be up in a few more days. I plan to add a bit more to it. Thanks for all the love and encouragement I've received lately. It really keeps me going.

Severus refrained from sharing details with Hermione and the others about what happened inside her mind. He simply said that he hadn’t had much luck and that they would try again the next day. If the others noticed how withdrawn he became, they shrugged it off as another headache after performing Legilimency for an extended period of time. Hermione accepted the headache remedy and went to go lie down and her friends filed out of their quarters. Just as Severus went to shut the door, Potter turned around and looked at him speculatively before walking off.

The rest of the day was uneventful as Severus bid his time until nightfall. He knew from Miss Parkinson that Bellatrix hadn’t dared to leave the warehouse she was hiding in yet and he hoped that were still the case. The girl’s memories showed her alone, but he wasn’t stupid enough to think that she wasn’t hoping to lure him into a trap there. What other reason would she set up shop near his childhood home?

As he gathered what supplies he suspected he might need tonight, he weighed the pros and cons of what he was about to do. It went against his very nature to include someone else in his plans, but he couldn’t afford to allow the mad bitch to escape alive. With a firm nod to himself, he strapped a dagger to his belt and placed the other items in his robe pocket.

As he thought of how beautiful Hermione was as he held her during their dance at their wedding, he whispered hoarsely, “Expecto Patronum.” An incredulous laugh escaped him as he looked at his patronus in wonder. He wasn’t surprised so much that it had changed, but the shape it now took on had him rolling his eyes in exasperation. Of bloody course it’d be a damn lioness. It couldn’t dare to be a male form for a change or even something not noticeably feminine. He knew he’d never live this down with Weasley, but he shook himself from his pity party and sent it off to it’s recipients.

He didn’t have long to wait, before he heard stealthy footsteps approaching his position at the gates. He was surprised however when they turned the corner and rather than just Potter and Weasley, there was a whole gaggle of people gathered, some of which didn’t even inhabit the castle. He raised an imperious eyebrow at them and waited for an explanation.
“It wouldn't be fair if we had all the fun, now would it? Besides with The Minister with us”, Weasley started before gesturing to Kingsley, “I doubt we'll have much explaining to do if things get.....messy....on accident of course.” Severus rolled his eyes and looked over the group standing before him. He wasn't surprised to see Miss Lovegood, Draco, Ginevra, Longbottom or even Miss Brown, but he hadn't expected Kingsley, George Weasley, or Lucius. He'd thought to invite the latter, but didn't want him implicated in any way should things go south.

He looked over the group critically before deciding to allow the additions. He might not enjoy working with others in a battle scenario, but even he couldn't deny that he could trust all of the individuals present with his life. Shaking off the suspiciously sentimental thought, he squared his shoulders and smirked. “Let's get going then, shall we?”

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Once outside the warehouse, Severus reached out with his magic to get a feel for the wards. Oh yes, she was expecting company. He held a hand up to the group behind him and went to work on dismantling the nastier of the wards without tipping her off to their presence. He then placed a few wards of his own to ensure she didn't elude him.

Twenty minutes later Severus put the finishing touches on the wards and swiped his damp hair out of his eyes. Smirking to Potter and Weasley, he tilted his head in invitation and led them into the warehouse. Once inside, he motioned for Potter to go right, Weasley left, and he walked confidently forward into the middle of the room.

As he ventured into the dark gloom of the room, light suddenly filled the area. “About time, Snape. I was starting to wonder if your wittle wifey's love was one sided.”, Bellatrix cooed sweetly from her perch upon an old barrel of petrol. “Hello Bella.”, he answered calmly as she hopped down and dusted off her skirts.

He raised a brow and said in a deadly calm voice, “Let's finish this tonight, shall we?” He didn't wait for an answer as he whipped his wand out and cast *Sectumsempra*. She cackled as she dodged to the left, the curse barely grazing her hair. “Oh you want to play dirty, Sevvie?” She kept moving as she cast an entrail expelling hex, which he dodged easily.

