One Step Left

by Cysteine

Summary

What would have happened if Dobby had flinched and taken one step to the left, leaving Hermione behind to fend for herself and thus causing a terribly different outcome of the war? "You defeated my husband on his own land in a duel. Pureblood tradition states that you claim all that was his...including his wife."

Notes

Author's Note: This is my standard disclaimer of not making any money off of this fan-fiction. Thanks for letting us play with your realm, JK.

A/N #2: This work will shift between Hermione's Point-of-View and a third person POV. I will use line breaks to denote the shifts.
Abandoned at Malfoy Manor

I couldn't blame him. He tried to save me.

We both saw the knife coming straight for his chest and I could tell he flinched in fear.

I'm not sure how I knew, but I knew he was about to do his type of apparating to get us out of Malfoy Manor.

But he took that extra moment to spare his own life.

And that's why I'm here, locked away in the dungeon, probably to be tortured to the brink of insanity like the Longbottoms before I'm executed.

It's dark in here; I bet Ron used that device from Dumbledore. Apparently there were others down here, including a goblin.

It would be like Harry to go back and save everyone, even after what happened in the Department of Mysteries.

And yet, I'm here. Alone. With the dead body of Wormtail to keep me company.

Footfalls alerted me of someone coming down the stairs, but as I was behind bars, there was nowhere I could really hide.

"Granger." The voice was flat and raspy; and I could tell it belonged to someone as resigned as I was in this war. Lights came on, and it was almost too much for my eyes.

As she came down the stairs, the poise and grace she had stood starkly against the tattered and spell-torn robes she wore. Her robes were supposed to be pale blue, but now were stained with the brown of drying blood.

Her ice-blue eyes met mine, and the sheer flatness of them made the floor drop out from beneath me. Those same eyes were dead as they stared at me as Bellatrix tortured me. She had just stood there and watched helplessly as her deranged sister had her way with me in front of everyone.

"Forgive me if I don't offer my condolences, Mrs. Malfoy." I said, mustering the last of my Gryffindor Bravado. If she was going to hex or kill me, I'd rather have her be angry at me than look so broken.

"That was my son's wand. That it worked well enough for you to have done that is just..." She seemed confused and disgusted. "unexpected."

I had sliced the man in half with the Sectumsempra curse. I only regret having done it so low on his abdomen that it bisected his colon. The smell was probably going to haunt me for the rest of my life.

"So what's to happen with me? Azkaban? More torture by your sister? Or is it too much to ask for a swift death?" My voice quivered as I asked. I didn't want to die, but what else could happen? You-Know-Who was on his way and angry, Harry had said.

"The Dark Lord is very angry over the loss of Potter, and not so much over my husband. In fact, he is quite... 'fascinated' with you." She said the word with a bit of disgust, but I could have sworn she had pity. "My son's wand had switched allegiances to you apparently, and with it, you have claimed
certain spoils of war."

"I had heard that wands choose their wizards, but what other spoils of war are you speaking of?"

"You defeated my husband on his own land in a duel. Pureblood tradition states that you claim all that was his."

My mind flashed through the entire ordeal. Dobby and my boys attacked, I got away from Bellatrix, and Dobby took one step to the left as the knife severed his arm and they all disappeared. I fell upon a severed arm and a wand was pressing between me and the floor, and I used it to cleave Lucius in half. The wand was mine. The duel was mine. The Manor was mine.

"Including his wife."

_Including his wife? No... that makes no sense. What would I do with a wife?_

"You cannot be serious."

"The Dark Lord follows the Old Traditions, Granger. And he is demanding reparations for his losses." Narcissa's composure seemed to be mostly out of a sense of shock; as if she defaulted into some semblance of 'polite'.

"What does that mean?"

"You are to take Lucius' place, as it were. After a fashion." Her face pinched somewhat as she said it. _Probably disgusted at the mere idea_

"I'd rather die than be a Death Eater!" I spat, knowing that I had no choice if he decided to bestow a Dark Mark upon me.

"No, you stupid Mudblood, he would never allow the likes of you take the Mark!" She snapped, and she flinched in pain. "I apologize sir, miss" she amended quickly, "oh shite. It appears that I am indeed your wife. Certain bonds I had with Lucius have apparently transferred to you. One of them is I cannot speak rude or ill towards you without pain."

"That's barbaric!" I replied, wondering what other spells bound us together.

"It is what it is; and if you refuse The Dark Lord, both of our lives are forfeit." I looked at her and realized that she had no say in any of this. She was as much a pawn as everyone else; while she was no innocent, she was never an active participant either.

"What reparations does he want?" I asked, confused at the current situation.

"Between your intelligence and magical ability and my status as a Pureblood, he desires us to produce offspring. You've seen the likes of Crabbe and Goyle's progeny, and Bellatrix is barren."

"But we're both witches! Surely he knows we can't..." _Polyjuice could be used, right? There probably was some sort of potion for this already._

"Either this is sport for the madman to watch us fail or he... it doesn't matter. I plan on surviving."

Narcissa lifted her wand, and a series of arithmantic equations appeared. It was complex yet stunning in its focus. The probability line for Lucius faded away into nothing, adjusting other nearby lines only slightly. A golden line split in two, one dropping sharply and ending while the other wavered
and rose, darkening slightly. Narcissa seemed to notice this as well before she banished the equations.

"Problem with applying binary theory is that you need to define all possible variables to get a more precise probability." I mumbled, forgetting this wasn't Hogwarts any more.

"I know Arithmancy quite well, Granger... It was how my family could afford to pay Abraxas' Dowry request." I knew that the Purebloods still had arranged marriages, but the Blacks had to hand over Galleons to ensure a wedding took place?

"I didn't know. I..." What could I say? Am I sorry for her place in life?

"Show me your arm, Granger." Her wand was out and already cleaning the wound that her sister gave me. "She and The Dark Lord aren't the same people from twenty years ago." From a hidden pocket she pulled out a small bottle of dittany, and charmed a bit of my sleeve into bandages. As she applied the dittany and wrapped my arm, a warmth began to build within me. My breathing went shallow as her bare fingertips touched the inside of my forearm and grazed my skin. Her slightest touch had overwhelmed me utterly, and if it weren't for these bars between us I would...

What in Merlin was that? I wondered as the sensation ended as she pulled away. Narcissa also seemed to be affected by it, but composed herself into a cool demeanor.

"I shall fetch you more suitable garments for when we must present ourselves to The Dark Lord." She mercifully left the lights on as she left the dungeon, careful to step around the body of wormtail. As the door upstairs opened, I could barely make out the hushed whispers.

"...think you're doing, Bella?"

"...congratulate you new husband, Cissy..."

"...not to be harmed!" A sharp cackle broke through the air.

"Such strong words from the Mudblood's Broodmare. It disgusts me to know that my sisters have stooped to whore themselves out to the filthy muggles."

One of the sisters stomped away as another came down the stairs. Disheveled black hair and bright, twisted eyes faced me. "So the Mudblood went and raised her station! Here's some friendly advice from your new sister-in-law... You'll never sully my sister nor my family's reputation!"

That really wasn't advice, I thought errantly as Bella's wand was trained on the dead body of Wormtail.

"I'd love to stay and watch, little girl, but I'll need an alibi as well as ditch this spare wand." Bellatix cackled as she ran up the stairs and warded the door as she left. That was oddly logical and thought out for her.

The corpse began to spasm its limbs to get up, as its death rattle grew louder. Harry faced this with Dumbledore! What did they do?

Something about light, right? Wish I still had that wand... I should be safe behind the bars here, right?

The corpse of Pettigrew began to shamble its way toward me, with the only thought to feed.
I was safe behind the bars here.

It couldn't get through.

*But the door upstairs was sealed and silenced. They'd never hear me scream as it begins to eat my lungs...*

The loud clang of the gate shook me out of my thoughts. It was up and grabbing the bars, trying to pull them apart to get to me. I backed away from it, my back against the far wall as it pulled at the entry but the gate's lock remained firm.

*I'm safe here I'm safe here it can't get me I'm safe here...*

The inferi couldn't feel pain; so it was able to pull with superhuman strength with that damn silver hand and wouldn't feel exhausted. And the hinge pin was starting to bend under the stress.

*So much for a magically locked gate when the hinge is the weak point...* I thought as I realized that the gate was going to give way.

I need something to scare or hold it off, and I have no magic... what could I do before I had a wand? *THINK!*

The squelch of distressed metal gave way as the door dislodged itself and the Inferi stumbled forward. Its movements were jerky and... unnatural. *Coming at me oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck...*

I panicked, and raised my hands up in front of me, remembering the bluebell flames I was able to hold onto and not scorch myself.

Cool, blue flames sprung from my hands. I used to keep this in jars so I could read by in the evenings, so I wasn't really scared of it. I hoped that the thing in front of me was, though.

"BACK OFF OR I'LL THROW THIS AT YOU!" I yelled, hoping that it understood. Rationally, I knew Inferi didn't understand language... only to feed. But screaming seemed to help.

The corpse stumbled and stopped in place, eyes wary on the flames. I had a standoff with a zombie bent on eating me, and only one of us could feel fatigue.

What once was Wormtail's silver hand reached out towards me, testing the bluebell flame. *It couldn't feel the heat anyways...*

Merlin.

It knew the fire couldn't burn him.

Lurching forward, the Inferi grabbed hold of my wrist and pulled me in. I doused it in the bluebell flames and shoved away, scrambling up the stairs to the doorway. *I can manage a wandless unlocking charm, right? This is my house now...* I thought in vain as I came up against the warded doorway.

The Inferi, still looking like a waxy version of Wormtail, stood up and looked at itself on fire. It didn't seem to care, and started to come after me.

With this door warded shut, I was as good as trapped in a dead end.

The scuffling sounds of it shambling towards me had me wonder if it could handle the concept of stairs. *Maybe I'm safe*
True to form, as the Inferi hit the bottom step, it fell forward. And started to crawl up the stairs at me.

Panicking, I screamed. I yelled. It was coming after me and there was nothing I could do.

"NARCISSA!" I screamed, hoping she would be back by now. *Never thought I'd ever be screaming for her help...*

The thunk-thunking of its knees jerkily pushing the Inferi up the stairs made me look at it, and my eyes were stuck on the empty eyes as its fingers grasped my ankle and pulled me down to the ground. The bluebell flames engulfing it made it all the more eerie, since it was on fire but not burning.

Kicking with my other heel, its head was knocked back momentarily as I crab-walked into the corner, hoping the door would open. I shut my eyes as I felt hands seize on my shoulders, tears streaming down my eyes as I expected the feeling of teeth sink into me.

"Incendio!" came Narcissa's voice from above me, her left arm wrapping me protectively. Wormtail really as on fire now, and she sent it flying back with a banishing charm, making a sickly crunch as its skull cracked on the back wall.

I scrambled to my feet, burying my head into her embrace. I could smell the flesh burning and the hair and clothes singing in the air, knowing that the only way to stop this was a complete immolation. She felt warm and safe and I held her tight, needing that sense of security.

The smell was acrid and I buried my nose into her robes to avoid breathing it in, and realized where I was. *I'm cuddling Narcissa Bloody Malfoy!*

Gathering my resolve, I pulled away, and it hurt. I wanted to be by her. *To touch her. I needed her.*

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Her eyes held concern.

"I guess we're on a first name basis." I took a step away and my ankle had a shooting pain of heat. "Ankle..." I managed before her wand was already healing it.

"The Dark Lord wishes to speak to you before dinner. For our sake, go along with whatever he says." Narcissa's voice had wavered, and I didn't like that. She should stand proud and certain, not look beaten like this.

"Why are you helping me? Healing me?"

"It's hard to explain; if you'll allow me..." Narcissa's hand reached towards me and I wanted to nuzzle it, but backed away in anger.

"I'm a smart witch, tell me." I clenched my jaw and resolved myself to not turn into jelly at her touch. *Perhaps holding onto anger helps.*

"I'm your wife. It's a modified compulsion curse. It was designed to strengthen the arranged couples, as you can imagine." She cupped my cheek, and I moaned into it. "If I were hurt, you'd blast your way through Hades if you had to."

"You didn't love Lucius?" I asked, my fingers trailing over her knuckles. *Why does this feel so good with her? And why am I asking about her love life?*

"I had a duty to fulfill. Before we were Bonded, I found him handsome enough... for a man. Odette wasn't as thrilled, considering. It came as quite a shock when Draco told his he wished to date her
daughter Pansy." Somehow the back of her knuckles were brushing against my lips, so I laid a gentle kiss upon them. This memory bothered her and I didn't like it. *Or was I jealous of Odette Parkinson?*

"See, Hermione? It's not so bad once you accept it; in fact, it will lessen once we have produced a new heir." Narcissa's eyes closed as she leaned in towards me. *She's going to snog me?*

I pulled away, disliking the feelings ripping through me. "I want my free will!" Narcissa's eyes opened sadly, and nodded.

"I know, Hermione. In fact, it makes me somewhat glad to realize that you're not going to take advantage of me. For that at least, I'm grateful." My heart sank for her. "I was taught from a young age I'd never be allowed to spend my wife with another witch, and I'd have to overlook my husband's infidelity."

"Do all of the Pureblood families do this?" I asked, trying to stay on a path of logic. Narcissa's smile was wistful.

"Not anymore; Cordelia Zabini never allowed it. You would think that husband number six might opt for the Bonding purely out of self-preservation..." a shy smile graced her lips, and I couldn't help but chuckle a little. *Being married to Narcissa might not be that bad after all.* I looked at the clothing she had for me. The look in her eyes betrayed how much she didn't want to be around Voldemort. She opened a door nearby and lead me into an opulent bathroom.

"You'll need to change, and remember: don't anger him. He's..." she swallowed her fear, "prone to outbursts. Help me protect my son and I'll be the best wife for you. To hell with what others say about us." Her eyes watered slightly as she placed the robes on the counter and turned her back to me. I couldn't tell if she was being modest or wanted to hide her tears.

Harry had decided to give Dobby's remains a muggle funeral as Bill and Fleur took in the other prisoners from Malfoy Manor. As he buried the brave house elf, he cried as he knew he couldn't get back into the Manor to rescue Hermione. His earlier row with Ronald didn't help either.

*Harry immediately knew that something went wrong when they left Malfoy Manor. His quiddich skills had his eyes tracking the dagger flying towards them just like any Golden Snitch, but he knew he was unable to stop it as they twisted into nothingness. The impact of the House Elf into Harry made him drop a wand; the abrupt shock reminded him of the car crashing into the Whomping Willow.*

*The split second of being everywhere and nowhere seemed to last for an eternity as a wail of pain hit their ears, a squickening noise of a kicked puppy and snapping bones as the boys realized that the House Elf was bleeding freely from where his other arm should have been...*

*Then there was the landing. The impact with the ground was worse than the first time he had used a Portkey; he had no control of the landing as he and Ron stumbled and tripped over the lifeless body of Dobby. The elf was pale grey; there was almost no blood left inside him as he turned to ask Hermione for some Dittany to tend to Dobby's wounds.*

*That was when they finally realized that Hermione had been left behind. The lurch in his stomach winded him, and Harry frantically tried to figure out how to go back for her.*
"Harry, we can't rescue her!" Ronald cried, his eyes redder than his hair. "If anything, they'll kill her and it will be the best thing for her!"

"How can you say that! She's like a sister to me!"

"I love her! And you know we've got a mission to complete. You two kept going without me and we're going to have to do the same without her!"

"But she was the brains of the group." Harry said sadly, reflecting on the truth of his words.

"I'm not too shabby when it comes to strategies. Look, we have to get into Bellatrix's vault at Gringotts. I'll talk to the goblin while you take care of Dobby." Harry put his anger and tears into the shovel as he dug the small grave.

Harry filled in the dirt and made a makeshift tombstone, not noticing the rest of the witches and wizards behind him. "Rest in peace, Dobby."

Bill spoke up first. "Harry, whatever Albus had you do, we can help."

Ron thought about it and nodded. "Yeah, we could use a curse-breaker, specially if we're going after horcruxes."

"Mon Dieu! Horcruxes?!" Fleur's eyes widened in shock. Bill looked to her in trepidation.

"Sweetie, what's that? I've broken through some of the toughest traps laid by King Ramses and never even heard of that."

Fleur spat it out, disgustedly. "Soul-splitting magic. Makes one unable to fully die... We're going with them; they won't be able to break into Gringott's without us."

Ron didn't seem too convinced. "I guess we can use her to flirt with a guard or two to get us in under the cloak..."

Bill rolled his eyes at his younger brother. "You've never seen an angry Veela, have you? Wings and fireballs, they have. Stuff of bloody terror."

Fleur smiled something sinister. "Why else do you think I'm with this man? He knows how to deal with me. Harry, we come with you, but you make sure Ronald doesn't get in my way."

"Why you worried about me?"

Bill chuckled at the question. "Because she'll be a loose cannon, Ronniekins. But she'll be our loose cannon. Look, people are going to get hurt if we do this. More than likely, with the dragon they have down there guarding the lower vaults like the LeStrange's, people will get killed. The goblins that used to run that place now have ministry wizards crawling all over the place... which does lead me to believe that You-Know-Who stuck something down there."

Harry seemed angered at that. "We've avoided hurting people Bill. We're not like Snape."

Fleur snapped at that. "This is war, Harry! War doesn't care if you're innocent or not, think of your parents, think of you! You, a baby, were targeted to be killed! How..."

Bill stepped between them. "Hon, calm down, he doesn't understand..."

Fleur put her hand on his arm, turning him to face her. "No Bill! We risked our lives getting him out of his Aunt's house and it was kill or be killed! Only then to plan to run away and do who knows
what! Do you have any idea how many people died there?"

Ron stood up, unsheathing his wand. "Don't blame Harry for the Death Eaters!" Bill eyed it and started to understand what was going on.

Fleur's jaw was set defiantly. "Five! And they weren't Death Eaters, they were normal wizards under the Imperius Curse!"

Harry was livid. "YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO KILL THEM!" Bill could see the traces of Dark Magic that had slowly seeped into them, causing them to be less in control.

Fleur's skin paled as her nose seemed to extend slightly. A thrum of magic shifted in the air. "They were sending hexes at my husband and myself as we were a kilometer above the ground! They were trying to kill us too!"

Ron was hiding behind his brother, his eyes locked on her hands. "Harry, she's on fire!" Bill's hand stroked the back of her neck; it was a gamble, but he was sure he could calm her down.

"Fleur, they are on our side. And have been infected with the Dark. Ronald in his right mind would be flirting with you, as awkward as that is." Bill's touch calmed her, and her features returned to human. Making a fist, the fire in her hand went out.

"That's bloody scary." Ron replied, his voice quivering.
I knew that the Malfoys were rich, but not like this. *I've inherited a house that just happens to have Voldemort as a permanent couch-crasher. Except for the deadly snake and Death Eaters, it can't be any worse than Harry's Aunt Marge...*

I was wearing horribly traditional Wizard Robes, and wasn't used to the weight of the fabric. It was crimson and gold brocade; perhaps something that was a generation old and had a distinctly Italian renaissance feel. Narcissa apologized at first, but her eyes seemed to smile as I pulled the robes over the doublet.

"You look like muggle royalty." She said, blushing slightly. I saw myself in a mirror and winced. I wasn't used to wearing men's clothes, but it was better than anything. *Oh Merlin, was this Lucius'?* The color, however, suited me well.

Narcissa seemed to know what I was thinking. "This was the first thing I could find in Draco's room... He hated the colors... and the cut... and I think he tried to set fire to them once..." her voice trailed into a muttering that was oddly comforting; it reminded me of Molly at The Burrow.

"Do you think you could get me something more modern or feminine later on?" I asked, squirming under the scratchy feel of fabric.

"Of course, I... don't know of any shops that are currently open in London. We may have to go to Paris." Narcissa frowned in apology.

I felt dumbstruck; I could just Apparate over to France and do some shopping with Malfoy Galleons... *What about muggle stores? And your parents? And Harry and Ron?* I frowned as I remembered the rest of the world and where I was needed.

"I can't wear muggle clothing in front of..." I gulped, shrinking at using his other name, "The Dark Lord, can I? I'm going to have to get used to calling him that while my best friend is on the run, all while finding a way to defeat him." Narcissa's face flashed in panic.

"He will see your thoughts, wife! Don't even think that you're going to oppose him!" Narcissa's shock struck my heart. There was unabashed horror in her eyes; she really was worried about us. *Or she's just really concerned with her own self-preservation...*

"Dumbledore wanted Harry to learn Occlumency, so naturally I read up on it and was able to keep both Professor Snape and Albus out of my head. I had no idea how nosy Legilimancers could be..." I replied off-handedly. "I'll teach you as well, if you want."

"You really plan to stop him, don't you?" Narcissa saw the resolve on my face and nodded her consent. "There's no future with this madman in power." She never had the courage of a Gryffindor, and now I understood how easy it was for people to cower and serve him. She was frightened but had no other choice but to side with me.

*She needs support and a show of strength. I have to assure her of my own ambition here.*

"I need a future where my friends and family aren't being hunted down, where nobody is enslaved, and where NOBODY is forced into arranged marriages." My voice was dry and holding back tears, and I looked away from Narcissa. I didn't want to see her reaction, even as my skin was clawing for her touch.
We left the room and went upstairs to another area of the home. It was large and opulent, but held the feeling of disrepair and decay. I could smell something rotting, and wished to not dwell on what it once was.

"Good Evening, Miss Granger." drawled the sotto voice of Professor Snape. Taking a steadying breath, I approached him like an equal.

"The Dark Lord is expecting us." I stated and moved to the door. Severus' hand held fast on the knob.

"He wishes to speak to you. Alone." His eyes darted to Narcissa and the meaning was made clear. I felt uneasy knowing that I'd be without her by my side. My hand found hers and I felt a flood of relief. I could get used to this.

Bellatrix rounded a corner, her cackling laugh scratching at the inside of my skull. "Pardon me, little prince, but I'm going to enjoy watching her squirm!" She shoved Severus out of the way, her face smashing into the doors as they remained closed for her. Frustrated, she shoved at the doors what wouldn't budge for her.

Severus crossed his arms and stared blankly at her, his wand barely visible in his hand. "Someone. Isn't. Worthy." He sang it at a low pitch, pausing just enough to agitate the unbalanced witch.

Bellatrix faced Snape, spittle flying as she was centimeters from his nose. "How dare you mock me you fucking half-blood!"

As Severus looked away in a bored fashion, I could tell he was conveying my wife a certain look. Her hand was on the small of my back, gently nudging me to go through the door. The door opened as soon as I touched the knob.

"I'll be fine, Hermione." Narcissa assured me, fidgeting as she sat nearby. I nodded to her, and went through the doorway.

This was a ballroom. The Malfoys... no, I... have a bloody ballroom! On a throne-like chair sat Voldemort, with his pet snake curled around the back of the chair. It was contrived, yet still conveyed the feeling of power, even as we were alone in the room.

Voldemort remained seated, but gestured where I should grovel before him. I stood, keeping a neutral face as my pulse raced. It actually made him smile. His alabaster skin looked like it was pulled too tight over bone, and the lack of a nose was unnerving. I knew enough to avoid looking directly at his eyes.

"He has no fucking nose..."

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"Welcome to Malfoy Manor. Now, where is Harry Potter?"

I took a breath, and tried to ignore the singular missing feature on his face. He's no longer human, he has no nose, he came back wrong! A cold, crawling sensation under my skin ran up my spine and down my arms. My vision tunneled onto him only; I was defenseless and wandless in front of Voldemort... but he wasn't attacking me. I kept my head for a moment and replied logically. I could lie to him if it sounded true, right?

"I won't insult your intelligence with lies. Ronald was known for his chess strategies; he will not take Harry anywhere that I know of now since I've been obviously captured and would be either tortured or forced to drink Veritaserum."

His eyes narrowed, but nodded. "The Blood Traitor does have a good mind for that; I recall him from Quirrell's classes. Did well with that chess game, too." Voldemort looked off into the distance,
obviously recollecting the intelligence he gathered when he was at Hogwarts my first year. 

Merlin, he was at Hogwarts and was gathering first-hand knowledge of us back then! The pause in the conversation was considerably eerie and I wanted any distraction from Nagini's tongue forking out towards me. 

"If I am not mistaken, I believe this is now Granger Manor." I gave a polite bow, my voice full of sarcasm. "My Lord." 

"Insolent little girl." He cooed, his smile stretching awkwardly across his face. My eyes couldn't help but look. ohgodohgod no nose... I took a breath and tried to hold back my panic. "But then again, that was you, escaping from Nagini on Christmas with Harry Potter in your arms, wasn't it? Very risky, girl, to disapparate as you jumped out that window. You've got quite a bit of talent in you." 

Voldemort got up from his throne and approached me, his hand trailing through my curls as he sniffed me. _Merlin's bollocks, he's... checking me out._ My stomach heaved at the thought. "Shame to let all this go to waste, so why not put you out to stud?" I swallowed the bile rising in my throat. _Maybe if I anger him enough he'll just kill me quickly..._. 

"So you're making an exception for Mudbloods like me? Or just for the Half-Bloods I can make, Riddle?" 

As I clawed my fingernails into my palm, the panic evaporated, alerting me that there was a subtle paranoia curse active in the room. 

"Ah, of course, this is your Manor now. And, since you deprived me of a trusted lieutenant..." _He was going to ignore my barbs... interesting._ 

"You expect me to serve in his place? You know I won't." I replied defiantly. 

"I expect you to do your duty and help me reconstitute my numbers. Or Narcissa and Draco will die." 

"Why do you think that would persuade me? You must know how much I loathe the amazing bouncing ferret." His eyes met mine and I pictured myself in a hot-air balloon, high above where Voldemort was, ransacking the library of books and memories I had. In my mind's eye, my arms held a journal that had been the only record of the Horcruxes. Pleased that he could ransack my mind, he pulled out, none the wiser. _Best Legilimancer my foot, I thought, perhaps he is too emotional to penetrate my mind right now..._. 

"You're still a 'good' person, 'Mister Granger'. Besides, you're wandless and trapped in your own home. Comply, and you'll have your freedom back. After a fashion." He turned away from me, and I felt free. I relaxed my fist, and felt blood flow back into my palm. 

He spun in place, and I knew that I was hit with body-bind hex. I was frozen and could feel his cold fingers as he pried my right arm up. "Oh, and I have a present for you, Granger." The tip of his wand touched my flesh at the wrist, and a fiery snake, black as night, coiled around my wrist like an Ouroboros. A spike of heat went through my arm and settled into my heart. _He fucking marked me!_. 

"Now, go enjoy Misses Granger and remember, you're alive only because I will it." 

My eyes opened and I found myself on my back, nose-to-nose with Professor Snape. He seemed
unimpressed as he stood, nodding to someone behind me.

"I told you she's fine, Narcissa. Her body went into a mild shock from getting branded by The Dark Lord. It appears that her brand is a modified Unbreakable Vow, tied to her life essence." Snape replied, stepping back as Narcissa took his place and knelt by me. It was then that I realized I was on some sort of fainting couch, complete with a pillow under my head and a thin throw over me. She took my hand and I couldn't help but see the stark relief in her eyes. How broken are you, Cissy?

"Hermione, you're okay! The Dark Lord literally banished you from his room, I barely had time to stop your momentum and put you down somewhere..." She held a look that shouldn't have to ever be in her eyes. The Malfoys are strong people, and deserve better than this...

"I'm fine... I..." If I died, Voldemort would kill her too. My eyes went down to my right wrist. The snake was there, eating its own tail. "Oh god that happened..." My fingers scratched at it, hoping it would come off. I hoped in vain that this was all just a bad dream that I'd wake up from, back in the tent with Harry and Ron. fuck fuck fuck I'm branded and he can just pull the plug on me...

The mark was real. My vision wavered, and my eyes started to sting. I can't do this, I can't bloody cry in front of the Death Eaters...

Narcissa conjured a soft cloth and dabbed my eyes dry. Her eyes held tired concern as her hands shook nervously.

"Did he make any requests of you? Demand anything? Whatever it is, I'll help you..." Narcissa rambled, her hair looking disheveled. Goodness, she's stressed to the breaking point... Using my left hand, I tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear. A flash of a smile betrayed the barest hint of lines at her eyes, and I couldn't help but wonder if I didn't truly disgust her like I thought I had.