They parried back and forth for a moment before Ron and Harry had finally gotten into position and each cast a stunner at the deranged witch. Unfortunately, she dropped to the floor and rolled clear and managed to shoot off a *Bombarda*, causing an explosion as the barrel of Petrol ignited. The blast knocked Harry unconscious and Ron looked between him and Severus in conflict of what to do.
Severus dodged a killing curse by millimeters and yelled over the roar of flames, “Get him out of here, Weasley!” Bellatrix continued slinging hexes manically as the fire spread, giggling with glee all the while. Ron nodded and lifted Harry, dashing towards the exit. To cover them, Severus went on a complete offensive, slinging curse after curse at her.

After a few moments however, she got the upper hand by hitting him square in the chest with an *Incendio*. His quick *Protego* saved his life, if not his skin. Bellatrix finally had Severus cornered between herself and the flames licking at his back as she said in a sing song voice, “Looks like it’s just you and me Snivvels.”

“I'm afraid not, dear Bella.”, Lucius said as he stepped out from behind a stack of crates. She spun in shock and Severus saw his chance. Hermione may not forgive him for taking the bitch's life, but he would do it to protect his precious wife. Even if he should end up in Azkaban, he wouldn't regret his decision tonight. He would have the satisfaction of removing the threat of her from the wizarding world. However, his prize was taken from him as a jet of green light erupted silently on the other side of her.

As her body crumpled lifelessly to the floor, Lucius looked at her with distaste. “Well that was all a bit dramatic. Shall we?” He looked to Severus with a tight smile. Severus nodded mutely and stepped over the corpse, leaving it to burn to ash.

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The minister looked Lucius and Severus in the eye as they walked out of the flaming building and said, “I see no reason for The Ministry to be involved in a muggle building fire.” and disappeared with a small pop. Lucius clapped Severus on the back, causing him to wince a bit from a slicing hex he'd caught to the shoulder. “I'd say you're a bit out of shape for this sort of thing old man.”

Severus glared and straightened his tattered robes, “Yes well, I had hoped after boy wonder killed The Dark Lord that I could retire peacefully from all this.” Lucius smirked and quipped, “No rest for the wicked, Severus.” Then he turned and nodded to the others present and he too disapparated.

The serious atmosphere was then broken by George as he yawned loudly, “Well I didn't get to have any fun tonight. Maybe next time you'll let the rest of us at least watch the show, eh Snape?” Severus rolled his eyes at the ginger man's antics and turned to his brother. “We should get Mr. Potter to Poppy. I'm afraid he has a concussion and my wife may be upset if I've allowed him to become permanently damaged.” Everyone present had become used to Severus' strange brand of humor and rolled their eyes good-naturedly.
Once back at Hogwarts, the others went to the hospital wing with Harry levitated before them, but Severus turned to his own quarters. Miss Brown had argued with him briefly about this, but he reminded her that he was in fact a Potions Master and ex-spy. His injuries were minor and he'd always preferred to treat himself where he could. He didn't like to show off his body, even to Poppy who had seen his scars already.

As he limped into his quarters and shrugged off his cloak, he grunted in pain as the fabric stuck to a burn on his chest. He threw his cloak over his chair for later repair and cleaning and stumbled towards the loo where he kept his potions stored. Momentarily forgetting about his wife asleep in the next room, he cursed loudly as he lost his balance and stumbled into the door frame.

Hermione woke abruptly and was disoriented as she looked around. She wasn't in her bed in Gryffindor tower, though judging by the walls and ceiling she was still at Hogwarts. She was trying to figure out how she ended up here, where ever here was, when she heard a muffled thump and cursing. That must have been what woke her in the first place.

She pushed back the covers and looked down to note she was wearing the fleece pajamas her mum had bought her for Christmas fifth year. Hastily deciding not to worry too much about changing as she wasn’t indecent, she went to investigate. As she opened the door to the room she had slept in, she blinked as her eyes adjusted to the brighter lighting. She looked around to see a very cozy looking living area filled to the brim with books. She was distracted from her mission to discover where she was and what the noise had been as she inspected the bookshelves around her.