"Don't smother your... spouse. I daresay she'd like some time to recompose herself and peruse her library." Snape replied dryly. I have a library? That will have to wait... My mind picked apart Professor Snape's hesitance at the word 'spouse', and I couldn't think of any homosexual relationships in Pureblood society. Were they even allowed, or was it just not talked about? I was used to being a social pariah, but could the Malfoys handle it too?

"Narcissa, I... I realize we're in an unwanted arrangement, but trust me. I don't want to see anything bad happen to you or Draco... Oh Merlin, where is he? Does he know about this?" I asked, wondering why I had not seen him yet.

"He does. He's putting Lucius' body in the catacombs; there won't be a funeral for him." Narcissa's voice lacked empathy, and it made me wonder what kind of family I inherited. What kind of man was he?

Severus' voice stopped my mind from wondering. "If you are worried that Draco will seek some sort of vengeance, Granger, he's getting it now by desecrating his father's remains. The scars and bruises you've suffered by Bellatrix pale in comparison to what his wife and son endured for the past sixteen years."

My eyes met his, knowing he would try to peek into my mind. I can stop you, Severus.

"It appears you have mastered Occlumency, Misses Granger. Were you ever able to impart that knowledge to Mister Potter?" I shook my head.

"He was too busy abusing your name and reputation for murdering Albus. But then again, the Headmaster was already dying, wasn't he?" Narcissa's eyes widened in surprise. "You did nothing
more than end Albus' suffering in the most painless manner possible. And secured your position among the Death Eaters. Which begs me to ask what side you are truly on?" I looked at him, and found myself blocked.

"I am a Slytherin; I'm on my own side. Just like Narcissa. Draco is also looking to find a new wand for himself, since his has now changed fealty to you." Severus nodded a meaningful glance to Narcissa and left via the fireplace.

"Don't mind Severus, he's a complicated person. He means well, even if he's never had anyone since... it's not my place to say. But he does care for the well-being of myself and Draco. And now, you too."

I sat up, and instantly felt lightheaded. "How long was I out for?" I asked.

"Not even a full hour, but at least you missed dinner. It's awfully tense there, particularly when it's Nagini's turn to feed. Let me to take you to your bedroom and have a house-elf bring you dinner. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow." I turned to look at her, confused.

"What's going on tomorrow?" Narcissa smiled softly, handing me a wand that wasn't mine. But as my hand closed around it, I knew, however, that it was. _This is the wand I killed Lucius with..._

"We get your name off of the 'Undesirable' list, and we join our accounts at Gringott's. The Dark Lord has lifted your house arrest and returning your wand to you."

"I'm to be allowed to live openly as a Muggle-born?" I asked, bewildered. Narcissa nodded happily.

"After a fashion, yes. There are too many Muggle-borns and not enough Purebloods and Half-Bloods for his ideal society, so he wants an example of..." Her face was carefully neutral, "well, how it won't be so bad once you learn your place."

"How could you follow a man like that? You have to know I'm going to oppose this..."

"The first time he took power, there had been a spike in Squib births. Our way of life had been fading with the influx of Muggle-borns, but Purebloods lost the majority here in the Wizarding World. We all were scared about losing our place in society, and what the future would be with muggles in charge. It wasn't too long ago that our culture had supposed urban legends from the Burning Times when Religious Muggles would come and snatch our babies away to kill them. Hermione, don't oppose him outright; be a Slytherin and work from inside."

The House-elf had delivered the food and Narcissa thanked her kindly. It was a far better way of treatment than I had ever seen anyone else treat one.

"You're nice to your elf. Well, nicer than Sirius treated Kreacher..." I muttered, grateful for the food.

"You met my cousin? Of course, after he escaped from Azkaban he would have gone back to..." she seemed to gag on words, and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Fidelius Charm, along with a tongue-tying hex?" I nodded.

"I forgot you two were related. But he was a good man, and cared for his godson Harry. Never really said anything about you; just that your sister is crazy and his mother's portrait could use a silencing charm." I smiled at the good memory.

Narcissa chuckled softly. _My god, what I'd give to keep you happy... "My aunt always did have a way with words when in a temper."_
I finished the food before me and set the plate on the nightstand. "I should change into something suitable for sleeping... this wasn't the room you and Lucius stayed in, is it?" I grew stiff at the thought of what was supposed to happen between us. *Could I make love to this woman? Would I be satisfactory to her?*

I mentally shoved those thoughts out of my head. *You're straight; quit looking at this like a bloody assignment to get full marks on.*

"Goodness no. That would be... no. This is a guest bedroom. I'm going to burn everything in that room to ash, perhaps turn it into a sewing room. It needs to contain something much more positive than the past." Narcissa got up and disrobed before me, and I averted my eyes in shock. *No shame there, it seems.* When I snuck a glance, she had on a midnight blue silk sleeping gown that left no curves to the imagination. My body tightened at the sight of her, and I knew my answer. *I could definitely make love to her.*

Narcissa pulled out a similar sleeping gown, black and lacy, and handed it to me. *She expected me to strip of front of her? To be exposed, and she'd see every flaw I have?* My mind thought of the word carved into my left forearm and I withered at her glance. *I can charm this to fit you better, if you want.* Her voice held trepidation.

"Sorry, this is just... I'm still having to adjust. Thank you, I'll see you in the morning..." I went to the door to open it for her, an uncomfortable smile awkwardly fitting my face. Narcissa's nervous exasperation could be heard in her voice.

"Hermione, could you at least share a bed with me? I... can't sleep otherwise. Never could when Lucius was in Azkaban or was off on a mission for The Dark Lord..." I nodded, realizing that this is the least I could do. *Will I be able to sleep at all tonight?*

"Yes, I suppose. Just don't try anything with me tonight; I'm really tired and.."

Narcissa cut me off, reassuringly. "Of course, I can fight the compulsion..."

*No you can't! I barely can, and I don't like this!*

"Narcissa, how can you be so okay with this?! With me, a muggle-born witch! I killed your husband!" *Hold on - is she bisexual?*

"War changes people, Hermione. And from what I've seen, never for the better. And yet you're still the strong, resourceful woman I used to be, and I can't help but admire that. I saw it still bother you when you noticed the house elves. I heard about that spew thing."

*She heard about S.P.E.W.? *"You did?"

"Between Draco and my contact on the Daily Prophet, you've been quite the girl." Narcissa blushed somewhat. "With a good sucker-punch."

Oh. *She knows all about that? *"Have you been tracking me?" Why would the Malfoys keep tabs on me? Did this start because I was Harry's friend, or because I punched her son?

Narcissa was shocked at the insinuation. "Oh of course not! I... may have a certain mosquito of a woman wrapped around my finger. It's done wonders for my arithmantic predictions, and kept my evenings from being too dull. When I had figured out you had trapped her in a jar, I was both furious and impressed."
Wrapped around her finger? That's not a bad way to influence the news, I suppose. She must be used to seducing women for what she wants... I was impressed with the possibilities.

"So you've had pull over the Daily Prophet just as Lucius had it in the Ministry of Magic."

Narcissa had a Mona Lisa Smile, the knowing look in her eye was deliciously devious. "Didn't you wonder why my family's name seemed above reproach for so long?"

I slipped under the covers, realizing how long it has been since I slept in an actual bed. "I thought that was all Malfoy Money."

She also got in bed, and my pulse was racing. It's okay, she's just sharing the same bed as you, nothing big... "Money only buys silence and information. True Loyalty comes from how you're seen and how you treat people. Lucius preferred to be feared over loved. I'm the opposite, and have worked hard at being respected and, only when needed, feared. It didn't hurt having Lucius to back up my infrequent threats, either."

_Bugger, not only am I married to a socialite, but a Slytherin one in the middle of a war._

"So now that I'm your wife, people may see us as potentially weak and test us? Merlin, how many witches and wizards want to see you dead? And I'm Undesirable #2 on top of that." Tossing my head onto the pillow, I was surprised at how soft yet firm the pillow was. Narcissa was on her side, facing me, and my eyes traced down the line and I was staring at her cleavage before I could stop myself.

Snap out of it, Granger.

"Many more will be glad to know that you've disposed of Lucius, to be honest. As for any threats towards us, I look forward to them underestimating us. Besides, that whole 'undesirable' status will go away once we clear everything up at the Ministry tomorrow."

"But I'm still wanted for the Muggleborn Registration by that pink toad Umbridge!"

"Leading Delores into a herd of angry Centaurs is a lovely vacation compared to what I've threatened to do to her."

"I take it you don't like her?"

"I loathe her spinelessness. She has no conviction behind her ambition; she was a horrible Slytherin."

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Sleeping in a guest room what was once Malfoy Manor should have been better than a smelly tent shared with two teenage boys, but I only fell asleep after tossing and turning for an hour. I had been left very frustrated and unsure of what to do about it; I didn't even have a sleeping drought to take.

But when I woke the next morning, I was incredibly refreshed. I hadn't woken up to any strange sounds, nor an alarm reminding me it was time to get some pre-breakfast reading in... I woke up to a heavenly smell.

Warm, fragrant coffee.

"Two cups? Thank you, now go away." Narcissa's muffled voice made me bolt upright in bed. _She spent the night here? _The House-elf padded away silently as my pulse hammered away in shock.

She must have come back to the bed sometime after I fell asleep. Narcissa looked the exact opposite
of refined, face down in the pillow under the sheets. I couldn't help but smile at the irony. *Not a morning person, huh?* I thought as I reached over her for the cup of coffee and sipped it.

It was a perfect breakfast blend. *Don't I have a library around here to rifle through?* I smiled slightly at the thought of advanced magical texts lying about. I could still do a lot of good here in the war, now that I have this resource.

Putting the coffee cup back down on the nightstand, I noticed dark wet spots on the white pillowcase. *She came back to bed and cried?* It tugged at me to see her like that, so I instinctively did what my mother used to do in order to comfort me; I stroked her back in a gentle petting fashion.

"Narcissa, are you okay? Why were you crying?" I changed my petting into slow circles, and the slow rise and fall of her breath shuddered as she sobbed silently.

"I lost my husband, I really couldn't sleep, and I was throwing myself at you like a randy schoolgirl. I tried to stay away last night, but... I couldn't. I came to bed out of sheer exhaustion, and you seemed able to sleep just fine."

"Narcissa, you didn't have to leave. I..." I trailed off, slowing the hand rubbing her back.

*I wanted you to stay.*

*I wanted you to kiss me.*

*I can't admit that out loud.*

"You what?" She responded, turning her head away from me.

"I don't know what to say. Yesterday you seemed to be taking all of this pretty well." I quit stroking her back and instead ran my fingers through her hair. Her golden locks were the softest thing I had ever had between my fingertips and I couldn't help but keep playing with it.

"Shock." She said simply, "It all happened so fast; my mind didn't have time to catch up with everything." I nodded, understanding what she meant by that. Too much has happened too quickly.

"Where did you go last night?" I asked, scared for her to roam the house alone while Nagini had free reign.

"I needed to..." Narcissa's head turned and sheepish eyes looked at me, sighing resignedly. "Hermione, I was quite frustrated last night." I wondered where she would go as my fingers played with her curls.

*oh... she was frustrated...*

I pulled my hand away, realizing I was only making things worse between us. "I see. Did you sleep well?"

She sat up and sipped the coffee, smiling gently. "Once I gave in and came back to bed, yes. Thank you."

I got up and rifled through the closet, partly to get away from the awkward moment, and partly hoping to find something suitably feminine. "I didn't do anything..." I replied, wondering what she was thanking me for.

"You held me last night. It was nice."
"I did what?"

"Narcissa, I fell asleep pretty quickly..." Did I somehow do that while I was sleeping?"

"Oh." She took a long sip from her cup, stalling as she tried to find the right words. Oh, bugger... I could see her face closing down from expressing any emotion; this apparently was a Slytherin thing.

"It's okay, Cissy. I... don't mind." Liar. "I'm sure you'd do the same for me."

"Herpy, a moment please?" Narcissa said, and a House Elf popped into the room. I jumped in surprise. "Please enter through the door so as not to surprise Hermione, okay? Also, could you fetch my emerald robes for her?"

The elf nodded, and I felt a wave of relief. "No more ugly wizard robes?" I asked, hoping the subject was changed.

"The Dark Lord wishes to see you in the worst light possible; to be a shining example of the lowly, out-of-place, 'Mudblood'. It's safer to play into his delusions. But to the rest of the Wizarding World, you will be clothed in the best robes and jewelry befitting my wife."

I couldn't tell if she was helping me oppose and defeat Voldemort, or just appease him so we can all survive. I nodded my thanks, and went to the bathroom for my morning ablutions.

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When I got out of the shower, I found a set of deep green brocade robes laid out on the bed, with a note from Narcissa.

I had these tactical robes designed specially for me in this war by the Weasleys. (And before you ask, no, they didn't realize it was for me in particular, I just added my specifications and measurements to the Ministry's large order.) Woven into the fabric are multiple shield charms, as well as a few hidden pockets for potions as well as a concealment charm. It's a one time only thing, activated if you pull off the bottom button. I hope they fit you well enough. -Cissy

Tactical Robes? I recognized the spelled cloth, and slipped a hand inside an inner pocket. It was enlarged as I had expected, finding healing potions in one pocket and decoy detonators in the other. Harry is seriously outclassed if this is what he's up against.

Shrugging on the robes, they felt substantial without being too heavy. I saw myself in the mirror; when had I grown into an adult? I experimented with a few different makeup charms until I settled on an understated complexion charm, adding just a brush of color to my lips. Would Narcissa like this?

Rather than try and deal with my hair, I spelled it into a modified up-do, allowing a few curls to fall and frame my face. This will have to do. I thought resignedly as I slipped the wand into a narrow wand holster built into the left sleeve.

Breakfast was, luckily, a small affair. The breakfast nook was just by the kitchen, where it seemed that the House Elves had full control over. As soon as I sat down at the table, I was presented with orange juice, water, and a selection of tea choices. I took the glass of juice and nodded my thanks. I'm never going to get used to being served by House Elves...

I had a plate of poached eggs and ham placed before me, surprised that my food was ready so soon.

"I took the liberty to order breakfast for you, dear." Narcissa said politely as she finished her tea. Her
eyes raked over me, a small smile on her lips as she took me in. *She must like me in this color.* I blushed at her smile, focusing on my breakfast. Draco seemed uncomfortable in his seat as he watched the interaction between us.

"Am I expected to call you stepfather, Granger?" He asked uncertainly.

"Of course not, son. Just call her... oh dear. 'Stepmother' sounds equally awkward, doesn't it?" Narcissa replied.

"Call me Hermione and I'll call you Draco. Settled?" Draco took a moment, and nodded once.

"You know Hermione, same-sex relationships simply aren't accepted in Pureblood society. You're going to be even more of a pariah than you were before." Draco said it as a statement of fact, almost pitifully.

"Then society is going to have to change." I said bluntly, "I may not have chosen this marriage, but I won't go around hanging my head in shame."

Even Draco seemed to smile proudly at me.

We apparated into the ministry, and Narcissa released my hand as the guards had their wands raised at us. She didn't raise her wand in defense but somehow radiated enough authority to keep the guards at bay.

"It appears that the Ministry has forgotten their manners in lieu for paranoia." Narcissa said coolly, walking forward and beckoning me to follow her. I took a hurried pace and stayed abreast of her.

"Mrs. Malfoy... that's Undesirable #2! Are you taking her down to be registered?" One of the guards asked, even as they moved out of our way.

She was not about to let them stop her, was she?

"Mrs. Malfoy... that's Undesirable #2! Are you taking her down to be registered?" One of the guards asked, even as they moved out of our way. *She was not about to let them stop her, was she?*

"In a matter of speaking, yes. She defeated Lucius Malfoy in a duel yesterday and is claiming the Rite of Succession. I am Narcissa Granger now."

The guards murmured in shock. "She bested Lucius?"

"You have to do more than just win the duel..."

"She killed the Malfoy patriarch?" *That's right, Hermione. You're going to be known as a murderer, even if it were in self defense.*

I stood straighter, understanding that I had to out-Pureblood the Purebloods. "I did indeed." I looked to Narcissa. "Come, wife." She smiled slightly as she fell into step.

As we got to the lifts, there was a flash of light as a photograph was taken. *This is going to be a regular occurrence now, won't it?*

"Cissy, darling, tell me it isn't true..." came the venomously saccharine voice from behind the photographer. It sounded suggestively seductive, and I realized who it was. *Rita Skeeter.* The blonde hair, the quick-quotes quill hovering beside her... and her jaw dropped in surprise.

"Rita, it's a pleasure to see you." Narcissa replied, and I could hear the lie in her voice. She used her wand-tip to activate the lift doors, implying a tight schedule. "We must have tea sometime and catch up on recent events." Putting her wand away, she placed her wand-hand in the crook of my left
elbow, allowing me to escort her away. I think she's used to being the supportive wife, so I guess I have to play the confident husband...

Her eyes widened in surprise as the quill scratched eagerly on its scroll. I looked neutral with a practiced smile as we went into the lift and closed the gate. No matter what I say, I know she'll twist it against me... I thought as I stayed silent.

"I shall owl you later, Rita. I daresay others will be... bugging us... for details." Narcissa hit a button for a certain floor and breathed a sigh of relief once we moved out of her sight. Apparently Rita didn't know that Narcissa knew...

"Thank you for letting me handle her, Hermione." She said, taking my hand into hers and clasping it reassuringly. I nodded my agreement as warmth spread through my chest. Merlin, why does this feel so good? Didn't I always expect to feel this way holding a boy's hand?

"Can you keep her," I swallowed at the thought, "...under your control? I know The Prophet does You-Know-Who's bidding, but you know she's got a vendetta against me." I asked, wondering what she was angling for.

"The number of sources she has, as well as her uncanny ability to slip into restricted areas? Better to keep her on my side." I frowned at that, realizing what it may have entailed.

"You've shagged her? And plan to again in the future?" I asked, curious as to why I felt jealous while in this sham marriage.

"It was a means to an end. Besides, Lucius had his own mistresses and didn't care what I did with another witch..." Narcissa said flippantly, pausing when she realized what she had said. "Oh. If you want to take a discrete wizard as a lover, I won't make a fuss..."

I stared at her, confused and upset at her assumption. "Narcissa, do you find me repulsive?" Merlin I hope not, because regardless of the Compulsion, I'd like to be seen as attractive and desirable...

"No, Hermione, it's not you, I just assumed that you preferred men..." Does she have to dismiss me so quickly?

"I believe I can be more than an adequate lover for you!" I retorted stubbornly. Narcissa looked at me curious.

"You wish that? I had thought you'd only want to do the minimum to satisfy the Compulsion and to have an offspring..." She muttered, looking at me in a whole new way.

"I may not have chosen to marry you, but I'm not about to see you cavorting with other women only to be given permission to cheat on my own wife!" I almost crossed my arms petulantly.

"I see. Are we negotiating the terms of our... physical intimacies? Slytherin's Snake, I didn't even know if you fancied women, let alone found me attractive."

I was dumbstruck. Do I fancy her? Is that why I'm jealous of her flirting with other women? It was like I couldn't decide how I felt about her, or if my attraction to her was simply from the Compulsion. But that would lessen once we consummate this bonding, right? But then what?

"I suppose you are... attractive enough and both intelligent and challenging enough for me as a partner. Merlin knows what I ever saw in Ronald."

Narcissa's face went from confused to comical. "The youngest Weasley boy? My, you could do..."
better. I recall you dancing with the Bulgarian Quidditch Athlete at the Yule Ball in the paper! No,
you'd need someone with a bit more grace, who could match your intellect and seduce you in a
subtle way, rather than resort to the tried and true 'bludger' approach." Her eyes, however, shone
slightly as she realized how I described her. I glanced away, trying to keep myself from
blushing. *Would this be happening if not for this damn Compulsion? No. Can I do anything to stop
it? No. Maybe I should learn to make the best out of it...*

The lift halted, and I hadn't noticed what floor we were on. Level three. As the door opened, a
Wizard entered the lift with us. He wore the robes of a Hit Wizard, and looked familiar to me.

"Good Morning, Lady Malfoy." He nodded nervously. As he saw me, his wand was already out and
trained on me. Narcissa stepped in front of me protectively as I fumbled out my own wand. *I really
need to stay on my guard here.*

"Arnie, it's okay. She's with me..." She said reassuringly, "And she won't cause any trouble."

"She's Undesirable #2, and I recall seeing her in 1994, at the World Cup, where the Dark Mark was
seen. I was only an Obliviator then, but I never forget a face." His voice was concerned yet cautious.

"I'm having her name and blood status cleared up. I am her wife now." Narcissa said coolly.

"You are *her* wife? What happened to Lucius?" He asked, lowering his wand. I took Narcissa's hand
in my own and stepped around her.

"I happened to Lucius." I said, holding his gaze. He took a moment and turned away from us.

"Couldn't happen to a nicer bloke. He always was too slippery to stay in Azkaban." He replied as the
lift continued its way down.

"Agreed." I said simply as I heard Narcissa humming to herself. The lift stopped, and the Hit Wizard
exited, leaving us both alone again. She took my hand in hers and the calming effect took over.

"Is it always going to be like this?" I asked, worried I'd have to always be on guard. Narcissa shook
her head, smirking. There was a feeling of protection and warmth between our hands, and I wasn't
ready to let go. Her humming continued and the tune perked up my senses as I quietly sang along.

"I don't need to fight... To prove I'm right... I don't need to be forgiven..." Narcissa's face erupted
into a shy smile and blushed as she realized I heard her.

"Severus got me into The Who back at Hogwarts. I was a bit of a rebel back then with my muggle
record player."

We exchanged a glance and, in the privacy of the lift, we sang the next stanza together.

"Don't cry... Don't raise your eye... It's only teenage wasteland..." I had a big grin on my face as the
lift stopped and the disembodied voice identified we were on the fifth level. We recomposed our
faces to look assured yet neutral, and Narcissa escorted me out of the lift.

"Knowing Rita and The Dark Lord, this will be front page news on the Daily Prophet." Narcissa's
fingers traced my jaw, and I lifted my chin to meet her eyes. *Such a perfect shade of blue...* I thought
as I smiled slightly.

"And if anyone raises a wand towards my wife, I will fight for you." Her face seemed to grow larger
in my sight as her eyes closed.
Her head tilted slightly to the right, and my eyes shut instinctively. *She's going to kiss me!* Soft lips touched mine, and my heart thumped wildly in my chest. *This was so much better than Viktor.*

I was filled with excitement and trepidation at the same time, wondering how I should kiss her back. Her lips were soft, and slightly warm. I wanted more as the Compulsion urged me on. Instead, she pulled away before I could react, leaving me breathless and wanting. *How much of that was just technique?*

A coiled tension seemed to leave my body that I hadn't noticed was there. I had to blink a few times to reset myself as the words "INTERNATIONAL MAGICAL OFFICE OF LAW" was etched onto the glass door.

"Time to register our marriage, Hermione." Narcissa said, seemingly chipper and with a spring in her step.

I couldn't help but feel the same as I followed her.

There was a waiting room with scared witches and wizards, all of them filling out scrolls concerning either emigration or confirming their blood status. *Why are they here doing paperwork? Don't they know who's running the Ministry now?*

The crowded waiting room as the clerk was dealing with paperwork was stuffy and a tension filled the air, particularly once they spotted Lucius' wife among them. As I checked over the stack of forms for marriage registration, Narcissa cut through the crowd lined up to the frazzled clerk at the desk. *Doesn't she see there's a queue?*

"Hello, I need to register my recent change in marital status." Narcissa said gently, quietly asserting herself for the clerk's attention.

"Lady Malfoy, I'm quite busy at the moment, if you would please wait your turn..." the witch apologized, gesturing to the others who wanted her attention.

The door behind her opened, and a crisp yet flat voice cut through the din. "Evelyn, I'll take care of this case... personally." As his eyes met mine, my right wrist ached with a dull thud. *Is he under the Imperius Curse?*

The desk clerk smiled in a happy yet overstressed manner. "Thank you, Minister! I'll get through the rest of these applicants immediately..."

Narcissa bowed her head towards the Minister, a bit more than she should have. *This isn't just an Imperius but a full-out possession...*

"Minister Thicknese, what a welcome surprise to see you here." She said, extending her hand, beckoning me to join her by her side. I naturally complied, feeling eerie as his eyes met mine.

"Ah, the Grangers are here! I take it you two are here to register your new marriage? Congratulations to you both!" It was definitely The Dark Lord in control of the wizard before us, and gloating about our situation. "I wish you many powerful children in this marriage."

"Thank you, Minister," I replied, effecting a polite smile. "Is there any paperwork that we must complete here, or simply leave a statement with a witness?"

The Minister looked affronted at the mere fact that I spoke up to him, and Narcissa stepped in, apologizing. "Forgive me, Minister, my wife and I have a busy day ahead of us. We are eager to get through our day's agenda and be back at our home to celebrate our union."
The look on his face was devoid of human emotion. "You have yet to consummate this?" My god, it would look more natural if his pupils were slits!

I shook my head, realizing the reach that this madman had. He could be inside anyone at any time, and virtually undetectable.

"Off you go, then. I shall not stand in the way of... love."
Gringott's Under New Management

Chapter Notes

Personal Note: This story will be hitting GLBT issues as well as the discrimination and public outcry of fighting for the civil right of being seen as equal. It's femmeslash, so I think you'd get that. My amazing wife (and partner for almost 10 years) said I should warn you that you'll come across some mild homophobia in this story as a part of the plot, so you should be warned. (And yes, I'm a lesbian.)

There is also a poly triad angle that comes in later, but you can see that in the story notes.

Leaving the Ministry for Gringotts was much easier, since there was a secure floo connection that Narcissa took us through.

"Security will still be pretty high there, but at least this way we can avoid the security arches and the probity-probes..." Narcissa sighed as she took me by hand through the floo.

Green flames danced around me as I smirked and did my best impression of the wicked witch from *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Hermione? You're not melting..." Narcissa looked at me, incredulous.

"Sorry, it's a muggle thing." I replied, shrugging it off. Though now I can see why purebloods might feel menaced by Muggles.

We twisted through the network and landed in the massive fireplace in the lobby of Gringotts. Ministry wizards there saw us and waved a sneakoscope over us, which buzzed lightly.

*Can it tell if I have hidden pockets?* I wondered as the guard shook the device and banged it on the wall.

"Bloody defective thing..." he mumbled, switching it out for a smaller, sleeker sneakoscope.

"Is there a problem?" Narcissa asked crisply, keeping me behind her.

"Standard procedure for those coming straight from the Ministry..." The guard replied, not looking up. The new sneakoscope had the Weasley logo on it, and made a quiet 'ding' as it passed over us. *Those brilliant twins...*

"You're fine, Miss... Lady Malfoy!" He stood up straighter, his eyes flashing nervous fear. "I didn't know. Do you need to see your vault? I'll fetch you a goblin attendant..."

Narcissa smiled, using her charm to hold him. "Actually... Pardon me, but what is your name?"

"Brady, Lady Malfoy. Quarter-blood, had it confirmed by Miss Umbridge herself..." He was shaking, as if he wanted to do anything to make himself disappear. Narcissa gasped slightly in realization, but quickly recomposed herself.

"Very good. However, I will need to see a bank manager regarding a change-over of the Malfoy
assets. I am no longer married to Lucius; I am Granger now."

I smiled sweetly at that, strangely proud at the confidence in her voice. He nodded, confused yet relieved, and walked away. It was then that I noticed the strange similarities of the wizard security uniforms here and the ones worn at the height of Nazi Germany. Just change the khaki for a light blue and it looks almost innocent. I could have sworn Umbridge had a hand in this.

"Who is he, Narcissa?" I asked, unsure if I wanted to know what had happened.

"Lucius and a few other Death Eaters found it prudent to target wealthy families that didn't keep in-depth ancestry records and had them declared as having insufficient blood status in order to seize their accounts. His mud... muggle-born wife was independently wealthy until recently." She bit her lip as her eyebrows knitted together in concern.

"What do you mean, 'was independently wealthy'?" A shiver went through me; how much have I inherited through unlawful means? Am I responsible to make reparations? Will I have to go to Azkaban for his crimes?

Narcissa shook her head slightly. "You don't want to know." The tone in her voice was utterly grave. That it was being said so flatly unnerved me.