Just as she was about to reach for a very intriguing tome on the use of Latin in modern spell craft, she jumped as she heard someone curse softly. She spun around and searched for the person, finding no one. As she looked around, her eyes landed on a partially open door with light streaming from within.
She quickly strode across the room and then let out a startled gasp as she took it her partially nude Professor. He had removed his shirt and was looking over his shoulder into the mirror and treating a nasty cut on his shoulder-blade. At the noise she made, his eyes darted up in alarm.

“I apologize for waking you. Are you alright?”, he said calmly as if he weren't injured. She blinked and then stepped forward. “I'm fine, sir, but you clearly aren't. May I help you?”, she asked warily. His eyes softened and he nodded minutely. “I would appreciate that. Thank you Hermione.” Her eyes flew to his face at his use of her given name, but he didn't seem to notice as he handed her a jar of salve and turned around.

She swallowed her nerves and dipped her fingers into the salve and then timidly reached out to rub it into the wound. His tense shoulders rippled at her touch and she could tell that he was holding his breath, but he made no sound. She wanted to ask him what had happened, but knew that it wasn't her place. She was honestly surprised he was letting her help him and not berating her for seeing him half naked.

When she finished treating his back she looked up to see him studying her in the mirror. Her mouth went dry at the clear affection she saw there. What was going on? She cleared her throat and mumbled, “all done, sir. Would you like help with the burn on your chest?”

He turned slowly and looked down at her with a small smile. “Please.” Her eyes that had lowered to his chest, snapped up. Had she ever heard him say that word? She couldn't recall it, if she had. It was then she realized how close they were standing. Her own chest was centimeters from his bared one. How inappropriate. He must have seen the conflict she was having in her eyes, because the smile dropped from his lips and he said gently, “If you’d rather not, I can handle it. It isn't nearly as bad as it looks.”

Hermione felt like a child for being uncomfortable in the first place. Yes, he was her professor and yes he was bare from the waist up, but he was in pain and asking for help. She shook her head and dipped her fingers in the salve again. She avoided raising her eyes as she rubbed it into his wound. The silence was uncomfortable, but Hermione was afraid to speak.

Just as she was finishing up, Professor Snape tilted her chin up with his knuckles. She was afraid to breathe, much less move as he whispered, “Thank you Hermione.” Her brow furrowed in confusion. He wasn't acting like the Professor Snape she knew. That was twice now that he had used her given name and he had never even had a kind word for her before today.

Steeling herself for a possible dressing down, she asked quietly, “What happened to you sir? And where exactly are we? Are these your rooms?” Professor Snape flinched and stepped backward bumping into the sink at her words. All traces of gentle emotions slid from his face and he looked at her expressionlessly, much as she was used to.
His voice wasn't unkind, but was much more formal when he spoke. “Yes, they are. You were cursed recently and have lapses in your memory. Tell me, how old are you Miss Granger?” She was surprised by his question. How old was she? Did he think she was mental? “I'm eighteen Professor.”, she answered as calmly as she could.

He cocked his head at her answer and she could read his confusion clearly. Her eyes widened and she hastily asked, “I am eighteen, aren't I?” He blinked and nodded slowly. “Yes, you are. I must admit to a bit of confusion however. When you went to sleep, you had no memories of anything after your fourth year. Tell me, do you remember the events of The Dark Lord's defeat?”

“He's gone?”, she asked in relief. He nodded and pinched his lips with his thumb and pointer finger while he thought of his next action. After a moment, he motioned for her to exit the loo and she followed him to the sitting room. “Accio”, he said distractedly and caught the bundle of black that came sailing into the room. He missed Hermione's eyes bulging out of their sockets as he put on the tee shirt.

He then began to pace and mumble to himself and Hermione had the feeling that he had forgotten her presence completely after a moment. She gingerly sat down on his sofa and awaited him to acknowledge her again while her own mind raced. What on earth was she doing in his rooms and why had he been so...familiar with her?

Finally, after what felt like an eternity to Hermione he stopped moving and looked up at her. “Were my energy not already so depleted, I would try to continue to break the curse that Bellatrix placed on you. As it is, I fear I may need until at least midday tomorrow before we resume.” “Bellatrix Lestrange cursed me, Sir? What is the curse?”, she asked hesitantly, almost afraid to know the answer.

“It doesn't have a name that I am aware of. It is a combination of negative influence hex, selective memory charm, and mind's torment curse. You have “lost” your memories, for lack of a better phrase, a few times now and every time it happens you display personality differences. Our focus up to this point had been studying the curse on your mind via Legilimency, but I believe we have reached the stage where I can try to unravel the curse. If you are agreeable, we will begin tomorrow after lunch.”, he replied in his usual Professor Snape voice that she was more used to.

“Of course, sir. Thank you. May I ask you one more question?”, she hedged warily. He merely arched a brow in response, so she steeled herself and asked as calmly as she could, “Why am I in your rooms, sir?” Professor Snape looked slightly uncomfortable for a fraction of a second, but then his face smoothed so quickly she was positive she imagined it. He cleared his throat and responded, “These are also your rooms. You awoke in your own bedroom. Mine is through that door there.”
She looked at him stunned for a moment before croaking, “We....share...rooms Professor?” He hesitated a moment and then nodded. “We do.”, he said simply, hoping to put an end to the discussion. But this was Hermione Granger he was dealing with. “But why, Sir?”, she asked bewilderedly.

He in turn rolled his eyes, looking much like Harry or Ron in his petulance and grumbled, “Must you ask so many questions, Miss Granger? I am exhausted, it is nearly three o’clock in the morning, and I would like to take a shower and get a bit of sleep before Weasley comes busting down the door to check on you in the morning as he is wont to do. I will explain more to you tomorrow before we begin. You may not even remember if I do so now.”

He half expected her to argue, but when he looked back to her she looked thoroughly chastised and a bit guilty. Catching his eye, she whispered, “Of course, Sir. I apologize. I'll just head back to bed then.” He sighed in regret for making her feel bad and said as kindly as he could, “Goodnight. Sleep well.”

He then strode into the loo and she heard the shower shudder to life, before the sound was cut off by a silencing spell. She sighed tiredly and headed back towards the room she had come from. Her heart shuddered in her chest however as a glint of silver caught the firelight as she reached out to push the door open. She was wearing a wedding ring. Why in the world would she be wearing a wedding band and living in her professor’s quarters?

She quickly entered her room and shut the door behind her, leaning back on it as her legs tried to give way. Surely she hadn't married Professor Snape? No, if she had she was certain they would be sharing a room. She wouldn't marry for any reason other than love and she wouldn't want to sleep separately if she loved him. He had called her Hermione, though, and looked at her so sweetly.

She situated herself back into bed as she thought more. He was clearly telling the truth about her memory loss, because she knew some things about the man that were quite personal, but was unsure how she knew. The things she knew made it even more difficult for her to believe that they were somehow married. She knew that he had loved Lily Potter. Lily was the reason that he had turned into a spy.

While it wasn't impossible that he could fall in love with someone else, Hermione doubted it would be her. Lily Potter had been drop dead gorgeous and Hermione was a bit plain if she were honest with herself. Unsure why she was even entertaining these thoughts or why they made her chest ache, she growled and turned on her side determined to go back to sleep. She didn't have much luck in the endeavor.
Early the next morning Hermione gave sleep up as a bad job and crawled out of her bed. She had just stumbled out of the loo when a knock came at the door. Professor Snape's door was closed so she assumed he had yet to wake up and, remembering the state he was in last night, decided to open the door herself. He had said these rooms were hers as well.

She was surprised to see Ron, Harry, and Malfoy on the other side of the door. All three smiled at her, so she stepped aside and let them in. Hopefully she could glean some more information from them than she had from the professor about what she was doing down here in his rooms. She gave them a cheery smile as they sat on the sofa.