"Yes I do. How much of our wealth is drenched in blood?" I felt fury take hold as if it were tangible, and it wanted to be unleashed at... something. Is this a remnant of Dark Magic from the locket, or something new from my wrist? Could people be horcruxes?

"She was... one of the first victims when the Dark Revels restarted. Lucius bragged about that particular sexual conquest; the 'Mudblood Millionaire'. She's dead now." She took a deep breath, "Hermione, what happened to you family?"

I shook my head defiantly. "They are safe. No way am I going to put them at risk in this war." No way am I going to trust her with that knowledge.

"They won't come back, look for their daughter?... I envy that you were able to do that."

I clenched my jaw and pressed my lips together; I didn't want to cry here. "They don't know I ever existed." My eyes watered as a tear rolled down my cheek. Damn it!

"Hermione, I didn't know!" Narcissa apologized, pulling me to face her directly. I didn't want her to see me like this; she was the enemy, I was forced to be married to her, and my body betrays me with false desire. This attraction is a lie, forged by murder; all I want is my own free will!

And yet, this emptiness I felt resonated with her. Both of us were alone and frightened for ourselves and our loved ones. We were alone, yet we had each other. I could at least sympathize with that. She's only been trying to make the best of this situation for both of us...

Her arms went around me in support, as her lips brushed my forehead in a sign of protection. It was nice, and my body responded to this selfless act by hugging her back. Her floral scent felt like a boon to my soul, and I knew I was doing the same for her.

Moisture was on my forehead and I realized she was crying as well.

"I hope to meet your parents once this war is over, Hermione." Narcissa whispered into my ear, making me want to hold her all the more tighter.

I sniffled at that, wondering how my parents would react to me being married to a witch their
Narcissa pulled away from me, and pulled out a tissue for each of us to dab at our eyes. I thanked her as I got myself to stop crying, and my mind seemed to stumble upon something.

"Narcissa, how come when you held me just now, the Compulsion wasn't making me want to rip your robes off and have you on the nearest table?" I asked, curious as to why I was painting such a vivid picture in my imagination. *Oh yes, I'd definitely have her pinned down... No, wait, I'm straight. I like boys...*

"The Compulsion isn't to make us simply hump like nifflers and breed... it's to create lasting relationships between people." Narcissa's hand cupped my cheek as the horror mentally set in. *It won't just 'go away' one day.*

"So this won't go away once we're pregnant?" I asked, resignedly.

"I never said it would go away, Hermione, just lessen." *Oh Circe! I'm going to be stuck desiring her like this forever? But I always thought I'd find a decent man after this war...*

"But you and Lucius... I mean, that was over, right?" Oh god, what if she did still love him now, and she's having to swallow her pride to be with me? *Does she still care about him even after I cut him in half?*

"My disgust for that man began a long time ago, and as you know anger can drown the feelings of the Compulsion. It will also lessen in most events of self-preservation. May I show you? Don't fight it or get angry this time, okay?" Her fingers barely touched the bottom of my chin, asking for compliance. It was a gentle yet reassuring gesture.

I tilted my chin up slightly, puzzled at her words. "What are you going..."

I was cut off by her lips on mine, and I was flooded with desire. Part of it was the magic, but another part was simply... her. *How could lips be soft, gentle, and firm all at once?* I mused as I found my own lips parting and a hint of her tongue seeking contact. My core tightened as my body thrummed in desire, my own tongue coaxed to touch her own warm velvet.

*Merlin, why is this so good!* I thought as my own body shuddered in pleasure and I found myself reciprocating, my hands settling on her the narrowest part of her waist, reminding me of her hourglass shape in silk from last night. *I get to be with this woman, she is all mine!* I thought greedily as I savored her taste.

Her fingers weaved through my hair, cupping the back of my head possessively and I had never felt this wanted before. Nothing else existed but the mutual need between us. I was sexy, I was desired, and she knew how to make me feel like the most important witch in the world.

"HERMIONE?! HERMIONE!!" My eyes shot open in surprise as Narcissa's lips pulled quickly away and left me silently whimpering for more. Bill Weasley looked shocked and livid, while Fleur looked detached and awkward. As Narcissa turned to face the Weasleys, I noticed a pair of feet poking out from under a certain invisibility cloak that could only be Harry Potter.

This wasn't good.

Harry was under the cloak with Griphook on his shoulders, while Bill and Fleur asked to see their vault as a regular customer. The security of Gringotts was much higher than what Bill had explained; the Goblins seemed upset to have so many armed wizards as if the Ministry was occupying the
At least, it was supposed to look like Bill Weasley and his wife.

The real Bill was disguised as a foreign wizard, having been told to get in through the goblin service entrance only if the plan started to fail. Ron hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Wands." The guard asked, and the married couple surrendered theirs. Both passed through an archway, yet Harry was stopped by the goblin's whispers.

"It will detect your magic, Mister Potter. Use the Imperious!"

Harry froze at the idea of using an Unforgivable. He didn't want to stoop to the same level as the Death Eaters.

But the plan wouldn't work if they couldn't get past the security here. So Harry prayed for forgiveness as he delved a bit more into the Dark Arts.

None of them realized that all of their planning would be for naught as Ron panicked at the sight of Hermione and Narcissa in an amorous embrace.

"I'll deal with this, Cissy..." I said, sighing out my worry. *Get it together, Bill's got a level head on his shoulders...*

Bill's wand was pointed directly at my wife, and I instinctively stepped in front of her. "What are you doing, Bill?" I asked, a thread of worry going through me.

_Why is he acting this way? Why does his wand look like... Fuck. It's Ronald..._

"Get out of the way, 'Mione! Why was that Malfoy bitch touch... snogging you!" *Definitely Ronald.*

Fleur clasped the hand pointing a wand directly at me. "Bill, you're going to get us in trouble with ze security. My. Husband." She seemed to stress the first and last parts there, as if reminding him who he was supposed to be. Harry's feet disappeared under the cloak, so I had no idea where he was or what was going on.

I felt a breath hit my right ear and I flinched, wondering what that was. Narcissa stood beside me with her hands raised, hoping to calm him down. This would probably not end well.

"Mister Weasley, if you would lower your wand, I could explain..."

"NO! She must be under the Imperious Curse!" It was definitely Ron under there. Fleur thought quickly and tried to diffuse the situation.

"Sweetie, if she were under such a curse, she would seem... more odd than usual. She seems alert and, how you say, rational." *Thanks, I think? I wondered as a soft whisper at my right ear.*

"Hermione, it's me, Harry. Use one long blink for yes and two blinks for no, okay?"

*Brilliant! I think...* I blinked once, slowly. *Glad at least he's got a level head on his shoulders.* The wizarding guards have not seemed to notice us yet, and for that I was breathing a sigh of relief.

"Lucius Malfoy fell at Malfoy Manor. Hermione bested him in a duel." Narcissa's voice was calm and soothing, and I shuddered at the sound.
Harry's whisper made me strain to hear him as I tilted my head minutely. "Are you okay, Hermione? Have you been treated okay?" I blinked once, looking at Ron with frustration.

"Good riddance to scum like him." Ron replied, the effect of the Dark Magic clear in his rage. Fleur glowed slightly, using her Veela charm to distract him as she got him to lower his wand.

"They seem to have no quarrel with us, Bill. Come, let us go to our vault." Fleur said, her concentration waning. He seemed stubborn, looking around as the guards were now all watching us. "We don't have ze time for this, Bill!"

"We think the cup is in Bellatrix's vault, can you help us get it?" I blinked a slow yes again.

"Why isn't she talking now? What's up with her eyes? Maybe Snape slipped some potion to her..."

"Honestly, Ronald, it's Professor Snape!" I replied automatically, years of repetition making this a habit for me. None of the guards seemed to notice my slip, however. "I mean, Headmaster..."

At that, Ron's eyes widened in shock. He realized not only that I was me, but that he was blowing his cover, despite the polyjuice. As he put his wand away, the security wizards cautiously came between us, with a goblin huddled between them.

"Mrs. Granger, we have received the paperwork from The Ministry confirming your Bonding; the transfer of the Malfoy Vault to Mrs. Hermione Granger's will be done by the end of the day. Did you want to inspect the vault beforehand?"

We both said yes. "Cissy, dear, do you still have access to the Black Family Vault? I expect a proper dowry still." I asked, effecting the cold Pureblood attitude I had seen her take countless times before. We exchanged a glance and she smiled politely. She understood I had a scheme but knew we couldn't speak of it yet.

"Of course, wife. It was passed on to the eldest sibling, but I can still access it." We can get into Bella's Vault! I tilted my head and let her take the lead down to the vaults.

Before we left, Bill's eyes met mine. I couldn't make out what he was thinking; I was too panicked to use Legilimency on him. "Hermione, what's going on? Are you really okay?"

No, I'm not. I'm married to a witch whose family wants me dead. I have no choice but to keep breeding with her like a dog until You-Know-Who kills us all.

My smile was forced. "My wife and I are fine." It would have to do.

As we got into the cart, Narcissa asked the goblin to go at half-speed due to her having a headache. As we pulled away, I cast the Muffliato charm. Narcissa's ears perked up and looked at me, impressed.

"You know Severus' spells? Of course, you must have found one of his old books... Brightest witch of the age." Narcissa smiled and I beamed at the compliment.

"You mean, brightest witch of my age." I corrected as I began to wonder which Horcruxes we were heading towards. It was repeated to me nearly as often as Harry was told about his mother's eyes.

"No, I didn't. I truly think you might be the brightest, most clever witch since Morgana." She sighed quietly as layers of stress peeled off of her. "I'm sorry about that confrontation with Ronald; you have
to understand the cultural mores that have been instilled in Wizarding society and most Pureblood families."

I thought back to Ron's attitude when he saw me with Narcissa. I had thought it was simply the shock of him seeing me with Draco's mother, but perhaps it was more than that. *I've never heard him ever say anything about gay people like I heard back in the Muggle world.*

"Narcissa, are there any prominent gay or lesbian couples in the Wizarding world? The only thing I've heard that has come close to it was Rita's book and her insinuations about Dumbledore's unhealthy attachment to Snape, Harry, and his 'close friendship' with the Dark Wizard Grindelwald."

"There aren't any wizards or witches that openly admit to being homosexual. We're trained from childhood that we will marry and have children, and that the ones who rebel from that path are usually decried as 'eccentric' and will eventually be found out to be a horrible or evil person like Gellert Grindelwald was." Narcissa looked apologetic as she said this to me. "I myself was punished horribly by my parents and Abraxas went out of his way to force Lucius to keep me under his thumb and an obedient wife when news of my relationship with Odette surfaced."

I was shocked at this. *If this was true, even Muggle-born sympathizers like the Weasleys would still look at gay wizards with disdain.* "Are you saying that Albus and Grindelwald...? But obviously Dumbledore was a good Wizard!"

"Hermione, in the last 100 years of Hogwarts history, there have been more injuries and fatalities when Albus was Headmaster than anyone else. Rita's book very much played on the theme that all gay wizards essentially defy common morals and principles to marry and have magical children and therefore have to seduce, quite literally, others into Darkness.

"Why else do you think my mother Druella pressured me into marrying Lucius and throw our support in along with the Rosiers for The Dark Lord? He was espousing Traditional Pureblood Family Values. She thought she was saving me from immorality by getting me away from such evil temptations."

I was aghast at that. "But that's insane! Surely there are good families... I mean, Molly Weasley doesn't hate Albus..."

"No, she only thinks of him as 'very eccentric' yet made sure that he never was alone with any of her sons. Some stereotypes and prejudices will be really hard to break for some people." Narcissa's face was pensive and I could tell there was more to it.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Do you recall when Harry used Parcelmouth in his duel with Draco, and everyone assumed he was evil because of it? Well, the same kind of ostracism happened whenever someone was rumored to be gay. The only way you could disprove it was by being married and having a lot of children, whereas giving birth to a squib was seen as bad." A thread of repressed anger was in her voice and I knew.

"Molly found out about you and Odette, didn't she? And, because she was worried about your going Dark, she warned your family..." I said, solving why the Weasleys and Malfoys never got along. The cart slowly took a steep turn and the momentum had me leaning towards her. She stroked my back, more for her own need than mine.

"You'd think, but not exactly. Odette and I were the other scandalous couple at Hogwars besides Severus and Lily. See, she was a mild-mannered Half-Blood Gryffindor. Molly was looking out for her best interests and assumed that I was the evil one out to twist her towards evil."
I was floored. "Molly's good intentions for Odette was what drove Narcissa and Lucius to side for Voldemort? The sheer prejudice was hard to believe, since they were absolutely fine with muggles. But they also went ahead and gave birth to an entire quidditch team, so maybe they were traditionalist after a fashion." It took me another moment to realize what she had said about Harry's mum.

"Severus and Lily were dating?" I asked, making connections about her death and his hatred for Harry.

"They never were officially a couple from what I could tell, but they were inseparable for the first few years here. It wasn't until James Potter and his gang's harassment went too far and in a fit of rage called Lily a Mudblood that they finally went their separate ways." Narcissa frowned slightly at that. "I think that they would have made a great couple, if they had been allowed to try."

The cart passed under a waterfall and I noticed Narcissa breathed a sigh of relief as we went through without any incident.

"Now, why are we really going into my sister's vault? I know you won't be wanting for Galleons." She kissed me a quick peck, helping me gather my resolve. "I'm going to have to trust her with this soon enough..."

"I'll tell you only after you learn Occlumency. There are a few artifacts that The Dark Lord stole that are vital to the war effort." As in killing him completely so that he remains dead.

"Very well. I was taught some occlumency years ago, yet never really had a way to test out my ability. But if we're taking stuff out, we need to make it look like a robbery so as not to lay suspicion... Oh dear. Ronald Weasley is here to do that, isn't he?"

I nodded. "You could tell he wasn't Bill?" Narcissa's smirk made me chuckle softly.

"I'm a Slytherin. I had better know when someone's using Polyjuice. Besides, I can tell something is off when a well-renowned Curse Breaker seems to lose his mind over seeing you hold me, while ignoring his gorgeous Veela wife..."

I nodded, my mind piecing things together. "Yeah, Ron usually went all gaga over her whereas Harry never did... Do you really think she's gorgeous?" I asked, feeling a bit crestfallen. It would be that she prefers blondes, with a perfect figure, perfect breasts...

"I prefer conviction over looks, dear. Veela women only have sway over those whom are attracted to women. Most women feel either ambivalent or dislike them. What about you?" Her response was diplomatic in her refusal to admit to anything. I could admit she had a great physique, sure.

I thought about it. I didn't seem to dislike her as Ginny and Molly Weasley seemed to, but I wasn't gushing to impress them like Arthur did. "Is Harry gay then?" I asked, feeling a bit crestfallen. It would be that she prefers blondes, with a perfect figure, perfect breasts...

"I prefer conviction over looks, dear. Veela women only have sway over those whom are attracted to women. Most women feel either ambivalent or dislike them. What about you?" Her response was diplomatic in her refusal to admit to anything. I could admit she had a great physique, sure.

I thought about it. I didn't seem to dislike her as Ginny and Molly Weasley seemed to, but I wasn't gushing to impress them like Arthur did. Is Harry gay then? "I don't seem to be either. I don't ogle nor loathe her."

"But you find me attractive?" Narcissa's eyes shined mischievously, fishing for a compliment. "If the Veela charm seems to be neutralized with you, there's a possible answer..."

"I'm bisexual?" I mused aloud, never having really thought about it. It's natural for me to question my orientation at this age, right? "Well, I did have a fantasy or two about both sexes..." My eyes met Narcissa's and I blushed, confirming her question.

The cart came to a halt as the goblin faced us and told us to get out. We stood before a massive
doorway, and the goblin directed Narcissa to put her hand on it. She yelped in pain, pulling away a slightly bloody hand as the door opened.

"I guess that worked. Thank you, goblin." The goblin nodded and waddled away, going through a door only tall enough for his species. The cart remained for us to return when we were done here.

Narcissa took my hand and pulled me into the vault, and I was amazed at the amassed wealth. *This is incredible, but why aren't they investing it?*

"The Sword of Gryffindor?!” Narcissa exclaimed. "What else has Bella been hiding from me?"

*The Darkest of Magics meant to pin one's soul from crossing over into the afterlife?* I mused, but shook my head. I had spotted the cup, but wondered if any other Horcruxes were here.

"How are we going to make it look like a robbery if we are recorded coming here for gold?" I asked, realizing a flaw in our plan. *The blame will get stuck on us regardless.*

"Hermione, if Ron and Fleur were upstairs, where was Bill?" Narcissa wondered idly as she pocketed a few handfuls of gold along with a gilded chest.

*I can't steal everything here and hope to get every Horcrux, but I can destroy everything... "Um, Narcissa, if there is anything here of value that you wish to keep, I suggest you get it now."

"Hermione, what are you on about? Oh. If there is something here that we cannot find nor take that gives your enemy an advantage... we destroy it." Narcissa nodded glumly. "It's just money, a concept that Lucius never really understood." She went over to a table, took few tomes and shrank them along with the chest and put them into a pocket.

I lifted my wand, knowing few spells that could obliterate everything in its path. "Get back, Cissy, I'm going to have to burn it all." I focused my mind and my will, and silently thought the incantation for Fiendfyre.

Nothing happened.

I shrugged it off, and prepared to try again.

I said the curse aloud, accepting the weight of casting my first Dark Spell.

Still, no reaction.

"Hermione, let me." Narcissa said. "You have to really mean it for any Dark Magic to work."

My eyes welled up, I wasn't strong enough to do this. "No Cissy, this is your family's vault. I can't make you do this."

"And I can't ask you to do this to yourself. Besides, they forced me to marry him. Trust me, I have a bit of repressed rage."

I backed away, letting her do the spell... *the curse...* that would destroy the last of the Black Family possessions. It would also destroy the Horcruxes, the only sure thing short of Basilisk Venom.

The heat of blazing fire before me hit my face; the shockwave drying out my skin instantly. Narcissa's wand directed fiery serpents to crash into the walls, melting everything in sight. A sharp flick of her arm and a series of shelves collapsed as an angry klaxon pierced the air.

I turned to look out and around the series of vaults, security wizards and goblins alike were running
everywhere in panic.

"THE DRAGON IS LOOSE!" Dragon?

Sure enough, a dragon was flapping its wings menacingly as Fleur and Harry were perched on its back between the wings. Ronald was there as well, the polyjuice having had worn off.

"SOMEONE STOP THEM!"

"BILL! COME ON!"

Spells crashed through the air, making the ground vibrate as the support columns fractured and began to crumble. The goblin cave-reinforcing magic is failing? We need to get out!

"GO! I HAVE THIS!"

"NO BILL! COME ON!"

The sound of stone and metal squelched as dragon fire and spell damage knocked out support columns. It was difficult to breathe as the soot and heat sucked the oxygen out of the air, and the floor shuddered and cracks began to make the floor give way.

Everyone on that floor would be instantly crushed to death... if they were lucky. My wife was directing the sentient flames to smash through the shelves in the vault, grim determination was etched in her face as she bared her teeth in a seething rage.

It was then that the ground fell out from under me, and I charmed myself to fall slowly so as to avoid injuring myself as I landed. Merlin, the ceiling above me doesn't look to be any better...

Powdered concrete, stone, and marble sifted through the air as the wand-fire seemed to cease in all of the confusion. They fighting was happening below me, and it stopped? This wasn't good.

The silence that followed was pierced by a sobbing cry. "BILL!" Fleur's hands instantly went aflame as her body changed into its bird-like form. She lobbed fireballs down on everyone, her rage unfocused as she tried to immolate everyone below her for the death of her husband.

The bloody bank is collapsing from the inside, if the fires don't take it down first.

"Cissy, we have to go!" I said, pulling out Harry's Firebolt from the pouch in my sock. Merlin I hate flying!

"I have to end the curse!" She said, her voice wavering. "Otherwise it will go wild!"

I grabbed her and pulled her onto the broom behind me. "Let it go wild, it will help wipe our tracks!" Gripping onto the broom, I started to kick us off the ground and fly away from the sentient fire. It wanted to consume everything, and we were the closest victim. We aren't going to make it...

Narcissa reached around me, stowing her wand in her sleeve and took hold of the broom herself. We took off with a jolt as I clung to the thin wooden rod for dear life. Oh Shit OH SHIT I'm going to to die...

"Cause some mayhem, love!" Narcissa said excitedly as she followed the ancient, angry dragon in flight.

Thinking fast, I disillusioned ourselves and started throwing hexes and jinxes towards the wizards who were trying to shoot down the dragon. The dragon didn't seem to care as it breathed fire and
took out various pillars.

The trio of Harry, Ron, and Fleur were firing spells to break the domed roof, hoping to escape the fire beneath us. A spell whizzed over Narcissa's head and I retaliated with an explosion curse, hoping to have hit the wizard that threw a spell at my wife. *If I was lucky, it would keep him from continuing his wand-fire.*

"Quit pulling your punches, we're in danger!" Narcissa yelled as she weaved frantically to avoid getting hit by the dragon's tail. "They are trying to kill us, Hermione!"

*Large area below me, all on fire, I could try aguamenti, but I could alter the spell...*

"ADUROMENTI!" I yelled as hot lava sprayed out of my wand, melting anything it first hit; walls, floors, even some of the vault doors on the upper levels. A small speck that might have been a goblin fell still. I couldn't dwell on that, nor on the wizards who were melting and burning instantly.

*Just focus on the ones trying to kill us, and we'll deal with guilt later...* I thought as I kept the onslaught of shooting out high-pressured lava down on the people beneath me.

Narcissa looked over her shoulder, eyes wide in shock. "That works, I suppose..." She turned back to the dragon ahead of us, and pulled out her own wand. The broom shook slightly as she regained full control with only one hand, and begun casting the reducto spell at the widening hole.

The collected spellwork of Harry, Ron, and Fleur along with the dragon's fire seemed to have made a hole almost large enough for them all to get through.

"Hermione, we're not going to fit..." Narcissa warned, taking aim at the fracture lines as she dodged the swinging tail.

"Trying to fire accurately on a broom is much harder than it appears, Cissy!" I kept firing reducto, but it wasn't doing much good. The dragon's tail flicked, and Narcissa had to do a barrel roll in order to avoid getting hit.

Unfortunately, my spell went wide and struck the dragon's wing, bouncing towards the riders. *Please don't hit them...* I prayed in vain... and the deflected hex struck Ron square in the face.

He went rag-doll as he slowly fell off of the dragon.

It felt like time had slowed down. I threw the strongest explosion curse I could muster at the ceiling, not caring at the amount of rubble that was about to rain down upon us, and caught Ron with Snape's levicorpus.

The connection was weak, and I felt that I was going to lose my hold of him at any moment. Fleur shifted into full Veela form, spread her wings, and caught Ron. She looked like a Fury from Greek Mythology, her anger enhancing her beauty and her abilities. I could tell she could see us through the disillusionment as she nodded her thanks to us.

"Salazar's Snake, she fully transformed!" Narcissa cursed in awe, "there's no going back from that..."

The thought of crossing a point of no return weighed heavily on me as my eyelids grew heavy and everything went dark.
I decided that I'd challenge myself to only use Nine Inch Nails' songs to describe the situation of Narcissa and Hermione. At this point in the plot, Hermione is "Sin" and Narcissa is "Gave Up"

I came to with a jolt, realizing the effects of the rennervate charm. I was sitting on a bench outside of the Ballroom. Narcissa's eyes held worry and sorrow. We survived, why is she upset?

The baritone pitch of Snape cut through the air. "She overtaxed herself and her magical ability. She will need rest, unfortunately The Dark Lord will not permit this at present. Might I suggest..."

Narcissa's sharp voice cut him off. "Of course, dose her! Hermione, we're okay. Just trust me and we'll get through this..." My eyes were still unfocused, but the cerulean blue of Narcissa's eyes were unmistakable.

"What's going on? We got out of the Bank..." My thoughts felt muddled as I took the proffered potion. I couldn't recognize it by sight or smell. A unique potion by Snape? Can I trust him? My throat hurt and my mouth was parched, so much so that I needed to put my trust in Narcissa.

"Our subtle mission got a lot of attention. Bad Attention. I'm so sorry my wife." She apologized profusely as I recognized her fear and took the potion. She's not about to poison me.

"Mister Ronald Weasley was recognized escaping Gringott's after having stolen the Goblin's dragon. The Dark Lord believes you failed to capture your little friend and demands to know what they are up to."

"It was a coincidence he was there..." I objected weakly, now realizing what the potion was. My nerves were getting numb as my memory got cloudy. I was going to be interrogated and tortured by Voldemort. Small mercy if I die at the madman's hands.

Narcissa's lips brushed mine gently. "I know, but remember whatever happens in there, do not take it personally. It is not your fault. I understand."

Not take it personally? How can I NOT take this personally?

Yaxley was at the doorway, leering at me. "Bring in the Mudblood."

I am shoved to my knees in front of Voldemort, the acrid smell of piss and death reeking the air. Ropes are conjured to restrain me harshly by the wrists, ensuring me to be defenseless. I gag at the smell, raising my eyes to see a pile of broken bodies stacked before me in a pile. They were all wearing the security robes from Gringotts, interspersed with a few goblins as well.

"Mudblood, I have their statements about what happened. Do you have anything to say for yourself?" His red slits were shining in blood-drenched fury. He wants me to confess... he has nothing?

"No, my Lord. My wife and I were getting our financial affairs in order when the mayhem broke
out.” I had met his eyes and was ready for his mental ransack.

It never came.

*Merlin, he's too mad with rage to read my mind!*

"Your little friend Ronald Weasley was seen there after his polyjuice wore off. Are you telling me you didn't know of any plan to raid the bank? Is this the Order's new way to pay for their resistance against my regime?! Bring in Narcissa!" *Why does he think she would know?*

Tears welled up as I understood what was about to happen. "NO! I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING! SHE DOESN'T KNOW ANYTHING! NOOO!" My voice felt hoarse as my wife as forced to kneel directly in front of me, her eyes wide in mine. Her breath was short and panicked, and her fear was thick and palpable. She knew what she was there for, and was trying to be brave for me.

"It's okay, Hermione. We didn't do anything wrong. We didn't even know they were there. This isn't your fault. This isn't your fault." Narcissa rambled quickly, assuaging me of my guilt. Her words ran together as a mantra, and she was already trying to disassociate her mind from the torture she was about to undergo.

Panic made my heart beat faster, the ropes feeling even tighter as my arms were pulled taut. *Don't hurt her please don't hurt her don't hurt her don't hurt her...*

"Bella, I know how much you wish to do the Mudblood harm, but you failed me. CRUCIO!"

Voldemort's wand sparked and the demented woman screamed in agony. The look on Narcissa's face sank deep into my heart. *I may hate her, but it's still her sister...*

He relented on Bellatrix and pointed his want to Narcissa. *My god, he's drawing it out for show.*

"Mudblood, I'm giving you a chance to confess. What were Harry and Ron doing?" *I can't tell him, I won't break...* I put up my occlumency shields, and tried to float away from consciousness.

Voldemort seemed poised to torture Narcissa, but put his wand down. He seemed at peace, and it vaguely reminded me of Umbridge. *He's scarier when he's calm.*

"Draco... crucio your mother. Now." His quiet voice chilled me to the bone. *That bastard is going to pit all of us against each other!*

Draco's wand was raised, though shaky. He seemed reticent, but after he was hit with some sort of hex, Draco croaked out the incantation. His face showed how squeamish he was about this, and how he was slowly breaking here.

Narcissa trembled in pain as tears trailed down her face. Her shriek was punctuated by the soulful whimpering that came after, and I felt the Compulsion urge me to do something, anything, to make this stop. *Lie to him! Make something up! Hell, how many horcruxes could be left now?*

"Now, do not make me ask again, Mudblood..." Voldemort cooed. His voice could have at one time been seductive.

"She didn't know a thing about this!" Narcissa snapped, adding a quick 'my lord' afterwards.

"Such conviction and obstinance... I see your new husband is rubbing off on you. I suppose I'll have to break her myself." His voice was almost seductively soft, and my body shivered in anticipation for the pain.
"NO! PLEASE!" Narcissa plead went unnoticed as hot knives sliced into me, through me, between my joints as if separating my bones...

My vision blanked out a bit as sweet unconsciousness threatened to come but was pulled back. Please, let me feel nothing! Warmth pooled in my pants and ran down my face, and I couldn't care less. Narcissa was no longer being tortured by her own son, and that was the only solace as the knives dug deeper and found new places to find pain within me. This was much worse than Bella was; how will I ever defeat a man this powerful?

If this keeps up, I knew my very sanity could be lost. The sharp, bitter cold that felt like heat seared in every crevice carved by the imaginary knives, causing a pain be so sharp it felt like crushing blows. The pain was a paradox in every way and all I could do was kneel in pain as red tinted my vision and the tell tale taste of copper trailed over my lips. I had no idea where I was bleeding and was hoping to pass out from blood loss.

I lost track of how long I was there, my eyes seeking refuge in the quivering blue orbs of Narcissa. Solace could be mine if only I could escape my mortal coil, to welcome the darkness of eternal rest. Instead, I had to endure the torment. I was condemned to survive.

The sensation was horribly enduring, a deep sense of soreness and bruised bones filled me as I was soaking in the massive bath. The House-Elf Herpy was attending to Narcissa and myself as I smelled a healing salve being added to the warm water.

There was a knock at the door to the bathroom, and I flinched at the idea of someone coming in on us like this. Now I'm getting panicked over being exposed? Narcissa conjured a privacy screen in front of the door and asked who was there.

"It is I." Severus replied brusquely, "I have the potions you requested. Shall I leave them outside your door or hand them to your elf?" There was trepidation in his voice; he didn't want to stick around for some reason. Herpy was opening the door slightly and had her hands up, nervously asking to take possession of the vials. Narcissa laughed at the exchange, and I couldn't help but smile as well. Never thought I'd see the day when Severus would squirm.

"Please hand them to my elf, Severus. And thank you." Narcissa replied, sighing as she took a sip of the mimosa at the edge of the large bath. It both relieved and pained me to know that she had this tradition. How often has this happened to her? A part of me vowed that she would never have to go through this again.

"Narcissa, I have included the andromorph potion as well. It will lose its potency over time, so I suggest you not... dawdle." His words were careful yet hurried as he walked away, and I could imagine the billow of his robes as he made his way out of this wing of the manor.

Andromorph potion? I wondered as a knowing look of concern flashed over her face. I heard his footfalls silence themselves as the House-Elf handed Narcissa the potions.

Narcissa stood, walking out of the large bath and dried herself with her wand. I couldn't help but gaze at her nude form and feel a pang of... possession? She is mine, in a way, right? For a woman who has endured war, a horrid marriage, and is a prisoner in her own house... she's still magnificent.

"Hermione, The Dark Lord has made great improvements on the Cruciatius Curse..." Narcissa began
hesitantly, conjuring up a large, low-lying flat table. After a pause, she added padding and a cloth over it. "You will feel aftershocks once you fall asleep unless we take certain measures now. Come lay down for me."

I did as she asked, drying myself off as well. I blushed and wanted to hide behind my hair as her eyes raked over my own nakedness. I bit my lip as I used my hands to cover myself in front of her.

She chuckled softly, taking the moment to steal a kiss from me. "You're beautiful and don't have to hide yourself from me. But actually, I need you to flip over for me." She opened one of the vials and started to rub the minty lotion on her hands.

As I rolled over, I felt the cool tingle of the potion mix with the warmth from her hands. It was bliss.

"Merlin, that feels great," I whispered, closing my eyes at the cool relief. I tense as a thought hits me. "Are you going to use this all over me?"

"If you insist," Narcissa said gently, coaxing my body to react to her slightest touch. Her fingers were soft yet firm, gentle yet hungry for my own skin. The craving between the two of us was hanging thick in the air as more of the potion was worked into my lower back. As she put more of the healing potion onto her hands, I felt a thrill coursing down the small of my back eagerly awaiting her contact again.

As her fingers traced down the length of my back, I gasped at the coolness and my muscles shuddered, making me write slightly on the table. I cracked an eye open, hoping to see a smile on her face, but she was too high. Instead my eyes reminded me of her distinct lack of clothing.

I wonder if this is turning her on as well?

Her fingers were firm as they massaged in the potion, the soft skin and minty balm were almost too much for my sensitive skin, a mixture of pleasure on top of painful soreness that had me biting my lip in beautiful agony. I took a sharp breath in, wanting for so much more due to the Compulsion. I'm not gay... I don't like witches... it's just the spell, right? I asked myself as the hands slowly lifted from me. My hips buckled in protest, the hitch in my breathing betraying my body to her.

Narcissa' hands traced gently over my raw shoulders, applying copious amounts of gel to the excessively-heated zone. I sighed beneath her, keeping perfectly still as he worked her magic. I panted at the feeling of being laid out before her like this — vulnerable and helpless — a slave to her capable hands. A little further south of her careful attentions, I was becoming wetter than I had ever been before.

Please, run your hands lower...

As if in response to my wish, Narcissa's hands drifted slowly down my back, her motions becoming more and more irregular as her concentration became obviously muddled. Her hands were wandering at random now, no longer conforming to any rigorous procedure. As they skimmed lightly across my lower back, my hips lifted up slightly as Narcissa's fingers trailed along the base of my spine as I shuddered in silent begging.

Narcissa looked at me at with a slightly dazed expression with heavy-lidded eyes. She was nearly panting from the sexual tension between us. Taking another sip of her mimosa, Narcissa's body language was begging for my consent. Eyes flashing to meet hers, Narcissa was startled to see I was blushing slightly, wanting more from her.

Taking another dollop of the potion in her hand, Narcissa began working it into the backs of my thighs, skimming tenderly over the calves before gradually working her way upwards again. The potion absorbed quickly, and I bit down on my lip as her caresses became more and more firm, aware that the friction she was creating was almost unbearable.
As her strokes continued to glance across the hot, firm flesh of my upper thighs, I inhaled deeply and allowed my legs to part a little. Narcissa’s movements faltered momentarily as her hand gripped my thigh in Pavlovian response. She had unknowingly dug her fingers deeper into my skin, forcing my right thigh to open wider, revealing myself to her. *Merlin, I can't believe I'm letting her do this...*

I watched her, my breath held painfully as she tilted her head to get a better view, completely absorbed in the erotic sight laid out before her. Mouth parted in awe, she slipped her hand further up my thigh until her thumb slipped over my slick folds, causing her to exhale a shuddering breath. I swallowed hard, exhaling at her touch, and my eyes flicked to hers, almost frightening her with my intensity as they blazed with need. *Oh gods, please let her continue!*

"Flip over." Narcissa’s voice wavered as she tried to compose herself. As I flipped over, I wondered how much of this was to help me not feel the pain later and how much of this was just subtle foreplay between us. *Was this salve cut with lust potion?* I couldn't know, considering this all could just be from the damned Compulsion. I decided to not over-analyze why I wanted her and decided to just go with it and enjoy this.

Keeping her gaze locked on me, her thumb moved again and it found my swollen clit, circling it with painful slowness as I let out a broken moan, looking properly tortured. "Fuck...." I said through clenched teeth, unsure of how to respond. I had never known how amazing this could feel; it seemed so much different than when I did it to myself...

My moan prompted her into action, dropping the salve before climbing on top of me. I cried out slightly as she grazed my abraded knees, the pain merging with my desire. The feeling was simultaneously thrilling and agonizing, and I wanted more. I felt myself grow extremely wet with need. *Bugger whatever magic got me here, I need this! I need her!*

"Are you alright?" She gasped apologetically, pushing herself up to hover over her, trying to minimize her contact with my sore skin. *No, no, nononoo... come back...*

"Yes," I panted, "fuck... please... don't stop!" *Merlin woman!*

At my encouragement, Narcissa's mouth dropped to my neck, her tongue tasting the hot, salty skin before lowering her teeth to scrape against it, causing me to gasp in little, faltering moans. I gasped and gulped down my panic and building frustration. She smelled of sunshine, sweetness, and the faintest hint of mint. With a low growl she bit down slowly, increasing pressure as I erupted in a piercing scream of agonized ecstasy. I never knew I could be so turned on by so little, and my thighs quivered in anticipation. She could notice my shaky legs against her hot thighs as she withdrew her teeth to press lazy, wet kisses over my tormented flesh, her lips trailing up my chin as I began to nearly sob from the overload of sensation. I turned my head so I could kiss her back frantically, but a hand on my chest forced me still as my body trembled and begged for more.

"Shhhh," she hushed gently in her ear, reaching down between my thighs to tease my folds, making me buck and whimper as she kissed the shell of my ear before whispering, "Is this what you want?"

"Yes," I sobbed, grinding futilely against her teasing hand as she breathed hotly against my ear. *She is a cruel woman! How can she do this to me like this?*

Narcissa moaned happily as she slipped a single finger inside me. It was a carnal sound and I rejoiced in hearing it. I had not known I could be this aroused to the point of pain, but I needed more of her to sate me. My jaw trembled as my hands clawed her arms in my desperate need. *I just needed... MORE.*

I cried out as one finger slid deep inside, followed quickly with a second. A look of questioning went...
over her features that I couldn't place... and then she curled her fingers and my eyes widened as... it... was touched.

With that knowing sexy smirk of hers, Narcissa plumbed deeper, surprising both of us when I shifted uncomfortably from the increased penetration. She let out a strange-sounding moan, half-way between delight and trepidation. *Was she scared? Did she want to stop?* The air around them seemed to grow thick with something more than lust; something that was at once foreign and yet eerily familiar. She paused. *Did I do something wrong? No please no don't stop...*

"Don't stop!" I pleaded, nearly hysterical, writhing beneath her wantonly.

Wincing, Narcissa shoved her fingers in again, this time noticing a definite resistance to her penetration. She stilled as she moved her fingers around experimentally, tracing the inside of my sex. *I think I am going to have to kill her if she keeps taunting me...* I whimpered in response, acutely aware of her every motion. After carefully stroking inside me in a circular movement with one long finger, Narcissa abruptly withdrew her fingers as if she'd been burnt. *What the...?*

"Why are you stopping?" I asked breathlessly, panting with lust-heavy eyes as Narcissa sat back with the strangest expression on her face. *Is there something wrong with me? Does she not desire me like I desire her now?*

_Maybe there's something wrong with the Compulsion, and she's not feeling the same way I am here._

"What's the matter?" I asked, nervous as she reached over the side of the table suddenly before standing up again, wand in hand. "What are you going to do with that?"

Narcissa started doing some diagnostic spells and her mouth opened in soft horror.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I asked, so quietly I wasn't sure she heard me. Narcissa continued to look at me in that incredibly disconcerting way.

"You're scaring me..." I breathed, covering myself up with my hands again. *This isn't going to work, is it? She doesn't want me like I want her? Am I not good enough? Was Odette better?! Say something!*

I couldn't look at her anymore, and didn't want her to look at me. I wasn't about to cry, I couldn't allow myself to look any more prone before her. I sat up, looking for my wand and any kind of towel or robe to cover myself with.

This was too good to be true, too wrong for it to work. She couldn't stoop to making love to a mudblood. I should have realized this before, but losing my self control and my will is nothing compared to her rejection...

Narcissa faltered slightly, recomposing herself as she always had before as a Malfoy wife. *Her carefully neutral tone and body language was a slap in the face more than anything.*

"You..." she began, breaking off as her voice cracked, then clearing her throat before continuing again, softly:

"You're a virgin..."

I walked away from the padded table, picking up a bath robe and tying it shut. I just had myself entirely exposed and vulnerable, and this is how she's going to respond? How dare she!

"Yeah, I am. So?" I was still clenching down there, but my anger was dissipating my desire. *Perhaps*
I didn't just lose it to the first boy who winked at me, and perhaps I was waiting for the right time, or when I got married, but so what?!

"You're an innocent. I... I can't do that to you." Narcissa shivered as she conjured a light blue robe from a nearby towel and tied it on. **Innocent? She has to say this now?**

"You were doing just fine a moment ago!" I shrieked, confused at her change of heart, "Here I thought I wasn't good enough for you, that you wanted someone more like Odette, or that maybe this stupid Compulsion only worked on me..." I wanted to walk away. I wanted to run. I wanted to just leave and not have to deal with her right now...

"...no, it's...on me too..."

"...and I didn't even sign up for this! How DARE you wind me up like this and then say you can't! Ever since I came into this house, I've had ABSOLUTELY NO say over my fate!" I railed on her, the wand in my hand starting to spark. My magic was about to misfire out of sheer anger, and I knew I needed to reel it in.

"Hermione, you're my son's age!" Narcissa said, trying to calm me down. **I know! Why bring this back up?!**

"And you're my mothers! And you're a woman!" I yelled back, gesturing with my wand. Narcissa automatically put up a shield, her eyes reflecting fear. "I'm sorry, Hermione! I can't change that! I just don't want to be your first, not like this..." **like what? what did she...** It felt like the ground gave out from under my feet again.

"...not like what? What was in that salve you were rubbing onto me?!" I screamed furiously. Narcissa was frozen, a tear trailing her cheek. "I thought you might need a bit of physical suggestion for this to work..." **She... dosed... me.**

I stepped closer and continued to rage, almost hysterical. "You have no right to treat me this way, Cissy! No right!"

Despite the panic and despair etched across Narcissa's face, she couldn't find any words.

**Oh bugger, she's afraid of me...** I took a deep breath and put down my wand. I didn't want to do something I'd regret. "But we are where we are now, aren't we?" We were supposed to be doing this, under Voldemort's command, because the alternative is death for us. And Draco.

My wand arm was quaking with rage. **She's going to just stand there, after all this?** I let out an exasperated sob and spun around to disappear from the bathroom. Narcissa stepped around the table and caught me by the wrist begging, "Mione! Hermione! Please! I'm so sorry. Please, Hermione! Don't leave! Please!"

I tried to pull away but Narcissa's grip was too strong.

"Let go of me!" I howled. I lashed out, and took a swing at her head with my free hand. Narcissa's spellwork was fast and I found both hands caught in magical binding. **Dammit!** My anger was still building up, and I didn't want to be restrained.

"Please, Hermione! I'm sorry!" Cissy pleaded desperately, pulling me closer. She yanked on my wrists, forcing me forward as she knelt before me. "Please!" She was bawling now. **I don't want to see her cry, but why did she think she should do this to me?** I found myself kneeling before her as
well, an echo of what happened previously. I couldn't really pull myself away from her.

Cissy tugged me even closer, so the only thing that remained between us were my bound wrists. She kissed me fiercely, with an intensity few would think the Ice Queen would ever have. I could feel my resolve crumbling beneath her passion. "Please, Hermione!" she cried again before engulfing my lips in another forceful kiss. The Compulsion seemed to feed on this as I felt my body spike in desire. *Merlin, I want to be able to decide how and when I shag someone, woman! Is that too much to ask?*

I found myself returning her kiss cravenly, meeting her with so much fervor that Narcissa's spell broke and my wrists were set free. *It might be.*

Instinctively my hands seized her head and grabbed a fist full of her hair as my other hand cupped her bum possessively. I gave a sharp tug at her scalp and the Malfoy matriarch whimpered in painful pleasure. I decided to file that morsel of information for later.

"I do not want to have my mind and body altered any more to FORCE me to desire you. Is that understood?" My rage and my desire merged into something new, and I decided to go with it.

"I thought only to make it easier for us to do this... You sounded like you would be reticent to make love to me..." Narcissa said tearfully. *Reticent?! Merlin, you're such a Slytherin...*

"Trust me to CHOOSE to want to do this! Let me have my free will and I might surprise you, okay?" I took a breath, visibly calmed down, and she nodded. "Is that why you panicked when you realized I was a virgin? You didn't want to force my first time to happen due to a love potion?"

Narcissa nodded sullenly. "You must think the worst of me. My own first time was of my choosing. If I had followed through with you like this, I'd be... a monster."

"That you'd resort to dosing me without my consent isn't much better, Narcissa." I chided her, frowning. "I may not like how we got forced into this, but I'd rather choose to be your lover than be coerced."

Narcissa frowned. "We never would have been here if not for the Compulsion." Her voice was matter-of-fact, and I couldn't argue with her.

I shook my head. "Well we can't change that now, but I've made a promise to protect you and Draco, and I intend to keep it. Besides, I plan on using this marriage to improve the Wizarding World once we defeat The Dark Lord."

Narcissa smiled slightly at that. "And um... Us?"

"I may not have chosen you as a mate before, but I will take whatever happiness and joy I can from this." She was brilliant, beautiful, and I couldn't resist her. *But can I actually admit that to her?* Besides, I couldn't fault her for doing what she thought was in the best interests for herself and her son.

I leaned in and kissed her myself, asserting my dominance as I parted her lips with my own, probing gently into her with my tongue. She responded favorably as her fingers twined through my hair and embraced my head. It felt marginally better if I took the lead in this, and I was glad that she let me.

Her moans were my undoing as her own tongue caressed mine, and my body responded to hers as if we were specially keyed to each other. *Well, that's because we are.*

Narcissa's hands flew from my hair to my ass, which she clutched roughly as she crushed our
pelvises together. I untied her sash and watched the robe slide off of her shoulders. Narcissa abandoned her tongue's persistent ambush upon my mouth and she tugged my robe open enough to continue upon my breast.

As she licked and sucked on a nipple, her fingers dug into my waist possessively as she guided me back to the table she had me on. *How is it she can do this to me?*

Narcissa had me sitting on the table as she looked up at me with her cerulean blue eyes. As our eyes held each other's gaze, I laid down upon my back, offering myself up wholly to her.

"Trust me, Hermione?" She breathed into my ear, grazing her teeth against my earlobe. My eyes were closed as I bit my lip nervously.

"Quit trying to manipulate me covertly?" I reply, untying my robe sash. In that moment, I knew she was putty in my hands and would agree to anything.

Narcissa had smirked her agreement when she took both of my wrists and pinned them firmly above my head. The flash of panic turned straight into hot desire within me. *She would be literal about this, wouldn't she?* I thought as I struggled up enough to kiss her.

She roughly kissed my neck, then sucked on it to make me yelp in surprise. I shuddered beneath her as she shifted to hold both of my hands with only one of hers as the other one splayed my robe open. My eyes were pleading for her to continue as her eyes were... feasting on me.

"Sweet Circe, you're beautiful..." Narcissa muttered as her lips met mine, still restraining my hands above me.

We moaned and breathed against each other, both of our tongues dancing in the other's mouth.

Narcissa broke the kiss and, with her free hand, she deftly slid three fingers inside me. The sudden fullness was unexpected and I gasped loudly, my body going rigid. My jaw dropped as my lips made a silent 'oh' while my eyes flicked to the ceiling.

Narcissa used the opportunity to drive herself deeper inside me, my body cresting in pleasure as I seemed to grow more wet and my hips rocked to meet her hand with each stroke.

"Cissy..." I softly moaned, the desperate plea made all the more tangible as a fourth finger filled me. I was tight, full, and accepting her inside me. My thighs quivered from the onslaught, and waves of pleasure were threatening to crest and crash upon each other. Narcissa kissed me as her thumb found my sensitive spot. She pulsed in and out, going deeper with every thrust as her thumb tortured my swollen clit.

I wasn't sure if I was making coherent sounds anymore as I clawed at Narcissa's back, convulsing as the sensations threatened to have me drown in pleasure. A sheen of cold sweat broke out all over me and I worried if that was natural...

"Let it happen, love. Kiss me as you come..." Narcissa's words were silk to my ears and I let myself explode around her hand and into her mouth, my moans being drawn into her as if she could drink in my orgasm. *Could she feel what I felt there? Could I do this for her as well?*

Perhaps she could, for I lost track of the time there as I waited for the waves of pleasure to subside. We were both out of breath yet neither wanted to relent as our lips traced every available bit of skin between ourselves. Narcissa seemed to favor nipping with her teeth, which made me struggle to keep my composure.

"I could go for another round, Narcissa." I shuddered as she summoned a small vial for me. I looked
at her, wary as to the contents. "What is it?"

"So... this is the andromorph potion. It will allow us to um... you will have temporary masculine qualities." Narcissa blushed as she said it, the hint of color making her look all the more delectable.

Temporary... Oh. Okay. So this will allow me to mate with her. "And it's entirely safe? I'll revert completely once it's finished?"

"Yes, Severus invented it as a modification of the polyjuice potion years ago." That made sense, the so-called Half Blood Prince was brilliant at... wait...

"Whose genetic material was used for this to...? I'm to take only a partial change to have male shape..." It dawned on me as I realized Severus was acting oddly when he delivered the potion.

"I know for a fact that you'll have the functioning parts but it would be your genetic material that would be passed on. This was used in the Arthurian legend when Merlin made it." Narcissa's words sounded too knowledgeable.

"And you know this how?" My libido wasn't extinguished as much as it was morbid curiosity surfacing.

"I... may have helped him test it. But this time, there's no contraception component included." Contraception? Right...it was Voldemort's decree to make us breed like cattle.

"I had forgotten that You-Know... No. I choose this." With that, I drank the contents of the vial in one gulp. I tried to not focus on the flavor as my body morphed and altered into its new conformation.

As I lay still, I idly wondered how in-depth this potion would change me. My breasts and face felt the same, therefore I focused my attention towards my groin. It felt swollen and turgid, while still expanding as the sensations seemed to only increase my budding frustration. How do guys deal with this on a daily basis?

"Narcissa, are you sure this isn't about to explode? It's just... getting a bit unwieldy." I asked nervously. I then realized I had no idea how big this was supposed to get and could only hope for it to know when to stop.

She chuckled in that dark way that only spurred on my desire. "Getting it to explode is the point, isn't it?" As she took it in her hand, my hips twitched in surprise. Her familiarity with this made me realize that she had not only taken the potion, but had taken this particular...

"oh it is Severus'...

A thread of panic went into my voice. "Oh... uh...well, you know what I mean. How do I even use this? I feel like I'm going to bump into things with this... thing."

"Try not to think about it, think of potion ingred... fuck!"

Before I knew what she was doing, her soft tongue and even softer lips wrapped around me in a warm and velvety embrace. Merlin, so that's what the fuss is about! Her slow draw downward, engulfing me so slowly I fought the urge to meet her with a thrust of my hips.

She chuckled again, and I felt the vibration as she changed the firmness of her tongue and applied just a bit of suction. Her eyes met mine and I was utterly hers and she knew it.

And that's when she slowly drew herself back up, tantalizing me with her skill and knowlege. "I dare say, Hermione, that your objective is to repeat that sensation as a union of our two bodies. Can't say I'm not a bit curious as to how a Gryffindor such as yourself would shag..." same here. wanna...
I scrambled up from the table and had Narcissa beneath me on the ground, a cushioning charm applied to the towel beneath her. She looked so warm and willing beneath me as I awkwardly tried to figure out how to position myself to enter her. _The damn thing won't even help me line up for this!_

"Get on with it Granger," growled Cissy and I jumped, caught up with trying to fit the contours of our bodies.

"Don't overthink this love." I nearly stumbled as I attempted to get both of my knees between hers. The tip of my new shaft poked her sex accidentally and she made a small whimper of need. _Sweet Circe, she needs me!_

I was at her entrance and she had her hand upon me to help guide me in. I thought I was being slow and gentle as she enveloped me in one smooth stroke. She made a short whimper of pain, however, as I fully slid inside her.

"Slytherin's Snake, that's a..." She said as I flinched, starting to pull out, "No nonono, let me adjust to this... just stay right here." Her hips rolled as I realized she must not have been prepared enough for my... girth.

"Narcissa, I'm sorry, I didn't think to be sure..." I began to apologize, but her lips upon mine cut me off.

Her kiss was deep and filled with anticipation. "Nobody gets it exactly right the first time. Besides, I'm just as randy as you are and would have wanted you to just fuck me already."

Something about the way the word 'fuck' rolled off of her lips made me smile. I made a short thrust with my pelvis to accentuate my playful smirk. "Hm. 'Fuck', you say?"

She nodded, using her muscles to squeeze around me. "Merlin's Bollocks!"

"Hermione, you can be a lot rougher than that with me, okay?" She asked, lust punctuating her gaze at me.

I nodded as I slowly withdrew myself by an inch and thrust back in. Judging from our mutual moans of pleasure, I was doing this right. I kept on with my new extension of myself, keeping up a constant rhythm as I sank myself into her. But I needed more, so I took the moment to use my teeth on her as well, biting and marking her as mine as I kept... fucking... her.

Even as I bit her, our pace never slowed. Everything was wet as we persisted in our lovemaking.

We moved into a new position, as I took and folded a leg between us, having her knee between our shoulders. I felt as though I could find a deeper purchase within her and liked having her pinned down beneath me.

I continued my onslaught, noticing my quicker speed even as we laid sweet but urgent kisses on each other's faces. Our pace quickened and it became apparent that I was about to climax inside her. She must have noticed the look on my face as her deft fingers reached between us and made her own body tighten in anticipation.

"It's okay, Hermione. Fuck me and come." She knew I liked the utter lack of propriety with that word and I pounded away inside her with a sense of abandon.

As our eyes met, I instantly knew we were both going to climax at the same time. She had timed it so
that we're both on the verge of finishing as we locked eyes, and pushed each other over the edge for a synchronized conclusion.

"Fuckfuckfuck..." I muttered as I collapsed into her, feeling my release as her own squeezed me as our arms and lips tangled in a needy embrace.

We were sated, feeling bonelessly limp, and smiling at each other. I knew my first time wasn't the standard fare, but I had thoroughly enjoyed myself.

Rolling off of her, I basked in the afterglow as searing pain hit my right wrist. The bathroom door was thrown open as my demented sister in law danced in glee.

"The Dark Lord wants all of us in the Forbidden Forest! Tonight we kill Harry Potter!"
Drying themselves off with their wands, Harry and Fleur quietly discussed what they had seen in their failed mission. Ron, however, was fixated on Hermione.

"Harry, what was she doing there?! I had thought... Merlin, I recall her being tortured right before we left, how the bloody hell did she wind up snogging that bitch!" Ron stammered.

"Ronald, the time to speculate over such minute details is not now! Do you not think I wish to mourn my husband!" Fleur's face no longer held the ethereal beauty but instead the cold rage that was always inside her. Folding her wings back in, she conjured a small fire for the three of them to warm up.

"She said she would help us, and that's exactly what happened. If there was a Horcrux in that vault, it's dead now." Harry replied factually, "besides, she's the one who saved you when you fell off of the dragon. Fleur grabbed you, but only after you were dangling from an ankle. Who else knows that spell?"

"She's shacked up with a Death Eater and using Snape's own spells! I don't know if I can trust her!"

"Mon Dieu, we're really going to stand around and chitter about this?! She used cursed fire; nothing can survive that. How many more of these morceaux de merde are there?"

"Can she really be married to another witch?" Ron asked, ignoring Fleur's question.

"Two more, one is the snake, another is something..." Harry's response was cut short by his flinching in pain. "It's at Hogwarts! He thinks it's safe because of Snape..."

"Then we go there, we destroy it, and go after him! Bill's death will not have been in vain." Grim determination was in her voice as she apparated the three of them to Hogsmeade, rushing into the nearest building as a caterwauling alarm pierced the night air.

Aberforth didn't expect any visitors this late; neither did he expect to find himself tied to a chair with the singed bodies of two Death Eaters at his feet. He would never again find a Veela beautiful, nor could he ever see barbecue as appetizing. Ron was pillaging the bar for food while Harry put up defensive spells around them in case more Death Eaters came poking around.

"Any chance you can turn back into a human form, miss? I'd hate to get immolated due to an accidental touch with those hands of yours..." Aberforth said, the safety of his bar a far distant second in his mind.

"No, I am only half-Veela. My change was permanent." Dark resignation filled her voice, and Aberforth seemed to almost pity her. "We need to get into Hogwarts."
A nearby portrait unlocked a hidden doorway, exposing a long passageway. Fleur shrugged her thanks and released the aged barkeep.

"The Daily Prophet reported that Hermione claimed the Right to Succession, and that it's Narcissa Granger now. What's that about?" Ron asked ambiguously.

As the trio made their way through the darkness, Fleur sighed heavily. "Purebloods like the Malfoys kept to the Old Ways. It ensured a strong union, but also allowed for one to duel for the witch, ensuring that the most powerful Wizard produced the most offspring. 'Might is Right', you could say."