“Would you all like some tea?”, she offered lightly. She was surprised when Malfoy answered her with a “That'd be great. Thanks Hermione.” So they were on first name basis? Interesting. As she set the water to boil and gathered the tea things, she took a chance and called over her shoulder, “Severus is still asleep. I think he had a bit of a rough night.”

Ron laughed under his breath and said, “You could say that again. I thought the bitch was going to kill him until Mr. Malfoy went in there. I felt bad for leaving him, but he told me to get Harry out. Did you see him before he went to sleep? He said he could handle his cut himself, but Lav wanted me to ask after him.”

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. What in the world was Ron talking about? Professor Snape had just told her Voldemort was dead. Was there a new Dark Wizard on the loose? She calmed herself and answered him nonchalantly, “Yes, I helped him patch up. He was pretty beat up.” As the kettle began to whistle, she took the tray to the sitting room and set it down.

She began to play mother for Ron and Harry and then froze. She didn't know how Malfoy liked his tea. He smiled and murmured, “one lump and a dash of cream.” She let out the breath she didn't realize she was holding and prepared it as directed. Sitting back with her own cup, she studied the three young men.

She was surprised to note Ron and Harry both had wedding bands. She knew Ron had mentioned Lavender a moment ago, so he had probably married her. She could only assume Harry had married Ginny. It was strange that all three of them had married so young. She especially didn't see herself marrying before training for whatever career she planned to go into, but she supposed she must have fallen pretty hard for her husband.
She was roused from her thoughts by Professor Snape's door opening and him shuffling into the sitting area without any of his normal poise. He cleared his throat and dropped gracelessly into the armchair next to Hermione's. “Good. Tea.”, he mumbled in a gravelly voice. He summoned another cup and went about fixing his tea without so much as acknowledging anyone.

Hermione watched him and the boys and since none of them reacted at all, she assumed this was normal behavior. She was honestly surprised he hadn't yelled at them for being in his rooms and taken points off them, but she wasn't complaining. The boys were telling her about Lucius Malfoy saving Professor Snape last night and she knew she should be listening, but she could really only focus on him.

Finally after a few minutes of her humming and nodding in the right places and not really listening Ron said something that caught her attention. “Wait what was that Ron?” He huffed at her in response. “You'd think you'd be listening closer since this whole thing was about that mad cow. I said I'm just glad she's dead instead of caught, because you won't have to worry about her escaping Azkaban.”

This seemed to trigger a memory or at least a feeling and her eyes shot to Professor Snape's. Her voice was panicked as she asked him, “Did you kill her?” His face was every bit as unreadable as she was used to as he answered woodenly, “No. Lucius did it before I could. I would have, though.”

All three boys grew quiet as she and her professor stared at one another. After a beat, she let out a relieved sigh. “I'm glad you didn't. I wouldn't want to be the reason you....Not that I'm conceited enough to think that I'd be the only reason—” “I find myself relieved as well.”, he cut her off gently.

The tension was broken by Harry slapping his knees and saying, “Right, so are you going to tackle that bushy head of hers again this morning Severus?” She whipped around to stare at him incredulously. She wasn't sure if she were more outraged at his ribbing of her hair so early in the morning or shocked at his address of their professor.

Professor Snape himself didn't seem phased at all as he drawled with a put upon sigh, “Well I do have a busy schedule. I will have to see what I can clear.” For a moment she felt guilty to take up his time until she saw his lips twitching into a small smile. Two could play at that game. She took a calming breath and turned to him with her best hurt expression.

“Surely your wife is worth a few minutes of your time?”, she whispered with trembling lips. She didn't expect the response she got. His cup stopped halfway to his lips and then he shakily set it down as his eyes flew to her own. “Do you remember more than last night?”, he choked out excitedly as he leaned towards her.
She felt guilty when she saw how happy he looked at the prospect of her remembering their relationship. She lowered her eyes and shook her head before mumbling, “Uh no. I'm sorry. It was a guess. I couldn't think of another reason I would be wearing a necklace with the Prince crest and a wedding ring...there's also the fact that I have a room here...” She trailed off and looked up.