"But they are both women! She can't... you know... do that." Ron replied, horrified.

"She killed Lucius in his home, she wins his wife. It is that simple." Fleur replied, disgusted at the archaic laws.

"And You-Know-Who went along with it? He was always about blood purity and killing her kind!" Ron questioned loudly.

"Mad men in power seldom make sense; perhaps he wanted to stick to the Old Ways." Fleur spat, her eyes narrowing in the darkness, "Who are you?!" Her sharp voice echoed to the other end of the corridor.

"Neville Longbottom. About time you showed up, Ronald! Who is that with you? Is Harry here?"

Narcissa and I dressed in the awkward silence, unsure of what to say now. She knew I wouldn't raise a wand against the Order, but I also wasn't about to leave her and Draco to Voldemort's mercy.

We were each in our tactical robes as we left the gates of the manor to apparate to the Forbidden Forest. Bellatrix seemed oddly gleeful; she must have been scheming something while we were... indisposed.

"Stow your wand. Inside pocket." Narcissa whispered as she picked up a stick and looked at it. I slipped it in, confused at what was going on.

With a deft tap, the stick was transfigured into a wand and put into my hand. It felt hollow, and I knew I couldn't cast any spells with it.

As I looked at her questioningly, Narcissa took my hand and hooked it into her arm. "I'll apparate us, Hermione." She said quietly as I felt the tight bands of apparition take us away. It was a quiet pop, surprising me at the control and delicate grace she had with her magic.

The Death Eaters were all preparing to attack Hogwarts, but there was a noticeable absence of blonde hair in the crowd. What is Draco up to?

The fake wand in my hand was casually pulled out of my hands and snapped cleanly in two by Voldemort as if it were an afterthought. "In case you had any bright ideas, Mudblood..." Narcissa saved my wand for me! The look she gave me told me she had expected as much, and then her eyes widened as comprehension dawned on her.

"Bella, where's my son?" The thread of panic in Narcissa's voice set me on alert.
"Shh... Draco is going to just nip into the school, bring back Potter, and then I'll get the honor of making you a widow again!" The broken smile on her face shone with a warped sense of childishness. It was like she was a broken teenager in the body of an adult, and for a moment I was more afraid of her than Voldemort. *She's never going to give up on seeing me dead, despite being related to her and a parent to her sister's child.*

"They know we are out here with The Dark Lord; the Order will kill him on sight!" I exclaimed, eyes widening as a giant and a werewolf cut through the trees to reach Bellatrix.

"Oh, duty calls..." Bellatrix turned away, helping organize creatures enlisted for Voldemort. Narcissa looked to me, the utter look of heartbreak in her face told me all I needed to know.

"He's only doing this out of fear, we have to stop him. We have to get out of this fight; I can't bear to lose any more family..." Narcissa said, tears threatening to fall. I cupped her cheek and reassured her. *This has to end, now.*

"I know, Cissy. I won't let harm come to him." I knew in that moment that I'd give my life for her, and her son. I was oddly okay with it.

Yanking the spare button off of the robes, a cold feeling washed over me as Narcissa nodded that the disillusionment charm activated properly. Pulling out my wand, I made my way into Hogwarts through the Shrieking Shack.

Hogwarts feels different; this is nothing like the school I came to. Even under the worst days under Umbridge's supposed rule, the school never felt this barren and dark. I knew that if something would be hidden here, it would have been in the Room of Requirement.

Once in the seventh floor corridor, I saw Harry, Ron, and Fleur fly out, carrying Draco and Goyle out behind them on brooms. *Draco! You're alive!*

"I can't believe we risked our lives to save him, Harry!" Ron cried out as they got off of their brooms. Fleur shrank them down and tossed them into a pocket as they ran off. I could barely make out the Veela saying something about Nagini.

The voice of The Dark Lord boomed into the night air. The magic it seemed to require squeezed at my wrist, and I noticed both Draco and Goyle were flinching in pain as he spoke.

"I know that you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have until midnight."

As the pain receded, I cancelled the disillusionment spell and approached Draco. "Your mother sent me to come get you. We are leaving. Now." Draco's fear quickly morphed into the classic sneer. *He was unsure how to react to me around Goyle.*

"Step-Father... how did you escape?"

"Draco, your mother and I were worried!" Goyle broke out in laughter, which seemed odd since Crabbe wasn't around. *Where was the daft boy?*

"The Mudblood is your new daddy... my, how the Malfoys have fallen!"

"Shut your mouth, Goyle! I..." Draco's voice wavered, "...can get us back in The Dark Lord's good graces if I hand over Potter and tell him that the Diadem he wanted was destroyed!"
"You do that and he'll kill all of us! You know he's become unstable!" I wouldn't admit it was a Horcrux in front of Goyle. But that just leaves the snake, right? Locket, Ring, Diary, Diadem, something of Hufflepuff... so that leaves Nagini.

"You're gonna be a good little boy and obey your Mudblood Daddy?" Goyle raised his wand at me, venom in his words. "Cruci-"

"NO!" Draco exclaimed, putting himself in the wand's path, making Goyle flick his wand away. It happened so fast that I didn't even have time to think, yet Draco got in the way to protect me!

Goyle's face went livid at that, centering his wand on Draco. "Blood Traitor! The Dark Lord will praise me for bringing back your head..." He flourished his wand as he tried to align a dark spell at my Draco. It felt as though time had slowed to a crawl, and my vision tunneled directly onto him. My son. I couldn't let that happen.

An arm shoved him aside.

Wand pointed square at his eyes.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Goyle fell, dead.

I blinked as my awareness expanded, and cold air hit my lungs. The sounds of the battle came back to me, and my eyes fixed on Draco. I felt woozy, like I had been woken from a deep sleep.

He was frozen in shock.

"Draco." His distant stare seemed unfocused and glazed over. I called his name again.

No response.

"You killed him." His voice was small; it was a child losing their innocence. I didn't know he had any left, but there it was. Voldemort didn't steal the last of his innocence away. I did.

"He threatened family." I said flatly, our eyes finally meeting. I knew my eyes held a cold resignation in them, and it should have scared him. This should be scaring me.

"Doesn't matter now, does it? The Dark Lord's going to win..."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy, Voldemort will be defeated today! You either can help me do this or stay out of the way, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, mum." Draco seemed a bit cowed at this. Finally he listens to me.

I looked at him and thought for a moment. "I promised my wife to keep you safe... so forgive me for this, okay?" Draco looked at me puzzled as hit his face with a series of jinxes and charms. He cradled his face in his hands and tentatively poked at his new face.

"Bloody hell, you just made me look all bruised and buggered like you did to Harry back at my home, didn't you?" Draco's voice was blunted by the swollen nose and mouth. So he did know, and didn't want to hand us over.

I sighed, realizing it wouldn't be enough. "It's just temporary. But your blonde is going to be like a beacon..." Pointing my wand, I charmed his hair to darken.
"Not ginger, anything but ginger..." Draco plead, eyes tightly shut.

"Be glad you're not a witch! Now that I think about it, perhaps I could..." I thought aloud, only to have him thank me and say that he'd follow me.

The ghost of Nearly Headless Nick hovered in front of us. "Miss Granger, I have missed you this year at Hogwarts. But, I've been tasked to recruit people for triage to help Madam Pomfrey. Do you think you and... is that Percy... go help with the wounded?"

I nodded, taking Draco's hand to keep him silent. "Of course, Percy and I would love to go help..."

"Salazar's Snake, he thinks I'm the ponciest Weasley..." Draco muttered under his breath.

"Hermione... I didn't want any of this." Draco's voice reflecting how broken he felt. Having seen this much death and pain has finally shaken him to his core, realizing how little blood purity really matters. I was actually proud of how much he's grown since I punched him in third year. *If only someone punched Tom Riddle when he was a kid, would we be here today?*

Luna winced as Draco mended her broken bone, guilt etched in his swollen face as she thanked him. "Glad to see you're on our side finally."

"Uhm, thanks, Luna. The Ministry seemed... unusual, as of late." Draco replied, trying to affect a Percy-like demeanor.

"I know it's you, Draco. It's a good glamour, though I can tell your eyes aren't that of a Weasley. Those eyes, plus being in disguise, could only be a Malfoy." Luna's voice was soft and forgiving, making Draco choke up slightly. There was something in the way she looked at him that was pleasant yet unsettling to me.

"Um, look, I'm really sorry-" *Oh bloody hell he's blushing.* I backed away, giving them just a bit of space as I made a quick inventory and saw what potions would need to be replenished.

"I know. I heard you lie to protect Harry. You were as much of a prisoner as I was there. Once this is over, I'll testify in your defense."

"You think we'll win?" Draco asks, dumbfounded. Luna glanced to me and smiled warily.

"I think we will."
Harry, Ronald, and Fleur snuck out of the Shrieking Shack, shocked at the brutal, senseless death of Snape. Their chance to kill Nagini seemed lost as Fleur tried to plan a way to break past the line of Death Eaters, Snatchers, and Dementors in order to get at the snake again.

As they were getting back into the Great Hall, Voldemort's voice pierced the air again.

"You have fought valiantly, but in vain. I do not wish this. Every drop of magical blood spilt is a terrible waste. I, therefore, command my forces to retreat. In their absence, dispose of your debt with dignity. Harry Potter, I now speak directly to you. On this night, you have allowed your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. There is no greater dishonor. Join me in the Forbidden Forest and confront your fate. If you do not do this, I shall kill every last man, woman and child who tries to conceal you from me."

"You think he'll do that?" Ron asked the pair of them.

"I don't know, he hasn't killed her yet and that was after she killed Lucius..." Harry replied.

"The crazy man is trying to play with your head. We fight, we kill him, he dies. That is all we need to know." Fleur's conviction only sharped at the loss of her husband, along with her human visage.

A flash of red hair went by, and Ron's knees gave out beneath him. "NO!"

Harry caught his friend as the body of Fred Weasley was laid to rest by the bodies of Remus and Nymphadora Lupin. Ron was distraught as Ginny and Molly held each other, lamenting the newly orphaned Ted Tonks.

Nodding his condolences to an awkward-seeming Percy, Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak and made his way to the Headmaster's office. He needed closure with Snape; to understand why the man would notice and mention his eyes.

Harry made his way to meet his destiny, his death. Fleur and Ron knew to kill the snake, but he also let Neville know to go after Nagini. Just in case. Harry's heart was erratic and adrenaline was making him want to run away, as fast and as far as he could. But he knew he couldn't.

Albus and Severus had set it up perfectly.

"He won't come, My Lord. I've sent Draco in to get him..." Bellatrix said, her voice trailing into a silent scream as Voldemort tortured her recklessly.

"Do NOT presume on my behalf! EVER!" Flicking his wand outward, he sliced through a dozen robed wizards as they fell dead onto the the grass beneath them. It no longer mattered whose side you were on; if Voldemort was unhappy, you would die. Along with everyone around you.

Harry pulled his cloak off with a flourish, keeping his wand safely stowed in his sleeve. He thought to himself the final brother in the tale, and accepted death as an old friend...

"Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. Come to meet your death." Voldemort intoned as Harry glanced around, noting the lack of Hermione in the group.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked, and Voldemort's head turned as he searched his ranks, keeping his wand pointed at the boy.
"I am no longer concerned about the Mudblood." White eyelids narrowed over red slits, his fractured mind fighting to refocus on what he had before him. "I'm going to kill you, Potter."

For a moment, Voldemort seemed confused at the lack of fight Harry was putting up. But he felled the Boy Who Lived all the same with the Avada Kedavra.

Narcissa was shocked at what she had seen. The Potter boy had just let himself stand there and get killed, only to see the spell rebound and knock them both out. Are they both dead? Is it over?

Before she could wonder, Voldemort began to stir. If he was alive, maybe so was Potter!

It only took a split second, but Narcissa knew to protect her wife's best friend. As Voldemort waved people away from him, Narcissa was already bending over Harry, ready to stun him and pass him off as dead. Hopefully he would understand, giving her enough time to plan an escape to then... she had no idea. One thing at a time.

"Is he dead, Narcissa?" Voldemort asked, panic threading through his voice.

Her hand went over his chest and felt the strong, steady heartbeat. Her eyes widened in shock. She knew stunning him might still get him killed, or torn apart, or even fed to Nagini.

"Help." he whispered, realizing it was me. "Tell him I'm dead."

"Slytherin's Snake! My family, are they okay?" Narcissa whispered in a rush, not knowing how much time they might have.

"Draco's fine; Hermione... I thought she was with you..."

Narcissa's head turned, "He's dead, my Lord!" a tear rolled down her cheek. She didn't know if Hermione was okay, and would give everything just to survive the day.

It was nearing the end of the cease-fire, and I had been too focused on bandaging up the wounded to notice the absence of my stepson until I noticed how quiet it had been. I am too young to call him that. He is just Draco...

Movement at my periphery had me jerk my eyes up, and I found myself at wand-point with Neville Longbottom.

"Where was I when you went after the Philosopher's Stone?" Neville asked coldly. Behind him was a pair of Percy Weasleys, one of them bound up in magical rope. The un-bound Percy had fewer bruises and a scowl that looked like it could be as bad as McGonagall's.

"Nev... I stunned you before your well-meaning intentions would have helped Voldemort return! Percy, let him go."

"I've seen the Daily Prophet. Usually it's all bollocks these days, but the Ministry records don't lie. You've joined their side, and this is a Death Eater!" Percy's wand wasn't raised at me, however. So far, so good I guess. Draco rolled his eyes at the accusation.

"You're not just a ponce, you're a bloody idiot! I've been helping heal people here!" Draco replied, teeth clenched.

"Hermione, we can't seem to undo whatever charms you put on him. Do it. Now." Neville's face
was filled with determination and authority, and for once I heard the threat in his voice and grew concerned.

"Fine." I relented, hoping my anger would be seen as not being ashamed for being found out, "but you will not bring any harm to Draco, is that clear?"

Percy nodded, releasing his doppelganger as Neville blinked at the admission. "You're really married to that bitch."

As I took down the glamour, Draco chuckled darkly. "Dare you to say that to my mum's face and see what happens. You wanna hate my father? We'll hold a bloody convention for everyone that does." He spat the last sentence out as he stepped around the boys and came abreast of me. Us against the world? Maybe, but I like our odds.

A young boy from Hufflepuff ran up to us. His eyes were red with tears.

"Hey, Snake-face is advancing with his... with everyone. And Hagrid's carrying Harry's... body."

Narcissa's heart leapt as she saw Hermione and Draco finally, lining up with the Longbottom boy and the rest of the people opposing The Dark Lord. She saw that they weren't restrained and still had their wands, and breathed a momentary sigh of relief. This battle would be nothing less than a bloodbath, considering how each side considered this to be their last stand. If only she could get them and escape... but she knew Hermione would want to stay and fight.

Grim determination would make even the kindest people do the most savagely barbaric act in the hopes of survival, and she knew that both sides of the conflict would want to see either herself of Hermione dead. They would have to fight and keep fighting to be accepted, but as Narcissa laid eyes on the chestnut curls, she knew it would be worth it.

Harry had maintained his ruse as his body had been banged up for sport. They were lucky that nobody tried a severing charm to behead him, either. There were so many things that could go wrong and Narcissa had to remain calm and trust the boy to be convincingly dead.

As the Dark Lord's forces were marshaled behind him, he charmed his voice for all to hear.

"Wizards and witches, Harry Potter... is dead! Put down your wands; I do not wish to spill any more magical blood here. Lord Voldemort is merciful; no retribution will befall any purebloods that have opposed me. Draco, come back to me."

There was a tangible tension in the air as Hermione stepped forward, putting herself between the young man and The Dark Lord. The act of defiance was not missed as gasps could be heard in the silence.

"No, Cissy, come join us. And anyone else who wants to stop Voldemort!" Narcissa couldn't help but marvel at her wife's bravery.

"You dare, Mudblood? Defy me? On the Eve of my victory?" His laugh demanded all of the Death Eaters to join in as well. Few did, though. Narcissa took that moment and ran to Hermione and Draco, clasping her in reassurance while keeping their eyes trained on the enemy ranks.

"NARCIssa!" Bellatrix shouted in surprise. The Dark Lord silenced her with a spell, his red eyes narrowed in decision.

"I'll kill them all, mudblood stud included. Now, anyone who.." Voldemort's speech was cut off as
Neville used a voice amplifying charm.

"Hey, loser, we're not giving up. We stand with Harry."

"Harry Potter is dead! Who are you, boy?"

"Neville Longbottom. My parents send their regards! DUMBLEDORE'S ARMY!" Neville raised his wand to attack, only to be bound and disarmed.

"You will fail and die."

"I would rather die on my feet than live on my knees!" Neville shouted as his bound form was levitated towards Nagini.

"So be it."

My jaw clenched as too much happened too fast. Neville was free of his bonds, the snake sprang to attack, the Sword of Gryffindor glinted as it struck. Harry disappeared as Voldemort flinched at the death of his last living horcrux.

"I WILL KILL YOU ALL FOR THIS!"

As the killing curse flew towards Neville, he was jerked back by a very visible and very alive Harry Potter. The curse struck the Gurg of the giants, the crash of his death keeping everyone rooted in their place.

"Nobody help me, I've got to finish this myself!" Harry shouted, keeping his wand trained on Voldemort.

"He doesn't mean that, he only lives by luck and by his friends sacrificing themselves for him."

"Was it luck when I destroyed your diary? Luck when I overcame your possessing me? Luck when you tried using the killing curse on me a half hour ago?"

"Pure luck! But I have the Elder Wand, taken from Dumbledore's tomb!" Why is he just standing there talking and not just killing him?

"How sad Tom. You're a petty criminal, resorting to robbing graves for the Deathstick that's not living up to its name."

"I killed Severus, my loyal servant, who killed Albus. The wand's loyalty is to me."

"You've made a big mistake, Tom. Severus was never yours! He loved my mother and was loyal to avenging her death!"

"He only Desired her, foolish boy. And if the wand of destiny is not mine, we duel on skill alone, and I will kill you." Wait. Draco disarmed Dumbledore. I was chosen by Draco's wand. Is the Wand of Destiny mine?

"I'm going to give you one last chance. Surrender and we'll make you live your sentence out in Azkaban. Show that you have remorse and you can live."

"Is this your plan, Potter? Appeal to my humanity? Is this the power the prophecy spoke of?"

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice
defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... ".

The power is born to those who have thrice defied him. I escaped Nagini at Christmas. Narcissa swapped my wand. Draco refused to rejoin his ranks. Born as the seventh month dies... What happened in July?

As they circled each other to size each other up for the duel, it hit me. It wasn't just love that was the power, but the melding of Gryffindor courage and Slytherin conviction. This was the power that he knew nothing of. Elbowing my wife, I accepted the strength and power that came from the Compulsion. The resolve in Narcissa's face told me she knew what I was going to do.

"...been looking forward to this day, Hermione. Charity shouldn't have been killed like that..."

"Draco... Draco disarmed Albus." Voldemort's red eyes flicked between Harry and myself. He must have wondered if attempting to kill Draco would result in another rebounded curse as Narcissa and I stood before him.

My wand was trained on him, steady and sure. Narcissa's joined mine, and Draco raised his own as well. He didn't even look the least bit worried at the three of us having our wands drawn.

"I will strike him down, Mudblood."

"But someone got to him first, Tom!" Harry called out, as if he needed the attention back on himself. What are you doing Harry?!

"Someone who possesses the other Deathly Hallows!"

The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed in fury as he faced The Boy who Wouldn't Stay Dead. Holy fuck, Harry thinks he is the master of the Elder Wand. And he just told everyone.

I turned my head enough to see Draco's nod, his resolve as we were a family forged in desperation and death.

Unified, the Grangers cast the Killing Curse.
Chapter Summary

This is a light and fluffy chapter after all that has just happened. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

A/N: Odette Parkinson (née Shafiq) is not a canon character, but obviously Pansy had to have had a Pureblood mother and the Shafiq lineage is one of the un-remarked upon 'Sacred Twenty-Eight' pureblood families that was around at this time.

It was a lazy Tuesday afternoon and because of the rain, most of the Slytherins were cooped up in the common room. Narcissa was sprawled sideways on a sofa seat, ankles dangling over the arm rest, as she took a hit from the joint being passed around. On her muggle record player, Sabbath Bloody Sabbath was playing.

"Sev, your turn." Narcissa leaned over to pass it to him, which he took politely and passed it on, not smoking it himself.

"I wish to keep my mental acuity, but thank you." Bellatrix cackled as she took two hits from the joint before passing it on.

"Severus, are you doing homework while the rest of us are smoking grass?" Narcissa chuckled softly at the thought of that.

"No, I'm working on something else. Something new." Her ears perked up at that, and she swung her legs off of the sofa, standing over Severus' notes

"What are you trying to invent, Sev?" He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes glancing at her shorter-than-regulation skirt and missing stockings. She apparently was dressing down for someone, and he could guess it wasn't for the arranged husband-to-be. Severus filed this away, knowing he'd find out eventually.

"I wanted to re-invent the Polyjuice potion; I am certain powerful wizards will pay a small ransom to have a larger…" Severus trailed off; he couldn't actually say it.

"A larger what?" With a flick of his wand, the muffliato charm was cast and they had relative privacy there.

"A larger… manhood. Engorgement charms don't always stay up under the stress of a good shag, and…" His words were cut off by an eager Narcissa.

"Now how do you know that?" Severus' lips pressed together as he fought himself from blushing. "When did it happen?"

"Over Christmas break. Lily and I were caught under some mistletoe and the muggle tradition calls
for a kiss, but apparently she and I both wanted to do more than just that. Don't… please don't let that spread around the school."

"I won't tell a soul. She's a Mudblood, but she makes you happy." There was no scorn or animosity in her words; the term was simply what was used when in the Slytherin Common Room.

"Yes, I wanted to impress her and the spell didn't work for long. When it ended, she was still quite impressed. And it's that insecurity that all men have that will find me my fortune."

Narcissa copied the arithmancy from the book and projected it in the air in front of her, picking apart the values to understand the problem.

"So this is to only alter one specific area of a person." Narcissa went over the eigenvalues, modified the variable for the recipient, and re-solved the equation.

The prediction lines went from a haywire mess to a standard curve. Severus was surprised and thanked her for proving that his potion would (theoretically) work.

"I was trying to account for the sex of the recipient, when really that's a spurious value. Apparently all that matters is the ingredients, the brewing process, and the genetic donor."

At that, Narcissa stilled. "Does this work of off a hair from their head? I've always wondered if Slughorn could see his own willy…"

Severus winced at the thought. "It does require a hair, but… from a different region. From what I can tell, this will only change the morphology of the flesh and not change the actual genetic material that the man has. The last thing I need is a flock of owls coming to me for paternity lawsuits."

Narcissa thought carefully about that. "Who is volunteering their hair for this trial? And who will test it?"

Severus shrugged. "I can't test it myself; there would be no change. And I doubt I can find any bloke around here willing to drop their trousers and pants for science."

Narcissa giggled at that. "I suppose I could try it." She said, her mind plotting away already.

"…but you are a witch. You don't have…"

"Arithmancy doesn't lie. The potion should work fine for me. Besides, I've always wondered what it would be like to have one."

Severus looked at her skeptically, but understood that this would definitely prove the viability of his potion.

Later that month, Narcissa was reviewing her notes for NEWT exams while Severus carefully watched his cauldron simmer and took copious notes on his observations.

"Almost done, Sev?" Narcissa asked, glad to have the excuse to be away from Lucius' egotistical attitude.

"It is currently cooling and I am ensuring that there are no unexpected changes in the color or consistency. But once this is done, I shall add the hair," He pointed to a silver plate that held a single short hair upon it, "and then it is done. The stock of potion should have a shelf-life of a month once opened."
Narcissa checked her pocket-watch and smirked knowingly. Severus ignored her as he carefully decanted the potion into a spherical bottle and added the hair, causing the potion to change to a light grey.

"Alright Narcissa, go ahead and take a sip and let me know how it tastes…"

"…I bet you ask that to all of the girls…" Narcissa interjected, taking the potion away from him.

"…and we can measure the time it takes for it to take full effect as well as if there was any loss when compared to the original."

Narcissa took the potion to her lips and took a healthy swig. "Tastes better than most, gonna go give it a real tryout, though!" And with that, Narcissa pulled her broom out of bookbag and flew out of the room and into the castle, leaving Severus in confusion.

It was easy enough for Narcissa to navigate the halls on broom-stick. It was technically forbidden, but most prefects looked the other way for her, particularly on a weekend. Once she got to the First Floor, she flew into the first unused classroom and flew out of the unlocked window.

It was times like this when she felt free; free of proper Pureblood expectations, free of family obligations, and free of having to be the prim and proper girl that Abraxas Malfoy would expect of his future daughter-in-law.

Here, Narcissa was able to determine where she would go next. Only her. And right now, all she wanted to do was to fly up to her lover's window and see Odette.

Swooping down towards a nearby tree, Narcissa summoned a few of the acorns and caught them as she flew up to Gryffindor Tower.

It seemed silly to be inside on a day like this, but this was ironically the only place where Odette could find solace from the Marauders and their prank-riddled rampage throughout the school. She assumed that the common room was declared 'off limits' only because Lily had asked James to lay off there.

She heard a clicking noise and looked to the window, expecting an owl attempting to make a delivery. She instead faced an exuberant Narcissa Black waving her to come to the window. Odette blushed at the antics that Narcissa would go to at length to impress her, and opened the window to let the witch in.

"No, come on out here, I can fly both of us on this broom." Narcissa said flirtingly, holding her broom handle suggestively. Odette rolled her eyes but laughed as she looked around the common room, made sure nobody noticed her, and she stepped out of the window.

The cushioning charm worked perfectly as Narcissa took control of the broom and sailed over the school grounds and made their way to the boathouse. A quick peck on her cheek told her that Narcissa was in a playful mood and up to something. It made the Gryffindor squirm a little on the broom in anticipation, when an unfamiliar sensation alerted her to the difference.

"Cissy… what is… that?" Odette asked curiously. In the distance, she could see a few students on the trail that lead to Hogsmeade. Otherwise, the grounds to the school were oddly empty.

"Oh my, Miss Shafiq, don't you want to be surprised?" Narcissa took the broom down low enough for their feet to graze the ground. Odette hopped off as Narcissa dismounted and the pair ran into the
empty boathouse. Dropping the broom and a quick notice-me-not charm later, the two girls were hungrily kissing each other as if starving for it.

"Is that real? Or did you do some sort of transfiguration?" Odette asked, feeling the firm flesh pressing against her.

"Modified potion, it will only last an hour unfortunately." Narcissa smirked coyly. Odette's adrenaline was still high from the flight, and before she could stop herself Narcissa reached forward, captured her lover's face in her hands, and brought their lips together in a heated kiss.

"Only an hour? Whatever shall we do?" The Gryffindor retorted playfully.

Odette was naturally a head shorter than Narcissa, but they made it work to their advantage. Narcissa kicked off her shoes and Odette was on the tips of her toes as the two witches savored each others' lips with reckless abandon. In fact, the difference in size made it easier for Narcissa to pick up and carry her lover, which was what usually happened as the Gryffindor and Slytherin remained in their lip-lock.

Odette nipped Narcissa's earlobe, eliciting a gasp. Green eyes shone as the Gryffindor apparently had ideas of her own. "Did you cast the repelling charms so we could have some privacy?" Narcissa nodded in affirmation as Odette gave the Slytherin a coy smile as she hooked her fingers around the waistband of her lover's pants and pulled them down as she knelt in front of her.

Narcissa looked down only to see an odd puckering in her Hogwarts skirt, impressed with the size and girth made possible by the so-called Half Blood Prince. Odette's fingers trailed up her skirt teasingly and took a gentle grip on the shaft, lust glazing over her eyes as her lover explored the new appendage.

"So... one hour? I think we can make this work..." Odette smirked as she hiked the skirt up and made a soft swipe of her tongue on her lover's tip.

Narcissa gasped in response. "Trust me, I'm definitely going to make this work. Um... do that again..." The Slytherin gulped in anticipation.

Coyly, Odette complied. She slowly began with the barest trace of tongue around the glans, slowly getting her lips to cover the shaft as she looked up to meet blue eyes. A heavy shudder of breath later and Narcissa's hands were grasping the Gryffindor's head and urging her to go deeper.

Odette giggled at her lover's insistence. "Miss Black, do you wish for me to continue?"

"Slytherin's... Please!"

"I am to please..." Odette's hands clutched onto Narcissa's hips, helping steady herself as the other witch began to rock her hips back and forth. Narcissa looked down and had to marvel at the situation before her; a Gryffindor willingly pleasing her on a Saturday afternoon in the middle of the boathouse.

Narcissa knew exactly how she wanted Odette and wasn't shy about getting it. "Miss Shafiq, turn around and get on your hands and knees." The tone she took left no doubt that this was not an idle request.

"Yes, Miss Black..." came the teasing reply. Narcissa stepped out of the undergarment left at her ankles and cast a stinging hex on her lover's arse before vanishing her own pants. The yelp of surprise was music to her ears as Narcissa cast a perfect Incarcerous, letting the rope bind Odette to the posts where the boats were tied up. Odette obligingly struggled against the restraints for show as
her arms were splayed outwardly and her ankles were fastened loosely to the tie-posts.

"At least you gave me a nice view of the lake from this angle." Odette replied, wiggling her bum teasingly at the Slytherin.

"Don't tempt me to take points away from Gryffindor..." Narcissa replied, effecting the sour attitude and persona of Madame Pince. More than a few times they had nearly been caught snogging in the library by her, and they were pretty certain that the Librarian knew about them. The Black girl knelt behind her restrained girlfriend and gripped her shaft, preparing to fuck her for the first time like this.

"Oh no! Anything but that..." Odette giggled, "I'll be a good Gryffindor." She felt a stinging hex strike her bum, and the Gryffindor moaned at the pleasurable pain. Her lover flipped up her skirt and saw her mons was wet enough that it dripped down onto the wooden dock beneath them.

"And I'll be a good Slytherin..." Narcissa replied, slipping her own sex inside that of her lover's for the first time. It was exquisite; the first sensation was a long, slow embrace of heat tightening around her length that was matched with a primal grunt of satisfaction.

The Slytherin pulled out, waited for her to whimper, and quickly thrust herself back in. She was being cruel, all for the sounds she could make the petite girl make while bound and at her mercy. Odette craned her head back as Narcissa continued to delve into her, their lips craving contact with each other as the shagged relentlessly in the boathouse. The Slytherin leaned in and tried to kiss her, all while keeping up the same tempo that made her lover's face rock slightly and that much harder to kiss.

"Merlin, Cissy..." Odette moaned, trying her best to rock back into the onslaught pounding her. Their rhythm was synchronized and they were as one for a bit, both lost in passion and looking to become undone with each other. Narcissa was almost too far gone to realize that her lover's muscles were pulsating as her legs were going shaky, along with the tell-tale ragged breathing signaled that she was about to orgasm. The Slytherin did notice it however, and therefore she took the time to fuck Odette harder.

Odette's head was thrown back in ecstasy as the waves of pleasure peaked within her and had her screaming Narcissa's name. The Gryffindor went limp in her restraints as Narcissa enjoyed herself and felt her own body prepare to climax.

"What was that, love?" Narcissa asked, unsure if Odette was able to even speak right now.

"Cissy... my god..." The girl couldn't stay coherent as she sagged bonelessly, leaving the ropes as the only support to hold her up.

As the two witches cuddled mid-coitus, Narcissa took a fist-full of her lover's hair near the back of her head and tugged sharply. Neither of them saw the boat pulling into the boathouse that held the Gryffindor Prefects Arthur and Molly, absolute horror etched on their faces.

"I'm going to fuck you 'till I come, Gryffindor." The Slytherin teased, increasing her rhythm as she pounded away at her lover.

Blue wand-fire incapacitated the Blonde witch as Molly set to rescuing her housemate, ignoring everything that Odette was attempting to stammer out in a hurried rush.

The last thing Narcissa remembered before being knocked out was the look of absolute rage on the otherwise gentle Arthur Weasley.
Rebuilding, a possible Annulment, and some light Bondage

I didn't know what to expect, really. As The Dark Lord lay dead, the utter shock and surprise wanted to keep me rooted to the ground. After seven years of hearing about this monster, it was over. He was dead.

Reality should have trickled in slowly, just enough so I could handle it, bit by bit. Instead it was utter chaos. Instant, utter chaos.

The firefight didn't just resume; the two sides were trying to massacre everything else out of sheer self-preservation. Fighters on both sides were getting mowed down as a rainbow of spell-fire lit up the early dawn. Jinxes and curses ricocheted off of each other, causing many to divert from their original path and leaving nobody safe by cover. The centaurs who had tried to stay neutral in this war, stood at the edge of the Dark Forest and were decimated instantly. The remaining ninety percent ran into the woods, only to be overrun by the acromantula and the Dementors. Firenze held his head in shame over at Hagrid's hut, as if he had seen this moment coming for years. Was there something to that whole divination thing after all?

"MOVE IT!" Narcissa grabbed Draco and myself by our wrists and pulled us out of the open battlefield. Draco had raised a shield and the sickly squelch of offensive magic impacting our barrier made me turn around quick enough to see Bellatrix scrambling on her knees towards her fallen master, her eyes betraying the lack of sanity behind them.

"Accio Elder Wand!" I whispered, knowing my wand would come to me. The demented witch saw it fly into my hands as she apparated away.

What is she going to do with the corpse?

My eyes darted to my right wrist, where the mark was fading but not disappearing. I'll have to compare it to Draco's later on.

The Giants and the Dementors seemed to want to still fight, but were willing to kill everything in front of them. Souls were getting sucked out of what must have been the shock troops, as a good quarter of them turned on the Death Eaters that were behind them. They must have been under The Dark Lord's control before...

The hand that pulled me to safety had let go, and only when I turned around to look did I notice Narcissa's arms wrapped tightly around her son. "Draco, you're okay! Let's get you out of here..."

"No mum, innocent people are still here and getting hurt! We're helping. It's what Hermione would do." Draco's shield charm collapsed as an errant spell ricocheted off of it. Narcissa's face flashed in anger as she took him by his casting arm and pulled him away from the fight even harder. Even as she tugged him off-balance, he got another shield up as a hailstorm of stunners were being shot right at us by a masked Death Eater.

"If she wants to just stand here like a stupid Gryffindor and die, let her!" Narcissa's words flew out instantly, and she doubled over in pain from the Compulsion. A rivulet of blood was slowly flowing out of her nose as she forced herself upright. "Sorry, Hermione..." Merlin, is there a way to stop her from hurting herself that way?

Instinctively, my wand was already casting the episkey charm on Narcissa as I was visually scouring the battlefield and finding hostile targets to disable. My wife's eyes narrowed as the spell took effect, twisting her wand with a flick that I recognized as the levicorpus. In the distance, I saw a Death Eater fly into an ambush of Dementors that had no mercy as they fed upon his soul.
As the three of us stood side-by-side, casting whatever spells, jinxes, and hexes to stop the Death Eaters and their allies from slaughtering us all, a gust of displaced air tickled the back of my neck as the tell-tale sound of fire hit my ears. *Oh fuck me, they surrounded us with dragons!*

"What are you still doing here? You're getting attacked by both sides!" Fleur said viciously, throwing fireballs towards some of the defenders of Hogwarts, "LEAVE THE GRANGERS BE! They killed You-Know-Who!"

I turned around to see what was going on and had to dodge a bright blue spell that was coming right at my head. *Why are they targeting me? This is what the muggles call friendly fire, right?*

"All I know is that she's with the Malfoys, and they shot You-Know-Who in the back. Not about to let them do the same to me!" My heart chilled at the sound of Dean's voice. *We had worked on Defensive techniques with Dumbledore's Army...*

"You don't want to do this, Dean. Lower your wand..." Narcissa urged, putting herself between me and the wizard.

"Hermione, we've got a werewolf pack coming towards us.." Draco warned, pulling my attention away from the imminent duel before me. *I don't want to look away from this if I'm needed, but we have an equally important problem coming towards us.*

The werewolves were making a bee-line for us, Fenrir shifting into his beast form outside of the Full Moon. Fleur took to flight, throwing down fireballs that Fenrir was easily evading due to the distance. A jet of purple light blasted into her left wing and she fell to the ground, hard. The fall was no more than 20 or 30 meters, but the sound of the impact told me that she'd be out of the fight for the rest of the day. "Granger..." she wheezed, "grab your shit and go..." A wet, slick cough told me that she'd need a mediwitch sooner than later. I turned my eyes away as I saw blood spatter out of her mouth; it was almost too much for me to bear.

"...no way am I going to trust a fucking Malfoy... RELASHIO!" Dean's spell never hit, and I had to assume Narcissa was taking care of the situation. I kept shooting stunners and took down a few of the werewolves as Draco deflected the hexes coming at us. My hand was itching to take The Elder wand out of its holster, but I didn't want to advertise the fact that I had it like Harry did. *No need to make myself a bigger target.*

"Not a Malfoy anymore, Dean. And I know your father wouldn't be happy with you attacking the very people who struck down The Dark Lord." Narcissa's voice was edgy; she was using excessive restraint with him.

"What do you know of my father? I barely even knew him!" Dean's angry voice was punctuated by his spell-work, and I took a second to glance to see his spells still being deflected.

"Dean, stop it! My wife isn't even attacking you!" I shouted, redoubling my efforts to at least wing the werewolf leader before he gets too close. Gritting my teeth, I let my anger into my magic and wielded it as I switched from stunner spells to the spell I modified at Gringott's.

"FIRE! SLYTHERIN'S... I'M ON FIRE!" Draco shrieked, changing the type of shield he had up, extinguishing the slight smolder on his outer robe. The air felt cool and moist around us, despite the fact that I had molten lava shooting out of my wand and was laying down a kind of fiery moat in front of us. Greyback stopped in his tracks as his minions crashed into each other, the closest ones shrieking in agony as they couldn't stop in time and fell into the burning pool, screaming into silence as the intense heat and fire suffocated them as they roasted alive. *Serves them right for siding with Voldemort. They all should burn in hell.*
A high pitched shriek made me glance back at my wife, bleeding from a nasty cutting hex that Dean must have landed on her. Instinctively my wand carved a gash across his chest, and I had him pinned onto the ground, my boot stomping on the free-bleeding wound and wand pointing directly at his face. "You. Will NEVER. Hurt. Narcissa." I said coldly, my hand trembling in the anticipation to end the life of the miserable wizard beneath me. *It would be oh so easy... just pull out the Deathstick and do it..."

"Hermione, NO!" Narcissa said fearfully. "His father was a good man... My sister and Dolph were supposed to recruit the Pureblood, but he refused and was killed. You BOTH need to stop." I lowered my wand and looked back to where Fenrir was advancing. He was gone. My jaw was clenched and my pulse was quickened with adrenaline. The look in Dean's eyes was of horror as his face went pale.

"He apparated. Bloody coward." I said, shooting curses towards the wizards that were still trying to hex us.

Draco sneered, pushing my foot off of Dean and began to sing a charm to heal the boy's gash. Dean looked shocked at the turn of events, and Narcissa took the moment to pocket his wand out of precaution. "Hermione, you trying to make your friend bleed to death?"

The fight was still going on around us, and the acromantulas were beginning to swarm the battlefield. In the distance, Harry and some Order members were beating back the Dementors with a phalanx of Patronuses. They were about to get overrun with spiders as the House-Elves ran into the field, armed with knives and whatever they could get a hold of to slaughter the incoming arachnids.

"Kreacher! Can you make them do nap-time?!" Narcissa yelled, sure that the elf would be able to hear her over the noise.

"Yes, Former Mistress..." Kreacher said dutifully, muttering as he ran away, "married to the mudblood that finished Master Regulus' task... proud day indeed... but confusing." As he said that, his fingers snapped and a nearby wizard fell unconscious. The other elves did the same thing, and the enemy wizards started to tumble like dominoes.

*What the bloody hell just happened?!* I wondered as narcolepsy rolled over the battlefield like a tidal wave. The remaining werewolves and spiders were easily dispatched as the fighting force dropped to nothing.

"Kreacher?" I asked, and he popped right in front of me.

"Friend of Harry Potter, finishing Master Regulus' duty of destroying the locket, and defeating The Dark Lord... I am at your service." His bow was an awkward, stuttering nod of his head. "Mistress Black would not approve, but perhaps she was mistaken about the pale man..."

"How were you able to do that? Make them all drop?" How come the house-elves didn't do this before?

"House-elves usually avoid Wizard battles, but Kreacher learned from Dobby that some rules ought be... changed."

Draco had an arm around Dean while Narcissa helped revive Fleur. "Wife, House-Elves can spell children to sleep when tasked to. I wasn't sure it would work, but it was worth a shot."

The deep voice of Kingley Shacklebolt boomed over the field. "Okay, they are going to be out for at least three hours. Bind the known Death Eaters and snap their wands, have an Auror take custody of
them. Enemy combatants who don't have the Mark might be under the Imperious Curse, but we should bind them as well. Let's get our injured looked at in the Infirmary. Anyone got medical training?"

A few hands went up, including my wife. Kingsley nodded, "alright, you all go help Poppy in the Hospital Wing. I'll see about getting mediwitches from St. Mungo's here to do triage as soon as possible, but we're probably going to also need more Potions." Narcissa looked to me, nodded knowingly, and set off with Fleur by her side.

Draco shot some sparks in the air, and magnified his voice as well. "I can access the Potions lab and start on those." Dean looked at him shiftily, but nodded his consent to go with him.

Kingsley sighed deeply. "Alright, looks like we all know what to do, either help the injured, or tie up the enemy and send them off to Azkaban for a trial. Let's go!"

"A trial?!" I was livid at the idea. These people infiltrated the Ministry, took power, and destroyed families and killed thousands of Muggle-borns and Muggles and we're going to play the part of nice guys and give them trials to claim innocence and get off?

I began to cross the field, binding witches and wizards that weren't dressed like snatchers or Death Eaters, furious with Shacklebolt's misguided mercy. I came across a mask and pulled it off, exposing the sleeping face of Dolohov.

Antonin Dolohov. The bastard that nearly killed me in the Department of Mysteries.

The scar on my chest made by him twinged and urged me to exact my revenge. I bound the man beneath me, banished the wand out of his hand by a few inches, and relished stomping on it and feeling the thin shaft of wood break under my foot.

"Hermione?" A voice called out behind me, the sound an errant buzz that I shook off. I've got to mean it.

"Hermy!"

"Avada..." A hand clasped my wrist and pulled me away from my prize.

"Hermy-own-knee, no! Don't become them!" It was Viktor. He looked relieved and genuinely happy to see me. Relief was on his face as his lips split into a boyish grin. I smiled back, feeling a bit odd at the surprise reunion.

And then he kissed me.

My heart froze. Viktor Krum... my first crush, first dance, first kiss... his lips were firm and his strong hands were at the small of my back, making me want to...

NO!

I pulled back, eyes wide in shock. His shoulders were broad and his muscles finally filled him out... my heart twitterpated as I saw him and realized I would always find this man handsome.

"Viktor... I..." I'm married. Against my will to a woman that's my mom's age... long story. I couldn't say that. I sighed and bit my lip nervously.

"Are you still involved with the Weasley boy from the wedding?" He asked apologetically.

I shook my head, scoffing at the idea. "Ronald? No..." For the longest time I thought he was going to ask me out, but it never came. Too late now, I suppose...
"Is there another wizard in your life, then?" Viktor's hopeful smile was disarming. "I haff missed you, Her-own-knee." I smiled at that guiltily. A handsome guy that I liked, and Narcissa did say I could have a discrete wizard as a lover...

Shame flooded through me. I couldn't stand to see someone else be the reason why there's a smile on my wife's face, so it's wrong for me to be considering this at all. If I was going to demand her be monogamous to me, I have to do the same for her. But is this a healthy way to look at it, to either be happy or miserable together? What if I still am attracted to men in ways that Narcissa can't be?

"No, not a wizard... but..." I stammered, not sure how I can just say 'married to a witch'. I was saved by Kingsley approaching with Percy right behind him.

"Oh, Hermione, you got Dolohov here! Good..." Percy nodded nervously, his eyes fixated on my tattooed wrist. "Good job." I shrugged my sleeve to cover it up. Kingsley missed the exchange entirely.

"Very good indeed, Hermione. Percy, would you portkey him to Azkaban with the others for trial?" Trial? He's going to go through that farce with them?!

Fury went through me. "You're going to give them trials? They will claim the Imperio and get away with murder again!" Kingsley's hand clapped me on the shoulder and lead me away from the others.

"Hermione, we're arresting everyone who took the mark, and they all will get their fair day in court. If we don't follow our laws and traditions, then what good are we?" His way of saying 'we' bothered me.

"Is the Order in charge of the Ministry now?" Kingsley nodded.

"I've been named temporary Minister of Magic until we can have elections. I'll make sure we improve where the ministry failed before; we'll be driving a strong pro-muggleborn agenda to remove the power from Pureblood interests."

"I'm sorry, Minister," I added as much venom as I could spit into it, "but I didn't take down one secret society that ruled over the Ministry just to put another one in its place."

"Hermione." His voice was trying to authoritative. "This is just an emergency measure; we have to try and stabilize the Wizarding World and rebuild our society."

"And the best way to do that is to NOT allow one kind of Fascism to replace another!" I sniped, turning my eyes away from him. In the further edges of the battlefield, a dozen or so goblins where pick-pocketing the unconscious wizards. What in Merlin's name are they doing?

"Now see here, I've read the records and I can tell you've been under an incredible amount of stress lately so I'm going to forgive you for..." I stepped out towards the goblins, trying to figure out what was going on. Why are they in such a hurry on the... wands.

"Kingsley, the goblins... they are taking up wands." My mind went back to Professor Binns' classes... after every major Wizarding War would be a goblin rebellion. They would stay out of the fights and attack when wizard-kind was at its weakest and trying to rebuild...

"What? Oh, the goblins. They're probably robbing the bodies for galleons. Disgusting. As I was saying, while we're in control of the Ministry, we can wield the power that it has and annul your... 'marriage', as it were." I didn't like the way he said it, as if the idea of me being married to her was disgusting.
He really doesn't see what's going on, does he? "Wait... you can annul my marriage?" What will happen to Narcissa? Why have I never thought of this as a possible solution? I should have considered the thought that I could undo this. The concept that I couldn't even think of divorce unnerved me.

"I don't see why not; Wizards and Witches end their unions all the time." He shrugged absently, "It shouldn't be any different, in theory."

Okay, I can get out of this... maybe. "Let's do that! I mean, what would it entail? You do realize that it's not just a Marriage but a full Bonding, including a Compulsion, right?" His face went pale.

"I... well... we can legally recognize the... dissolution... but the Bonding and associated Compulsion Curse has gone out of vogue for that reason." He flashed an uncertain smile. "But at least getting it annulled would keep you from being tried alongside the Malfoys." So I could still be left panting like a bitch in heat for this woman? I want my life back!

"Why would they be on trial! We killed Voldemort!" We saved the bloody world from him and that's the thanks we get?

"Narcissa and Draco did collaborate with You-Know-Who, and any financial penalties and restitution will hit you as well. We need you to essentially revoke all claim to the family and disown them." He took a gentler tone. "I'll help walk you through this; Merlin knows we never expected a witch to claim the Rite of Succession and take the wife as her own..."

"I want my life back, Kingsley! I didn't choose to take Narcissa on as a lover!" My outburst shocked him into silence.

"You've not... consummated, have you?" His face was grave. How dare he judge me like that! He had no idea what it was like!

"It was a bit difficult not to! And the things I may or may not have done with her are none of your business!"

Viktor had his hand on my wand-arm, and I had to fight the urge to elbow him away from me. Merlin, I'm as testy as when I had to wear that damned locket.

"I think you can do some good helping with potions for the Hospital Wing." I nodded my agreement as we headed back towards the castle. The strewn-about rubble was getting cleaned up by loyal house-elves as everyone who was still able-bodied was getting impressed to help tend to the wounded. Ginny was levitating a body to the Great Hall since the Hospital Wing was overrun.

"So you are married, but to a Pureblood witch?" Viktor asked.

"Um, yeah. It just kind of happened."

"Then all is well. Purebloods marry for power but take on lovers for pleasure. When I haff to be married, I hope my wife will want a similar arrangement." Any desire I had for the man was instantly doused in ice water.

"That's disdainful. Why marry in the first place if you can't be monogamous?"

"Do you love Narcissa? Or is it simply an arrangement that you have to deal with?"

I paused at the question. I don't love her, but I'm not about to abandon them if they are going to be thrown in Azkaban. "It's complicated."
"Then why are you married to her?"

Narcissa was glad that she got her license in mediwizardry after all; though Lucius would not see her soiling her hands by having a menial job when she should be a proper housewife and have at least half a dozen children, she wanted to have something to show for her six NEWT's. Before her hands were bloodstained as the wife of a Death Eater. Now they were drenched in blood from saving their lives.

As for her high marks in the supposedly easy subject of charms, it was definitely paying off as she removed the acrid smell of cauterized flesh from the makeshift hospital that was the Great Hall. Dark Magic was used extensively in the battle, and many wounds were hexed specifically to not heal on their own. It was a horrible solution that most Healers would not have considered, rather letting the corruption slowly creep across the body as a slow-moving cancer that would eventually prove fatal; but Poppy saw the results and agreed that Narcissa's radical treatment was for the best.

They saved as much of the body as they could, but the excising and amputation of flesh had to be done with Dark Magic in order to stop the cursed flesh from jumping the node.

The wizard before them had his ankle bone melting out of a wound in his skin, and would have been screaming in pain if Narcissa hadn't spelled him unconscious. Poppy wasn't a fan of her bedside manner.

"Honestly, Narcissa, you ought to be a bit more compassionate to your patients."

"And they all should realize how much they are taxing my patience." Casting the diagnostic charm, they were able to see where the curse was centralized in the wound before it began to spread. *Twisting the curse so it can recognize medicinal spellwork and retaliate is just... too intelligently evil.* She didn't want to analyze it too deeply, but the spellwork was too sentient and too rooted in Necromancy for her to miss her sister's signature.

Poppy's wistful voice broke Narcissa's reminiscing. "I wish Severus were around still, he was able to retard this kind of curse in Albus'." She trailed off, the uncomfortable moment languishing between them. Narcissa cast the impervious charm and set to using the Sectumsempra curse to save the rest of the person.

"Well, he's dead now, and all he could do was buy the old man some time. Besides, I'm pretty certain that he was ordered by Albus to do whatever it took to secure his position with the Death Eaters, including euthanizing him." Narcissa would have pitied his death, but she knew better. At least *Severus would be less unhappy now.*

"Albus, order his own death?! He was... admittedly, eccentric... but that?" Narcissa grimaced as the spell took hold and cleaved the flesh in two. Poppy was shuddering at the sound of slicing bone as she prepared to cauterize the wound. *Out of the many ways someone could refer to his homosexual inclination, 'eccentric' is one of the more polite ones.*

"My son was ordered to dispatch Albus," both women scoffed at the notion, "and Bellatrix and I twisted Severus' arm into making the Unbreakable Vow to do the job himself if Draco failed. My son's no killer, and I doubt Severus could get away with killing my sister then."

"He could have easily killed you, though!" Poppy exclaimed as the rotten foot fell to the ground and she incinerated it.
"Other than his mother, I'm the closest thing to family he ever had. He would never harm me or my boy. I... I never should have made him take the Unbreakable Vow to kill Albus..." Narcissa said.

"So both sides conspired among themselves to assassinate Albus?"

Of course, that was when Ginny would show up and ask what her next task was. "Harry praised Severus as a hero; he apparently did all that double agent work because he loved Lily. " She seemed too innocent to have to see any of this, but war changes people. Never for the better. Ginny's eyes lingered on the wizard's stumpy leg for a moment too long before she jerked out of it.

"I suppose Severus is a hero then. Merlin knows he wouldn't want to be called that."

"Mrs... Uh, Black? I wanted to ask after Hermione. How... How is she?"

Narcissa bit her lip, and considered her words carefully. "It's Granger now, and she's still having to adjust to all that happened. But physically? I've healed her injuries, and will do everything in my power to make sure she never gets hurt again."

The youngest Weasley nodded her understanding. "Never saw her as a fan of the Holyhead Harpies." Ginny had mumbled it, but the slight disgust was evident in her crinkled nose.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm just saying, we were good friends for years, and I had no idea that she was into..." She held her tongue. "Well, she was raised in the muggle world; probably doesn't know better."

"Ginevra Weasley, are you saying that my wife is mentally deficient because she might like women?"

"Well of course not, she's brilliant, but just... Not right, you know?"

"She and I just killed the most evil wizard on the planet, and you think she's not right in the head?"

"Well, you were married and had a son with Lucius, so you can't be a gay." Narcissa felt like she had her work cut out for her as she sighed and calmed herself.

"Whether she has romantic feelings towards women or not doesn't make her any less of a person, either morally, mentally, or any other metric one could compare others. Some women only want a man with wealth and power, some only are attracted to a certain physique, a few out there really have a thing for gingers... An attraction to women is no different. And I think she could use all the friends she could get right now, because a lot of people are going to say horrible things about her now."

Ginny nodded, but Narcissa could tell that it would take time for her to unlearn some stubborn Gryffindor prejudices. "She didn't choose to do this on purpose, did she?"

"No, she didn't. And I'm fairly certain she still only likes boys."

Relief flooded her face. "Thank Merlin! I was worried I never noticed in the years we shared a bedroom when she came to visit..." Narcissa knew that Hermione never chose this and, if given the opportunity, would not want to choose her. It hurt on a level she didn't expect it to.

"I should get back to helping the patients..." Narcissa said in a hurry, blinking tears away.

Ginny finally noticed the woman before her. "Oh, and now you're stuck as her wife..."
"Ginevra, do you think any less of me if I fancy Hermione? So far, she's been a far better husband than Lucius. I haven't had to glamour away bruises he used to give me."

"Mrs. Granger... I had no idea. But I guess Hermione would be as good or better than some guys out there. Better than Pansy, at least. She's worse than one of Hagrid's nifflers."

Narcissa chuckled quietly. "The quality of the partner matters more than blood status or gender in my accounting." Poppy had left them and was treating other patients as Narcissa turned away to do the same.

"Did you always know you liked women? Why did you marry Lucius?"

Ginny's question stunned her as she thought of a new way to answer it, and in a way that should sway many others to make her marriage socially acceptable.

"I did; the first crush I had in my third year was to a witch. But I married Lucius because it was expected of me. Did you know that in my parent's generation, it was a public scandal to have a Pureblood marry a Muggle? To the point where you could get labeled a social pariah and nobody would do business with you?"

"That's silly! I knew that your sister was disowned, but I just thought that the Black family were all just backward, Pureblood supremacists."

"Everyone was, though. Society as a whole saw it as 'wrong' and the Weasleys were the first to say otherwise and change the minds of people. Someday the same will happen for when two wizards or witches fall in love."

"Then I guess as Hermione's friend, I get to threaten you with a bat-bogey hex if you ever break her heart." Her smirk was a little too knowing and Narcissa realized that it wasn't an empty threat. But maybe that means I've gained her trust?

They went over to a patient whose trembling was obviously an after-effect of spell damage. Narcissa showed the young woman how to check for Dark Magic before using any diagnostic spells.

They were leaning over their patient as the venomously sweet voice shot a frozen bolt into her.

"Moving on already? My, the ink isn't even dry on the paperwork and you're already looking for your next victim?"

Narcissa could tell that whatever persuasion she had with the reporter before was already gone.

"What are you talking about, Rita? I'm here treating the injured!"

"Oh, was this a way for you to have your cake and eat it too? To trample on our ways and traditions so you could parade about with your young witch lover?"

"You used to be a great reporter. Now you're just a ghoul."

"Well I am following the death of your Sodomite Marriage. Hermione's talking to the interim Minister of Magic for an annulment... when she's not off snogging Viktor Krum..."

Cold fury raged through Narcissa and she strode to leave the Great Hall as Molly came in, relieved to see Ginny was alright and eyes narrowed at the former Malfoy matriarch.

"You stay AWAY from my daughter, she's not even of age!" Molly said quietly, her teeth bared and
Dracon and I worked well in the comfortable silence, and I had to wonder how things would have worked out between us as classmates if I had been at least a Half-blood in Ravenclaw. *Would he have given me begrudging respect? He never seemed to hate me as much as Harry...*

As I prepared the sopophorous bean, Draco glanced over and made a suggestion. "Hermione, you'll get better juice if you..."