She was shocked to see the raw pain in his eyes as he leaned back and murmured, “Well you always were too bright for your own good. Ahem. We should get started. With any luck we can at least begin to unravel the Negative Influence Hex today.”

After a quick breakfast of dry toast, Hermione found herself facing Professor Snape as he prepared himself to enter her mind. Her heart raced in fear and a bit of excitement. She found it hard to believe that she had forgotten such important details of her life such as her marital status and the events of the war, but she knew better than to believe that Professor Snape or either of her friends would joke about such things.

As he whispered the spell, her consciousness shifted. She awoke in a dirty room feeling as if every nerve in her body were being burned with fiendfyre. She was unaware of the horrible animistic sounds issuing from her own throat or the fact that she had soiled herself. Her whole being was focused on the pain, excruciating and all encompassing.

The first thing Severus noted upon entering her mind was that the doors were open. He wondered briefly if this were due to Bellatrix's demise. The second thing he noted, which had him running frantically towards one of the doors, was the horrible screaming. He'd never heard anything like it and as someone who'd bowed and scraped to Voldemort for two decades that was saying something.

The sight of her lying in her own blood and piss had him falling to his knees beside her. He wanted to lift her into his arms and offer her reassurances that he would make it all better. He daren't touch her however. He knew that this pain was not physical and that cradling her would help nothing save his own battered feelings.

Softly he called to her, “Hermione, my love. Can you hear me?” The screaming ended abruptly in a choked sob. “Who?”, she asked brokenly, unable to open her eyes. “It's Severus- Professor Snape. I'm here to put an end to this, Hermione. Bellatrix is dead, she cannot hurt you ever again.”
Her eyes snapped open and searched frantically for him. “Professor? Professor please kill me. Make the pain end. I can't take anymore.” He squeezed his own eyes tightly in pain for a moment before reaching forward to stroke her hair. “No, my dear. I won't kill you, but I will take your pain. Hermione you are skilled in occlumency, I need you to help me protect your mind. This pain is not physical, we are inside your mind.”

Her eyes unfocused for a moment before she replied, “Oh that's quite clever.” “What is?”, he asked in confusion. “This is all an illusion. I'm not real. I'm part of my own shields. There's a curse out here, but it can't get to the important bits. Bellatrix never even knew she was still outside my shields, because I convinced myself she was within them. I need your help lowering them sir.”

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Two Gryffindors and one Slytherin sat in tense silence and watched sweat bead upon the potion master's brow and the head girl's body quake with shivers. Some time ago, the tears had stopped streaming down Hermione's face and all three boys agreed that that must be a positive sign.

It had been nearly six hours since Professor Snape had entered Hermione's mind and Ron had stood to pace and worry aloud multiple times much to Draco's annoyance. As he bolted up once again, Draco finally snapped, “Weasley we're every bit as concerned as you are but if you don't sit down, so help me Merlin-”

His tirade was cut off by a startled cry and before anyone knew what was going on Hermione was in Professor Snape's lap and he was clutching her tightly as she cried. All three boys suddenly found various objects within the sitting room incredibly interesting as she cried, “Oh Severus. Oh thank Merlin. I was so afraid you wouldn't figure it out and I'd be stuck there.”

As he began to croon in her ear quiet reassurances, Harry stood and tilted his head for Draco and Ron to follow him from the couple's chambers. Ron looked as if he might object, but Draco's thunderous expression had him biting his tongue and following meekly.

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A/N: I know this chapter is a bit short and a long time coming, but I'd rather put out this bit I have than make anyone waiting on a chapter wait even longer. Most of this was already written when I last posted and I've got so much going on this year that my posting has been very sporadic. Thanks for all of the kind comments and understanding. Hopefully there will be a new chapter in a week.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!