"...crush with the flat edge of a silver knife? Yeah, I know." I replied off-handedly, making him look at me in wonder.

"And if I told you for every seven counter-clockwise stirs..." He baited, smiling.

"...add one clockwise. Professor Snape gave you private lessons?" I asked, smiling at the idea of how he would teach a private lesson. Without inane dunderheads nearby risking the lives of everyone else, he could focus on so much more of the theory and tweaking potions to have higher effectiveness...

"Yeah. My godfather wanted to teach someone his trade as well as know how to devise the antivenin for Nagini in case he..." His face wavered and he looked away.

"He turned out to be a very good man in the end. Be proud of what he did, and remember why he did it." I consoled.

"But how did you know that? Merlin knows you're not that creative to deviate from the instructions..." I frowned, but knew he was right.

"Harry found Snape's old potions textbook that was heavily annotated. I thought he was cheating."

"Oh, Brilliant! I wondered how he surpassed my own scores in Slughorn's class so easily." Draco's smile disappeared quickly. "I never thought Godfather would... you know. He was too Slytherin to die."

I nodded, stirring the cauldron and lowering the flame so it would simmer. In the quiet companionship after that last battle, I was comforted by how at ease Draco seemed with me. I was not, however, expecting the door to slam open. In surprise, I nearly knocked over the cauldron in front of me as Draco's eyes went wide in panic. Narcissa paced in, her face leaving no room for pleasantry.

"EAGER FOR AN ANNULMENT?! Draco, go find a House Elf and bring us back some food. Take your time." A flick of her eyes to her son and he was off in an instant.

Those same eyes rested on me, with tightly pressed lips conveying quiet rage. When she spoke, her jaw barely moved.

"Why am I hearing this from that... vile... reporter?" *Oh, bugger. I was going to try talking to her first... Weren't they lovers at one point?* It hit me like a ton of bricks. Rita would have assumed that she was the only one, and was now not only a scorned woman, but one that realized she had been played and used for years.
I then also realized that I had a legitimate right to be upset, and seeing as she wanted to talk, I could take the time to tell her off for why I had been angry at her. *She never made this easier for me to adjust to, and I shouldn't have to suffer because I did the world a favor by ridding it of Lucius Malfoy. And at this rate, Rita and her damned beetle form to boot.*

"I should have drowned that bug in the lake when I could..." I muttered, anger rising within me, "Should I list the reasons, wife? I'm eighteen, I've never even had a relationship before, I'm not ready to settle down, specially with a woman, particularly one whose son I went to school with!

"I want to go out on dates, get sloshed at a pub, go dance at the Candy Bar, just be carefree like every other kid out there my age! I want to be wooed. I deserve romance! We don't have a relationship, we have a fucking contract with a FUCKING sex clause!" *I don't care if women were historically treated like property and the laws reflect that, I am NOT property, nor do I wish to own anyone! I want to decide whom I love and desire!*

Narcissa looked stricken at the words, but she looked more angry than hurt.

"Romance? What does Marriage have to do with romance? It's a moot point; what's done is done. Honestly, what did you think a marriage was in the Pureblood world? Flowers and candy every night? I heard about your kiss with Viktor. I said you could have a discrete lover, not get caught by Rita herself and turn us into a front page scandal!"

"I didn't kiss Viktor, he kissed me! And I won't do some sham open marriage; I don't cheat! Perhaps you can whore yourself around all you want, but damn it, I have standards!" Narcissa flinched back as if slapped in the face.

"How. DARE. You. Do - NOT - presume to judge me for the choices I've had to make in my life." The sound of stomping feet caught our attention as errant spell-fire went off nearby.

"Time to make all those bloody Slytherins pay for their shit!" A voice called out, slurred.

"This is for Cedric!" Another voice called out, and a small explosion charm hit.

"Fucking Pureblood scum, I swear I wanna see them all burn like in the stories..."

Narcissa and I exchanged a knowing glance. Our fight would have to wait if we're about to be outnumbered by an unknown number of drunk troublemakers looking to loot and pillage the Slytherin area in the dungeons.

She took point at the doorway, casting some basic defensive wards to attempt to repel them, as I went to the storeroom and cast bubble-head charms on both of us. As I quickly grabbed the ingredients for garrotting gas, Narcissa looked over at me and nodded her understanding and hexed the lights to dim outside.

"How many?" I asked, charming a bubble-head charm around the cauldron, once the ingredients were all added. *Never did find a self-stirring cauldron...*

A flick of her wand later, she responded. "At least 6 right now, give me a second and I can determine how drunk..." A small blast went off near her. "Some are sober enough to aim and dumb enough to kill, damn it! Depulso!"

I had a cauldron that I couldn't stir without gassing ourselves as Narcissa was dueling with kid gloves, merely trying to push them back. "Use Bombarda! That might actually stop them!" Thinking quickly, I pushed a stirring rod past the charm and into the cauldron, using my wand to levitate and stir the potion remotely. It took more effort than if I did it manually, but this way was safer.
"But Depulso isn't lethal, Hermione. They might just be angry idiots trying to blow off steam."

"I don't care if it's Justin Finch-Fletchley with the damned Choir, they aren't about to come down here and attack us!" I replied, levitating the cauldron and making my way carefully to the door. Narcissa had her wand out and took over levitating the cauldron for me, shooting it down the hallway towards the looters and followed it up with a *Confringo* hex. The blast undid the bubble-head charm on it, and I could hear bodies dropping like flies as I pulled Narcissa in from the doorway and slammed the door shut, charming it to seal entirely.

*For having to improvise and fight off unknown assailants with no warning, we certainly can work like team...*

I had Narcissa pinned to the wall, and all I could think of was how naturally we fit together. How close those lips were to mine... And how her touch could undo me so easily...

Her eyes darted to the cauldrons. Composing herself, she coldly stated, "It's time to stir your blood-replenishing potion."

I looked, and she was right. *She could tell it was the blood-replenishing potion at this point?* I pulled out a stirring rod, wiped it clean with the charmed Potion-making cloth, and began to do the four minutes of stirring. It was tedious, but I knew this was coming along perfectly.

"Professor... um, Severus didn't seem to have any self-stirring cauldrons here, do you know where I could find some?"

"Oh, he never trusted those. Refused to have them here." I kept stirring, the awkward silence growing between us. I'm not going to apologize, I know I'm right. The muscles seized in my bicep and I quickly switched hands to keep the stirring constant.

Narcissa came over to me instinctively, concern on her face. "Hold out your arm, I can massage it..." I winced, knowing that my left arm wasn't as able to keep this up.

"No, take over, one more minute widdershins..." I passed off the stirring rod and Narcissa took it over ably, using her other hand to check the notes I had made.

"You're using his modifications, I see. I offered to pay Severus for his private lessons to Draco, but he wouldn't hear of it. I think he saw Draco as the son he never had." Narcissa commented, trying to break the silence.

The minute went by and she pulled the stirring rod out, cast a stasis spell on the cauldron, and quickly tended to massaging my pulled bicep better than I could. Relief flowed through me simple at the touch, and the muscle started to un-knot. *Was that her, or the Bond? I had been stirring potions for a few hours now, no wonder I finally cramped up...*

Her blue eyes were apologetic. "I understand your reluctance in all this; but as women go, you're pretty amazing. Brilliant, talented, stick to your ideals, and you're not full of yourself. You are better than most men I know." As my eyes met hers, I couldn't hold onto my anger either. It didn't feel natural between us. "I am lucky that, of all the people I could have wound up Bonded to... That it was you." Her fingertips brushed my cheek and the heat was back. It felt so amazing between us, and I fought myself from nuzzling her hand. *we fit together so perfectly, so right...* After seeing all of the gore and bloodshed, this human contact, this affirmation of life was what I craved. I never realized how much I could starve for physical contact until I met Narcissa.

"I... I'm sorry for snogging Krum. I don't want to hurt your feelings because some boy thought I was..."
single. Next time a guy starts to flirt with me, I'll explain that my situation is complicated.” She seemed to roll her eyes at his name.

"Hermione, I don't care about that as much as you wanting an annulment! It won't change a thing between us, you know. We'll still be Bonded, and the Compulsion will still have its effect." I knew that, yet...am I just being stubborn? There was another option, one that I guess wouldn't be so horrible with her. Not while my body craved her like it does now...

"Muggles have a term for that... Friends with 'benefits'. Essentially two people not in love and not a relationship have an arrangement based on mutual... er, physical... satisfaction."

Narcissa looked as though she wanted to argue the point that we were indeed in a relationship, but didn't. She leaned into me, smirking ever so slightly, and I bit my lower lip in... oh boy, there it is again... heady need.

"So if I wanted to summon you for... Amorous Congress..." Narc smirked as she gently kissed the most sensitive part of my neck. My head tilted to give her more access, and I couldn't stop the moan coming from me even if I wanted to.

"That's," I swallowed as my breathing went a bit heavy, "commonly referred to as a 'booty call'..." Am I really entertaining this as an idea? Why am I over-analyzing this now?

"How gauche. I'd prefer to be with a cunning linguist." Her lips met mine and I met them with my own. This doesn't mean that I don't like boys still, but yeah, I think I'm bisexual.

"I will so do that for you." I resumed kissing her and as my tongue probed for access, she willingly obliged me entry. She is a damn good kisser...

"I'd rather see you put those hands to good use."

Draco left the potions lab, glad to be out of the brewing fight. Unlike the ones from his childhood, he knew his mother could stand up to Hermione. They might even settle their differences. My mum and the Princess of Gryffindor, who would have thought?

As he passed the Great Hall, a loud scuffle grabbed his attention. Ginny Weasley was arguing with the Ministry Healers, who were levitating a visibly injured Firenze like one would discard refuse.

"...I don't care how many times you say it's for the health and sanitary needs of the other patients, he's a patient too! He fought to stop Voldemort, he got injured, so he deserves treatment!"

"My resources are for healing witches and wizards, NOT for the Dobbin, and definitely not for the demon. It stays outside." Fleur wasn't sure what she was more angry with, the demon or being referred to as 'it'.

"VEELA!" Fleur retorted, whose arms were bound behind her back in magical chains, "I'm no demon! Release me and I'll send you to hell so you can see the difference!"

"Don't make us call for an exterminator. Go away and leave the Wizarding World to those who belong here."

Draco leered in typical Pureblood fashion, hoping to distract them long enough to let Ginny help get Firenze and Fleur out of the escalating conflict.
"I was raised to look down my nose at inferior creatures by my blood-supremacist parents... what's your excuse?" Draco said coldly, challenging them to own up to their own prejudice.

"Oh look, the blue-blood is coming to rescue the nag and the french bitch." Draco stopped cold. He had done his share of teasing and bullying, and had even dealt with an angry retort or two, but he had never been targeted before. What was more, these were adults - Healers - who were supposed to be focused on their patients. He weighed his options, and knew that retaliating by 'pulling a Granger' would only make matters worse.

His face was neutral, but he couldn't be sure about keeping his voice from wavering. Setting his jaw, he kept eye contact with the Healers as he jerked his head as a signal for Ginny to help the injured patients. Ginny's wand was out and broke the shackles that had been restraining Fleur's hands. The Healers raised their own wands in fear, prepared to hex first and answer for their actions later.

Draco stepped between them, hand on his holstered wand, but un-drawn. His look was challenging theirs, and the Healers' resolve broke first. They turned back to the Great Hall where they had patients to attend to.

"Thanks." Ginny said, gently levitating Firenze and leading him back to his divination classroom on the first floor. Fleur looked to the young Slytherin and inquired about getting potions for herself and the centaur.

"Hermione and my mother were having an argument in the potions lab; it'll be a bit before anyone will want to go in there."

Fleur nodded her understanding. "They will make a strong couple, if they can get over their own issues."

Draco thought about it, and knew how rare it was to see his mother both happy and as the confident woman that he knew as a child. The past few years, she started to look more withdrawn and closed-off, even before The Dark Lord had returned. "I'll bring you some potions after I take some food down to them."

Ginny laid the centaur into a soft patch of clover, and he groaned appreciatively as he looked over his wounds and took in his situation. "Thank you both; I believe I can wait for some bandages for my hindquarter. How are you, Fury?"

Fleur's eyes flashed at his for a moment before her lips split into a grin. "That one I like. There's a cauldron-sized hole in one wing, and I landed on the other. It might be broken." She said it matter-of-factly, knowing she would recover. "Thank you."

There was a lot not said in the exchange, but they both knew their own losses in the war and would learn to move on. Ginny, however, needed to be busy and work her way through her grief. "Bandages, healing salve, essence of dittany? I can knick that." She offered, disillusioning herself as she left the classroom.

Narcissa couldn't stop squirming from Hermione's ticklish touch, so she shouldn't have been surprised when she found her ankles restrained with rope by her enthusiastic wife.

It was the fact that she had her legs left open wide by the rope, exposing her sex and being vulnerable to Hermione that had her dripping wet was what surprised her. *I think I can appreciate a bit of bondage during sex again...* she mused as her wife's wand vanished her pants under the robes that were splayed open. She was exposed and vulnerable, and it spurred her desire for the brunette
who was on top of her.

Another flick of the wand. Narcissa's wrists were equally bound on the spare potions desk, and her breasts were exposed to the cold air as Hermione took the time to explore and appreciate the body before her. Her fingertips trailed over the blonde's torso and it was as if heat were transferring between the two. Narcissa saw the look in her lover's eyes and it was the rawest, most sexual thing she had ever seen, and she knew in that moment that she was hers. Just for this look and this feeling from Hermione, I could give up every other lover. She could be it.

Lips touched for only a moment before Narcissa's lips were being parted by her wife, whose tongue probed and caressed her own. Hermione knew that this felt much different than how a guy would kiss; she liked it being gentle at first and warming up to scorching, whereas seeing how guys snogged it was all about being too aggressive and making the girl want to back away by an inch. She knew she might have to train whatever partner in the future to kiss like a girl, but quickly dismissed the thought from her head. She was kissing, quite possibly, the most beautiful woman in the world and would savor it.

Hermione shrugged off her robes and vanished her own undergarments, and a thrill went through her as the naughtiness of the whole situation set in. I'm naked and straddling my bound, naked lover... in Snape's private potions lab... Hermione pulled her hair into a ponytail before she began to mark a trail of kisses and nips down Narcissa's neck. She kept going down, and Narcissa strained against the bonds. The blonde wanted to have her fingers threaded through the chestnut curls, to play with that amazing hair of hers, perhaps guide that amazing mouth of hers lower...

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" Hermione asked, eagerly punctuating the question as she drew a breast into her mouth and sucked intently, letting her teeth graze the areola. She had breasts herself so she thought she knew what to expect, but these were just so much more amazing. They were soft, a perfect shape while she was on her back, and the young Gryffindor just wanted to nuzzle and play with them. They were slightly larger than her own B cup, and Hermione couldn't help but want to leave a bite mark on one of them. She is mine to mark, isn't she?

"Do you have any clue how bloody lucky I am right now?" Narcissa replied, thready need as her hips rolled in aching need. The Slytherin was used to being on top, being the one in control with her female lovers. It was an issue of manipulation, control, and getting off. But here she felt safe enough to relinquish control to this woman, and though she was still feeling a bit anxious about this situation, her eyes were pleading to her wife to go on.

Small, delicate fingers found her quim and deftly slid back and forth, and they both knew how wet Narcissa was as there was already enough lubricant for what Hermione had in mind. Their eyes met and it was like legilimency; no words had to be said in this exchange as the shuddering breath and shaky nod came from the bound woman.

"Oh... please..." Narcissa sounded like she was praying, which suited Hermione just fine. This could be their Heaven, as Hermione was worshiping the prone body beneath her and thanking every deity she could think of for this moment.

Their lips met, raw passion and need conveying between them as Narcissa shuddered in surprise for a second, her mouth opening again as Hermione's fingers easily slid their way in. The gryffindor purred her satisfaction into the slytherin's mouth as fingers curled and stroked her inner walls. Narcissa sobbed as she felt Hermione inside her. It was only three inches deep, but she felt herself tighten against those fingers and made every inch count.

The kiss relented and Narcissa's eyes opened to take in the sight of her lover and her heart pounded as Hermione sucked and licked her own fingers, surprisingly pleased with her wife's flavor. I think
Hermione plans to kill me this way... Narcissa thought as her pulse jackhammered away in her chest. She bit her lip as she took in the sight of her lover enjoying her taste, and then had those same fingers in her own mouth.

Narcissa was wanton, lifting her head from the table as she took in her own taste on her lover's fingers and loved the scent. *Fuck, I've missed this...* She thought, realizing it had been almost a year since her last assignation.

"I'm going to enjoy that," Hermione said seductively as Narcissa writhed in naked need. She could have sworn that her voice had gone husky and loved the sound of it.

"Fill me. Please. I need it." *I need you...* Narcissa's words stopped as lips and tongues met, and she tasted herself on her wife's lips and savored it. It was absolute heaven; she knew she wanted more from her. Narcissa's hips rolled against the fingers that were deftly circling her clit with the barest of pressure, and it was a maddening tease that had the blonde woman ready to beg for more.

"I need to try this, Cissy." Hermione's words were lost on the other woman, who was only able to incoherently nod some sort of agreement. Warm wetness penetrated her folds, and Narcissa was amazed at the eager tongue-fucking she was receiving from her wife. It was both soft yet firm as the warm silk lapped inside her.

*Hermione's enthusiasm is vastly better than the uncertain women I had in the past...* Narcissa considered as lips gently sucked on her clit, her hands fighting the rope restraints because she wanted - needed - to caress this mortal succubus who perfected a rhythm of suction and penetration.

"More. I need more, 'Mione. Fuck me, fuck me..." The older woman's lack of propriety in her words edged Hermione on, getting her fourth finger inside and marveling at the possibilities here.

"You want me to fuck you with my hand?" Hermione teased, her eyes glazed over in lust as she kissed a trail up from her lover's breasts to her chin. Narcissa nodded as her thighs shook almost violently.

"Say it." Hermione's voice was husky with desire, and Narcissa relented. *She's going to make me beg, and I can barely talk...*

"Pl... Please... please fuu.. fuck me with-with..." She swallowed and gasped, "your hand..."

Narcissa felt the trail of her slickness in the kisses and had her suspicions confirmed as she licked her wife's chin, able to drown herself in the mingling of their scents and flavors. She began to say 'rotate' and she was rendered speechless as Hermione did just that with her hand, and Narcissa shuddered slightly as her lover's fist was entirely inside her. The gryffindor's face opened up in surprise and amazement as her hand just naturally slid in, and she couldn't help the Cheshire smile on her face.

It was that intense fullness that she had been craving, and having it now, combined with the restraints keeping her legs open, Narcissa's trembling could have been mistaken for shock. Even her teeth were nearly chattering as she was on the brink of climax.

Hermione loved having this power over her wife, being the one who could make her lose her composure and see her so needy for her. This base level of desire was new to the gryffindor, and to be wanted and needed this much was a heady feeling.

"So... Oh so so so good fuck me fuck slowly so fuck deep yes..." Narcissa's back arched as she began to break into a cold sweat, Hermione’s lips fastened onto her as she came loudly, pouring the intensity of the orgasm into the kiss and time seemed to stop for them. Hermione drank it all in, the
flavor, the sensation, the raw need, the satisfaction, and somewhere inside her she felt her own lust sated as time seemed to resume for them both. Her awareness came back, and she was re-orienting herself and blinked her eyes to return to reality.

Hermione recognized that things kept going on as normal; her hand was pumping in her wife, her lips were sharing the most intense kiss she had ever experienced, but the feeling of satisfaction and completion had stripped everything else away. As the kiss ended, Hermione collapsed onto her wife's breast, spent as though she had the cathartic orgasm herself. *Did I just orgasm from her climax?* Hermione wondered as she she felt exhaustion take her.

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Ginny and Fleur were bandaging Firenze as Draco returned with an unreadable expression on his face. "Where are the potions? Did you talk to your mom?"

He hadn't talked to his mother; he had seen the pile of bodies and thought the worst as he ran down to the laboratory. But when he had barely opened the door, his mother's words had him closing it as quickly and as silently as possible. He wanted to Obliviate himself after hearing her say 'fuck', but he was glad to know his mother was happy with the muggle-born.

"Uh, no, wasn't able to talk to her."

"Oh, were they still going at it?" Draco paled at the question. He just nodded.

Ginny nodded sympathetically at the blonde boy.

"Good call; I knew when to avoid my parents were in the thick of it."
I awoke in a tangle of legs, my thighs and pelvis rocking gently on the smooth thigh I was draped over. An arm held me as blue eyes met my own. The last thing I recall was kissing Narcissa when we... My eyes shot open wide in panic. I left her bound and fell asleep, where's my wand?! I groped around for my wand and noticed Narcissa's wand vibrating nearby like an alarm. It took me a moment to realize that the wand had woken me up. I'll have to ask for that charm sometime...

"It's okay, Hermione. I summoned my wand and freed myself. But you looked so tired and cute sleeping on me that I thought we could both use a nap."

As I came to, I took in my surroundings. The table I had bound her to was padded, and there was a thin comforter over the two of us. She was no longer in her robes, and neither was I. I lifted the comforter slightly to realize that I was still in my undergarments while Narcissa was entirely naked. She arched an eyebrow at me.

"I prefer sleeping naked when possible, I didn't think you'd mind."

Maybe it was because I was physically sated, or because I had slept well, but I didn't mind at all. "How long was I out for?" I asked, yawning myself into a stretch.

"Only two hours; I thought that would be enough for you to feel re-charged for finishing up and delivering these potions."

"Oh my god! I forgot all about them! What... what about the... um, people outside? Did they not come in?" My mind was a jumble; I couldn't focus on too much at once it seems.

"Your wards are still up, dear. I couldn't even crack them, which is saying something. And I have it on good authority that you've broken through Severus' wards in your second year. He was quite miffed, yet impressed with you."

"He knew?" I asked, guilt still playing in me.

"He had to go through your notes and figure out what you were doing. Apparently since you brewed the Polyjuice Potion correctly, it was an easier job to isolate the flaw with the animal hair."

I blushed at the recollection, and Narcissa leaned over to kiss me. I pulled back; the sudden comfortable, at-home feeling I had here was alien and... not welcome. No, it is quite welcome, just not... expected.

"Sorry. I just... um..." I started, wanting to express how this new life I have is so very incongruous to the past year of being on the run, sleeping alone, and only having a smelly tent to call home. This is just too much... too perfect. I'm going to wake up on the run from Snatchers again, I swear... this is just some horrible dream, right?

Narcissa's eyes drooped. "Oh, sorry. I'll... just be out of your way then. I'm sure you have things to do." She looked crestfallen as she got up and dressed herself again. I can't leave it like this, just say it! Say something!

"I'm not ready for fresh, warm cinnamon rolls!" Narcissa stopped and looked at me as she had only one leg through her black lacy boy-shorts, the other foot hovering to go through. The moment was just so awkwardly normal and mundane that it only unnerved me more. The Ice Queen Bitch is a normal person, just like you, whom you just fucked... and loved doing it.
She finished pulling her pants on and gave me a pensive look. "I don't get that Muggle turn of phrase."

I sighed, and took a few slow breaths to gather my thoughts. Oh god, I'm doing that whole self-revealing, pillow-talk thing. "When I was a kid, my mum had fresh cinnamon rolls on the weekend made for us to enjoy. Sugar-free frosting, of course. To me it was a sign of a happy home and loving family. This... It's too... I'm not ready to accept it, like this is all some sort of dream that will end, and I'll be back on the run and you'll want me dead... know what I mean?"

Her mouth opened in disgust, like she tasted something abhorrent. Her voice was cold as I had ever heard it. "I haven't had a happy home nor a loving family for over a decade, Hermione. The war is over, and that... fucking madman... is finally dead. Salazar knows the cost was too high, but I thought I found the silver lining in all of this senseless death. Working along side you, we could make this world a better place, and I could actually let you into my heart and not just into my bed."

I shrugged, knowing that she deserved a better life than before and I wanted to help improve the Wizarding World... but the right way. "Cissy, I thought you understood what I was offering when I said we could be... well, shag buddies. Yes, there's obviously an attraction here and I apparently, have to indulge in it from time to time... but that's it. Between helping Harry, wanting to improve the welfare of the House Elves, finding my parents and restoring their memories, and a very probable Goblin Rebellion... I just don't have the time or energy to try and be your wife."

A silvery dragon patronus floated into the room, and Fleur's voice came from it. "Hermione, there's an Order meeting being called right now. Headmaster's office, but we can't seem to get in. It's warded with an arithmancy problem; none of us seem able to crack it. Though I think Narcissa can. Bring her too." Why wasn't I told of the meeting? As I tried to piece this together, Narcissa's eyes were red and I realized she was fighting to control her tears and not her rage.

"So am I supposed to just wait around to be used by you, only to be thrown out when you're done?" Narcissa spat, "The last time I felt this ashamed about making love was with Lucius. What's worse is that you've been gentle about it."

I so don't have time for this now. I got dressed and silently shuffled out of the lab, taking the potions with me.

There was a crowd at the doorway to the Headmaster's office, members from both the Order and the D.A. were trying to all fit into the spiral staircase to give their advice on how to solve the equation.

"Can't we just ask Professor Vector to come solve this for us?" Neville asked, dumbfounded.

"Yeah, and say what? 'Hey, a ragtag group of suspected Order members and people from that D.A. list all want to go chat in private with Albus' portrait?' Cormac replied loudly. I saw Luna wave to me, her cheerful smile helping soothe my nerves from the awkward silent trek I had alongside Narcissa after dropping off the potions at the Great Hall.

"Oh, Hermione! Glad to see you!" I smiled back as her eyes darted to my wife and quivered in fear. She hugged me, but gave an awkward look towards Cissy.

"You too, Luna. Surely, you could solve the equation?"

"Arithmancy was a subject that I understood the basics of, but this problem seems to delve into the theory. Whomever made it, designed it so only certain people could figure it out." Who could be in there? Was this yet another trick up Albus' sleeve?
"Everyone, back up! Harry, I understand that the D.A. wants to keep helping here, but we need to establish a clear leader." Kingsley's voice carried over the din. Alicia was comforting Dennis, while Terry Boot checked Susan's bandage. Katie, Ernie, Lee, and Hannah were by George chatting, while Angelina, Cormac, and Neville were at the bottom of the stairs trying to call up to Kingsley and Harry.

Off to the side was Charlie, Ron, and Molly looking over a distraught Lavender. Fleur was walking over, a frown on face. "She barely survived Greyback's attack and was torn up just like Bill was. He at least was handsome with the scars but this girl..." She shook her head sadly. "At least she's still recognized as a witch..."

I didn't know what to make of that, but Minerva called down to me from the top of the stairwell. "Oh, Hermione... what are you... well, can you help us with this?" She saw Narcissa and her wand was immediately pointed at her. Without thinking, I stood in the way and shielded us.

"She's with me." I said firmly, "and she's not the enemy." I looked back to Narcissa, whose eyes glared coldly at mine for a second, then turned away, resignedly.

"We have things to discuss in confidence," Molly added, "and honestly I don't trust a Malfoy, or a Black."

Cissy muttered something that I could barely hear.

"What was that, Narcissa?" Molly spat, her wand-hand's knuckles white with tension.

"It's Granger now; she can order me as her wife to keep her secrets." I didn't like the cowed look she had, but she was also not escalating the problem and I could work with that.

"That means nothing! I'm sure you..." Molly was cut off by Kingsley.

"The Compulsion Curse was partly why we could never convict Lucius. Even with veritaserum, Narcissa was tongue-tied when we tried to get her to testify." There was something like a finality in Shacklebolt's voice that left us with no room to question his word.

I made my way through the small crowd to the stairwell, a strange feeling as everyone moved to make a path for me. Everyone is staring, best to just shrug it off. When I reached the top of the spiral staircase, Minerva stopped me. Her wand was still trained on my wife.

"Order her to keep our secrets, Hermione." Did she really expect me to do this? I thought about it, and knew we had a bigger security risk with Rita buzzing about... but relented.

"Narcissa, as my wife, I order to you keep the secrets of the Order of the Phoenix as well as the D.A." Minerva nodded her approval. I refused to jump through hoop after hoop, if that's what they think... "...unless it helps either myself, Harry, or the Greater Good. To be determined by Fleur." The look of indignation by Minerva had me smirking, and I didn't care. I'll add as many loopholes as I want; I can trust myself, Harry, and Fleur.

"Now see here..." She started, but I wasn't about to listen.

"No. You all decided to have a meeting without me. For a reason. You even have the D.A. here, which I helped form, and I have to wonder why. Harry, why are you all meeting here without me?"

Harry shook his head. "I guessed it had to do with the end of the war and making sure we got all of the Dark Wizards unlike last time. But then I realized you weren't invited to the meeting, and I knew it would involve you."
He looked guilty, but I didn't blame him. "I killed Voldemort, with Narcissa and Draco at my side, and you all have the audacity to ask where my loyalties lie?" The older members of the Order were silent at that. *Good. They should have known better.*

Looking at the warded door, I saw the various celestial variables plugged into an intricate equation that already had the Eigenvalue. *So it's already solved?* I ran the equation and watched... nothing happen.

"That's... odd." I muttered to myself, using my wand to expand the matrix of numbers and compared it to the Hamiltonian and its Eigenfunction.

"What's odd?" Narcissa asked, and I turned to see her. She was at the bottom of the staircase with Fleur by her side. Her curiosity overcame her frustration with me, it seems. *I guess us outcasts have to stick together now.*

"Arithmancy is the art of calculating the probability of... well, almost anything, provided you have enough details and defined variables." I said, trying to not sound like the textbook, "But this is dealing with the planets in our system, and the moon, and the sun... and the Eigenvalue is already solved."

"That is odd. Usually the problem with Arithmancy is that you don't have enough relevant variables to accurately predict something. I'm coming up." Narcissa made her way up and Kingsley nudged McGonagall to move down and out of the way.

"I just..." Minerva huffed, but let her through. As Narcissa took in the equation, she smirked. "Too many variables, that's why it can't be solved. Wait, it's... it's not even a real problem, because the solution is one. It's a riddle."

"The probability is one? What has a one hundred per cent chance of occurring?" Shaklebolt asked, the confusion obvious in his voice.

Luna's voice perked up. "Sunrise. The sun always rises, naturally."

Narcissa smiled as she started erasing the extraneous values. "Ten Points to Ravenclaw... Salazar knows that Severus wouldn't ever award..." As the wards released, she gasped in shock. "Get a Healer! Now!"

As the door opened, I saw Severus in the Headmaster's chair, pale as death with Fawkes perched on his shoulder. He looked haggard, as if snatched back from the jaws of death itself, and his once-rich voice had the timbre of a lifetime of smoking and gargling with battery acid.

"Any reports of my demise are, regretfully... premature."

Severus winced as Healer Augustus Pye checked over the scarred neck of Severus Snape, marveling at the rate of healing. Fawkes had left shortly after Severus was discovered, and I saw a twinkling smile from Albus' portrait. *Probably a final act of loyalty to Albus.*

"I dare say, you're... fine. Aside from the scarring on the neck and vocal cords, it is as if you were never injured." Molly gave him a untrustworthy glare. *Oh, he was the one who stitched up Arthur..."

"Thank.." Severus' throat caught on something it seemed, and nodded his thanks. His eyes went straight to Narcissa's and it was like they had exchanged a knowing look. He didn't look like the man
he once was, the stoic yet respected teacher, who was always ready with a barbed comment... he
looked relieved. The stress of his life was over, and his hair was starting to grey as if years of stress
finally took its toll upon him in one fell swoop.

"Interim Minister, anyone else you need me to look at?" Healer Pye said, professionally polite.
Narcissa's wand was out and faster than anyone would have guessed, and I heard the whispered
'Obliviate'.

"You saw too much carnage and needed to go outside for a was all." Narcissa's voice carried just
enough so that everyone knew his memory was being modified. The healer was helped out of the
Headmaster's office and Severus struggled to stand.

"As long as there are..." Severus swallowed, wincing at the sound of his own voice, "Death Eaters
on the loose, it is prudent that my fate be hidden."

Everyone nodded their agreement; after hearing Harry's vocal defense of Severus to The Dark Lord
right before his defeat, there was no question as to his loyalty. *It didn't hurt that Albus' portrait also
vouched for him, up to and including admitting that Severus was manipulated into killing Albus on
his own orders. If only they could believe the same for me.*

"You'll help the Aurors track down and capture them all?" Kingsley asked.

"Capture? Yes. Kill?" Severus' face went to a careful neutral. "Depends." Shacklebolt's face winced
as if he had taken a bite into a lemon.

"Depends on?"

"Full immunity of my actions for the war. And I will not be sent after the Grangers. Or my
godson." *I never realized Severus' loyalty to Draco and Cissy until now... but I'm glad I'm a part of
it. I don't think I'd want Snape hunting me.*

"There are no charges against them." Kingsley said matter-of-factly.

"Yet." The single word held as much promise as it did threat. And if the Order's reaction to me was
any indication, the rest of the Wizarding World would be out to get us, too.

Kingley nodded, and shook Severus' hand. "Happy Hunting. Now, onto the rest of Order Business...
Let's all have seats."

McGonagall transfigured enough chairs for everyone, and Narcissa changed our chairs into an
elegant silver-and-cream chaise lounge. I couldn't help but smile at the spellwork as I sat and was
handed a cup of hot Darjeeling Tea by my wife.

"I um... thank you, Cissy." She nodded a polite 'of course' as she sipped her own cup. Minerva
quirked an eyebrow to Severus, who took in the exchange placidly.

"Hermione, you don't know what she put..." Molly trailed off as I sipped the tea. *Does she really
think that Narcissa would slip me something in front of everyone?*

"It's just tea, she's not out to poison or dose me with some sort of love potion in front of everyone.
Give her some credit as a Slytherin." I could have sworn Severus made an amused grunt. It was
probably the closest thing to laughing that he's done in ages.

"Well you don't have to be so cozy with the... lemon." *Lemon? What in the world is she talking
about?* There was a very uncomfortable look as Narcissa took it in, and the hostility from Molly was
also coming from Arthur.

Narcissa spoke up. "It's a dated slur; she's calling me a lesbian." I was angered at that; Molly Weasley, known for being the mother of a very pro-muggle family... Merlin, both her and Arthur are homophobes, aren't they? I thought back to how Ron seemed to always hate Draco. I was on my feet, and Narcissa was behind me, trying to diffuse the situation.

"Mrs Weas... Molly, I can't believe you. Considering what we just did, you'd think that maybe that warrants some cordiality from you." If they are going to act this childish, I will treat them in kind.

Angered, Molly looked up to the portrait of Albus for an appeal. "Albus, would you explain... I..." she huffed, realizing the futility of asking him, "I did not give you leave to use my given name." Oh, so now she's going to harp on the fact that I called her 'Molly'? She was looking to Albus like a child would seek the adult in the room after being told off. Narcissa looked sheepish and cowed again, and I was not having it.

"Please, 'Mione, let it go." She muttered quietly, her hand resting on my arm. Hell no! I'm a Gryffindor, dammit!

I whispered back to her. "No, Cissy, I won't stand for this." My fingers swept her hair back and tucked it behind her ear; her black-and-blonde somehow worked for her and I found my fingers trailing her delicate jawline. You deserve to be respected. Her shy smile was all the reward I needed.

My eyes turned to Molly. "Then you may refer to me, and my wife, as Mrs. Granger. And if anyone points their wand at my wife again, we duel to kill." My mind was very calm and certain about what I said, and saw Molly's eyes flicker in fear. I kind of like it, too.

As our eyes locked in the silence, I wondered if she knew I could read her thoughts if I cared to. I really wouldn't need to, since her face was as red as her hair was. May I never become anything close to resembling her.

Kingsley cleared his throat, and moved on like nothing happened. "Apparently, the Ministry is in chaos as You-Know-Who's supporters looted the coffers as fast as they could turn muggle-borns into the Soulless with the Dementors." Severus and Narcissa exchanged another knowing look between them, and I could have sworn they were talking to each other.

"So Umbridge is responsible for a few hundred dead people because she was put in charge of something? I'm not surprised." I said bitterly. Narcissa did an almost imperceptible shake of her head and their 'conversation' was over.

"No, actually... it was over a thousand, and many are still alive, for now. They are in Azkaban." Kingsley replied sadly. "No souls left, and I already expelled the Dementors from the prison... but we have a lot of empty people that will never think, or feel, or... anything... ever again."

"What... what's the humane thing to do?" Harry asked. "Can't we just put them in St. Mungo's, long-term spell damage ward?" Like Neville's parents, but he didn't want to say it out loud.

"The hospital is designed for Witches and Wizards only. If they have no soul left, they are just... shells. Useless shells." Narcissa said regretfully.

"Well, my parents are there! They get taken care of, fed... clothed... can't we do that?" Neville's voice cracked slightly.

"Your parents aren't one of the Soulless. They were tortured to insanity, but they still have their
souls. They know enough to eat the food in front of them, even if they forget how to use a fork. But when your soul is removed... you don't even know hunger. They will starve to death in two weeks." Narcissa's face held horror as she said that. _She saw it happen before, didn't she?_

Severus tried to clear his throat, and the resulting sound made me wince. It made a lot of us wince. "Euthanize them. I would want that. If it... were me."

"I can't... I can't just say, 'Let's kill these people'." It was Arthur speaking up, and a part of me wanted to side with him. _They are alive, right?_

"They will waste away in two weeks from starvation, if dehydration doesn't kill them first. It's strange, but a lot of the Soulless don't seem to need water." Narcissa replied, and I knew I'd have to ask about that later.

"Yes," Kingsley agreed, "and we will need to re-staff the ranks in the Auror office. Harry, would you, Ron, Neville, and Hermione join the Aurors? I'll waive your NEWT requirements for your service in the war."

Harry gulped, but agreed. "How many are left?" Neville also nodded, knowing he would want to keep catching Dark Wizards.

"Dawlish, Savage, and Williamson all fell during the war. So did..." The rich voice cracked, "Tonks. Robards' is getting pretty old, so Proudfoot's the only one right now." _Merlin, there's only one guy left?_ I looked around the room and took in the casualties from the Order; Albus, Moody, Sirius, Lupin, Fred, and Bill.

So much death has happened, and there was more fighting to do, more lives to be risked to save others. I noticed the lack of Dean, Nigel, Romilda, and Leanne from the D.A, as well. I couldn't just sign up for more of the same; I needed my old routine. _And I wasn't about to just skip my NEWT exams, either._

"Sorry, Kingsley... I think I want to go back and finish my schooling at Hogwarts. Earn my grades, not just be told that I'm bright and not prove it." I looked to Ron, whose face looked equally haunted from the recent past.

"Same here." Harry looked at his best friend as if he didn't recognize him. "Not going back to Hogwarts, you mad? Just... I need a normal life, and laughs... gonna go help George with his shop."

George teared up at it, and hugged his brother.

It felt like an odd moment, but there was an elephant in the room that I couldn't ignore. _The goblins._ "Kingsley, what about the Goblins? You know they are furious at Wizard-kind..."

People started to shout me down, some scoffing, others rolling their eyes, and still some thinking we did them all favors. _The Dark Lord forced wizard security into their bank, and took away their autonomy. Of course they are furious._

"Honestly, Hermione, you can't believe that they are going to do anything... unreasonable..." Minerva said. I could tell there was a hint of worry in her voice, and that she wanted to be consoled like Fudge. _No Dark Lord returning, just a lot of worrying for no reason, stick your head in the sand and all will be well..._

"Mon Dieu! They had a chained and tortured dragon down there, in violation of all our laws, and on top of it all Snake-face put wizard guards in charge there? Of course they will exact their revenge! I heard how they wanted wands for a long time now." Fleur interjected.
"They can't even use wands!" Terry scoffed.

"The long-fingers forget their place!" Dedalus shouted.

"They stole the Sword of Gryffindor from us!" Ron exclaimed, which made me remember the oddest tidbit: it fit Harry's hands when he was only 12. It might not have originally been Godric Gryffindor's.

"They might lodge a complaint and demand reparations, but Wizarding Law is clear: Dragon Fire caused the bank's collapse, and they weren't authorized to keep one there. They won't get a knut from us." Charlie's comment made everyone nod in agreement. But I couldn't help but wonder if the Goblins would agree with Wizarding Law. Speaking of Wizarding Law; If my friends are signing up to be Aurors, they have to know what they are expected to do...

"Kingsley, did the Ministry authorize the wholesale use of Unforgivables to Aurors in order to stop the Death Eaters?" He nodded, paused, and gave a deep sigh. Harry and Neville looked at the interim minister in shock, and I knew I would have to explain.

"Last war, they did this, but some of those spells are like a Pandora's Box; you can't just say 'stop' and expect zero fallout to come later on." He was hiding something and I did not like it.

"What aren't you saying, Kingsley?" I pressed.

"We haven't been able to find Proudfoot. He was having some... ingenious ideas that, uh... were signed off by Scrimgeour days before his death." Severus and Minerva both had grave faces.

"What did Bedlam approve?" Severus pointedly asked. I didn't recognize the nickname, but most Aurors had one. I knew about Mad-Eye and Chamelion, but I never heard this one before.

"He wanted to ensure that the top lieutenants were given no quarter, and would be hunted down whenever and wherever they were found. Just for the really bad ones, the Death Eaters that we knew of." Shacklebolt didn't want to finish.

"Out with it..." Minerva chided.

"...innocent Witches and Wizards are under the Imperius Curse to live their normal lives... until one of the Marked are seen. That's when the Curse takes over and they will stop at nothing to kill the target." My blood ran cold. Sleeper assassins, that's the type of Ministry we're trying to save.

"Merlin's... that's..." Molly stuttered.

"That's war." I said coldly. "So I can look forward to an unknown number of innocent people out there gunning for Draco, and quite possibly, my wife." I wondered if I could hurt and kill innocent people trying to bring harm to me or mine in self defense. Let them try it; I will not abandon her.

"Well, she made her bed ages ago. Best if you get away from that..." Molly's disgust was evident in her voice.

"My wife was no Death Eater. She never took the mark, Mrs. Weasley, and I don't know what your problem is with her, but I am certain she doesn't deserve death!"

"Ladies," interrupted Kingsley, "we have more vital issues to deal with, like capturing the rogue Death Eaters and burying You-Know-Who's remains. And there's a Ball already being planned to commemorate the war and award the Order of Merlin medals..." Narcissa panicked at that. Her face went ghost-white and I couldn't help but find her starkly beautiful.
"What? Bury? More like behead, burn in separate fires, and scatter the ashes in two different rivers flowing in opposite directions!" What is she going on about?

"What? That's a bit overkill." Shacklebolt said warily.

"We couldn't do that even if we wanted to." I said, discouraged.

"No, no... no." Her face conveyed sheer horror. I didn't think she could be any more scared than we were right before The Dark Lord was to torture us, but she was. She hadn't seen what I had, did she? My skin started to crawl with an ominous feeling, and I wanted to be consoled that the war was truly over, and that he wouldn't return even more powerful in a decade or so. But the body was missing...

"Bellatrix took his body, Cissy..." I said apologetically. We'll get it back when we capture her, right?

"Oh. Shit." Narcissa whispered the useless prayer into the evening.

Heavily warded in a Romanian forest, Bellatrix rocked the remains of Lord Voldemort in her arms as one would a small child. Though the last slip of soul had been lost, Bella had been able to coax an imprint of him to exist on this side of reality, though the cost was great and taxed the last of her sanity.

"I shall do your bidding as always, Master."

Cuddling the inhuman skull as her own baby and keeping it warm upon her breast, she nursed it with the only thing she had left: her soul.
Severus watched the exchange between Hermione and Narcissa, and sat up slightly as he was shocked to see Narcissa conjure tea for the pair of themselves. He looked over to Minerva, his Gryffindor counterpart who had an equally surprised yet interested attitude about the exchange. It's been less than a week, and they seem to have fallen into some sort of domestic pattern. That she took the tea without checking it bode well for them, not to mention her dry humor. Of course Narcissa wouldn't poison her in front of so many witnesses.

He and Minerva had verbally sparred countless times over who the best student was at Hogwarts, and she had naturally sided with Hermione. He would have to probe her insight to the young lady's attitude toward relationships, and see if there was any way to ensure Narcissa would not be hurt - though marital bliss seemed highly unlikely.

Molly Weasley was her typical Pureblood self, full of anti-homosexual rhetoric. The Potions Master noticed that the younger generation, particularly the ones who were raised in the Muggle world, didn't seem to carry the same animus as the older ones from 'respectful Pureblood stock'. Like Crabbe and Goyle? Best that they not reproduce.

Hermione whispered something to his friend, and tucked some of her hair behind her ear. It was a gentle, protective gesture that comforted him. Maybe there is hope. Narcissa smiled back to her, one of the small, genuine ones that are quite rare for her.

The young Gryffindor faced Molly, and Severus folded his hands at the Headmaster's Desk to watch the exchange with my most neutral expression.

"Then you may refer to me, and my wife, as Mrs. Granger. And if anyone points their wand at my wife again, we duel to kill." Ten points to Gryffindor for silencing her, and for a successfully intimidating threat.

Kingsley broke it up, thinking that it was over. He must realize that this will come to a head someday. He went on to say that the Ministry was financially broke due to looting by the Death Eaters and other supporters of the Dark Lord. Narcissa's eyes met Severus' and she did the slow blink that signaled she wanted to communicate via legilimancy.

'Severus... can you hear me?'

Severus arched an eyebrow. Obviously.

'I think there is something wrong with Hermione. She seems... I worry that she's going Dark.'

Severus looked the girl over. She has always been known to have a fiery temper just below the surface, Narcissa. I daresay she's stressed out and needs to find her footing. I also happened to notice that nobody here seems to be bringing up The Wand of Destiny, nor Potter's idiotic public confession that it is his now.

'Call it the DeathStick. It does Death. Don't turn it into any more of a legend.'

Severus contemplated something, as he saw Hermione fidget with her wand-holster in her tactical robes while her wand was in her hand. Miss Gran... Misses Granger is in possession of it, isn't she? It won't do her mental faculties any favors if she does wield it. If anything, it can quicken any mental deterioration she has in order to twist her to use the Elder Wand.
'I can't be certain, but between having killed for the first time, stress from the war, and becoming married? I'm impressed she hasn't fallen apart entirely. Narcissa shook her head ever so slightly. Thanks for listening... I'm just worried this won't work out.'

The meeting was over, and I was looking forward to a bed and a full night's rest. Exhaustion was fighting adrenaline and I could tell I was getting grumpy with every dagger-glare Molly had for me and Cissy. What the hell is her deal?

Harry came over and hugged me. I hugged back, grateful for the moment of normalcy. "It's been like, what... three days since I saw you and the war's over and you got a wife. Everything okay there?"

I nodded, realizing how much has happened in so little time. "Huh. Yeah, it's fine... I just am trying to get back into a normal life." We looked at each other and both laughed at the understatement. I couldn't be certain, but I thought his scar was fading. But my tattoo hasn't. So, maybe it's not a horcrux? Would my wrist be drawn to his scar? It was then that I noticed his scar was gone. My mind had been automatically filling it in since I've known it was there for so long. I shook the thought out of my head; Harry was talking to me.

"...going back to do your seventh year? That is definitely the most Hermione thing I have ever heard." I smiled at him, knowing it was true.

"And you're going to go be an Auror? Better be safe out there." I said as he and I walked away from the crowd. Narcissa was by Severus, as Molly wanted to talk to him but kept a wary distance from my wife. I smirked at the bitch, she can just deal with my Cissy like an adult...

"What about your parents?" He asked.

"I want to be certain the Wizarding World will be safe before I bring them back."

Harry agreed, idly wondering where his own family was. He yawned, and I looked him over with concern. In a way, he's still my boy. My mind went back to when we were sharing a tent on the run, and how I made something to pass for food and put him to bed as I took the first shift at watch.

"Have you gotten any food or rest?" I asked, wondering how long he had been up.

"No... Not since I entered Hogsmeade. Been a bit busy, you know..." Harry downplayed it with a shrug.

I lead us through the doorway and down the spiral staircase; most of us seemed to be leaving now.

Ron joined us. "Pretty certain dying and coming back from the great beyond really takes it out of you." I couldn't help but smile at that. Ron and I exchanged a look that I couldn't decipher, but I decided to ignore it.

"Kreacher, could you..." The house elf popped into existence right before Harry. "Hi. Yes. Would you bring up some food for my friends and myself to... The Gryffindor Common room, please?"

The elf bowed, "Of course, Master Potter." And he disappeared just as quickly.

"Thanks, Kreacher..." Harry said oddly to the empty space before him. Ron turned to the D.A. members filing out and called out to them 'Gryffindor Tower!'

"What about us Hufflepuffs?"
"...and Ravenclaws?"

"Of course! We all worked together, we all eat together!" I said cheerfully. *We have to break down the barriers between the houses, maybe this will help.*

Harry and I went through the portrait hole and was surprised to see Severus and Narcissa already eating in the common room. *How did they beat us here?*

Ron said it for me. "How the hell did you two get in here?"

"We were invited, correct?" Narcissa asked with a smirk. We all nodded.

"I mean, you got here sooner AND past the fat lady's portrait!" Ron clarified, who had moved to stand between myself and them.

My wife just smiled and let him struggle for a few seconds before she relented. "Window. When I was a student I'd fly up here to see..." She stopped herself, and I realized Arthur had just entered, "someone."

I went to sit next to Narcissa, and the boys followed my lead. "Cissy, you know my friends Harry and Ron." I gestured to Narcissa, "and this is my wife, Narcissa Granger."

Harry made to shake her hand, but realized how foolish that seemed right then. Ron did a nervous little tick of his head that was meant to be a nod.

"So how did this happen?" Ron asked. The common room seemed to grow silent, and I felt many eyes fall on me.

"You were there, sort of. When Dobby went to get us out of my - Malfoy's - Manor... Bellatrix threw that dagger; he flinched as he saw it coming."

Harry looked uneasy. "Are you blaming Dobby for this?"

Narcissa and I shook our heads at that. "Of course not... He was a brave elf for what he did..."

Cissy's words stunned me.

"Didn't know you gave two knuts about the servants." Ron scoffed.

"He stood up for what he believed in. I have to respect that; I was a coward and just stood there as my sister tortured Hermione. I stood for a lot of horrible things that happened in my house because I used to think that I was fighting to preserve my heritage." She looked like she was about to tear up, so I pressed on so as to get the attention off of her.

"Anyways," I continued, "I found myself alone there, a wand was at my feet clutched in... well, held by the... severed arm." *Oh god, I didn't remember that until now...*

Both boys grimaced at that, and I realized Harry had dealt with a dying Dobby who had his arm cut off. So I did the only thing I could. I soldiered on through the story.

"So I used the most lethal spell I could think of. Sectumsempra. Lucius..." My eyes unfocused as the memory of the smell hit me. I could only call it 'tunnel vision', but it was affecting all of my senses. "The smell..."

Narcissa's hand was on my shoulder, and it helped pull me back. "She killed Lucius by slicing him in half, and she claimed Rite of Succession as The Dark Lord arrived."
"How did you know they did that?" Ron asked, "Most couples don't do a Bonding anymore."

"I didn't... It's all still a blur. Vol... Voldemort showed up and... I guess it was Narcissa was shielding me. I thought it was odd." I replied, the details starting to become a bit more clear now. Was my memory blocked, or was there some sort of post-trauma stress?

"She cried out for me to help, and I couldn't refuse her. I realized it meant that I was under the Compulsion and she was summarily put into the dungeon below as The Dark Lord deliberated our fates." Narcissa added soberly.

"He was very angry about losing Potter, and apparently Goyle and McNair's failure to secure the support of the vampires had him fuming about their incompetence. You have to understand that he'd been growing more unstable and irrational over time and we all feared his wrath.

"He tasked me to..." she swallowed, exhaling a self-composing breath, "breed with Hermione and give birth to a new generation of intelligent Death Eaters, albeit Half-Blooded. And before you ask, yes, it's possible. It was that, or die, so we had to agree. The next day, we bumped into you at Gringotts."

Ron pieced this together as House-elves brought in platters of food. "Brilliant, thanks..." He mumbled to the elves as he put together a plate for himself. "So, did you two do it?"

"Actually-" Narcissa started, awkwardly about to confess my sex life to my good friend.

"Cissy, no!" I said sharply, and she flinched as if she had to obey my order. I need to be careful with that."

"That's personal, Ronald. I'm not about to ask what all happened between you and... Lav-Lav...

That seemed to shut his questions. Harry, however, looked thoughtful. "You mentioned something called the 'Compulsion'. Is that like the Imperius Curse?" Narcissa looked thoughtful as she made her reply.

"In a word: maybe? It's different than if I were to cast the Unforgivable and force you to go eat all the chocolate ice cream and gain 10 pounds..." Her eyes met mine and I tried to keep a straight face.

"Why would that be a bad thing?" Ron asked.

Narcissa chuckled. "I'd make a horrible Dark Lady." She's making a real effort to be liked by my friends... In her own way, though. "The Compulsion is more vague; instead of 'you will eat this ice cream', it would simply be a very strong suggestion that makes you crave something cold and tasty. You could completely ignore it, or out-reason it by realizing the ice cream will just go to your hips... also strong emotion can overcome it, albeit only temporarily. This curse was modified for Bondings to keep a relationship strong and healthy, but it leaves it up to the morals and personalities of the involved people." Which explains why Lucius was able to be such a bastard to his wife... he thought it was for the best...

"So, Hermione isn't being forced to like you against her will?" Harry asked. I'm not sure I want to know the answer here...

"Cissy, that is enough." I said, and she shut her mouth and looked a bit sullen. "The Compulsion also makes her have to obey a direct order and she can't speak against me without suffering immense pain. She hasn't been able to call me a mudblood, if you've noticed."

"I quit buying into the whole Pureblood superiority rhetoric, you know. But some of the words are just habit. You have to understand where we were coming from. There was an historic increase of
squib births, and it appeared that, with the influx of Muggle-borns, that the society the Purebloods built centuries before was slowly dying out. It scared a lot of us, you know." Narcissa replied, finishing her plate of fruit.

"So that makes all this okay, then?" Lavender Brown said, a fierce look on her scarred face. She would never be stunning ever again, and nobody was certain if she would transform into a werewolf the following month.

"Actually, no. It doesn't. Our different cultures need to merge and co-exist." Narcissa answered dutifully. "Ignoring the traditions and history makes you ignorant of powers that exist out there. If anything, I think we may need to start adding a Pureblood studies curriculum, just like we have a Muggle course."

"Well Carrow did a fine job with her class..." Neville spat.

"I'm not saying we need to teach Pro-Pureblood propaganda, nor Pro-Muggle. But there is a lot of the culture that needs to be understood, both the good and the bad." Narcissa coolly replied, and it shut everyone up for a moment.

"So does this mean you're gay?" Ron blurted out.

"No - " I replied automatically, but Narcissa's response cut me off.

"Yes -"

My wife was trembling, and my hand was in hers for support. "It's okay." She nodded as she spoke up. She took a deep breath, and I saw her face start to pale in nervousness.

"I am. I'm a... lesbian. Knew it back in third year." Narcissa seemed to have a weight shifted off of herself, and I felt proud of her in that moment.

Harry shrugged. "I knew I wanted to date Ginny in my third year. So, what's your plan for the summer, Hermione? School resumes as soon as they re-build it, I suppose."

I thought about it; letting go of Narcissa's hand as I said it. "I need to get my parents.."

Narcissa frowned at that. "I'll help; you can... consider it our honeymoon."

I shook my head. This was my family, it's personal, and I don't think I want to show up with my new wife in tow that's their age...

"No, I can manage by myself."

"Mione, I insist. I'd like to... leave this country for a few days myself." Ugh, I need my space! Does she realize she's suffocating me?!

"Cissy, why are you so adamant about wanting to help? There's nothing 'in it' for you; It's not like I'm going to just wake up one morning and be okay being married to you against my will!"

Narcissa stood up and paced away. "Ugh, you are such an insufferable... Elizabeth Bennet!"

I was awestruck. Did she just make a literary reference to Pride and Prejudice? And how am I Lizzy?

"Oh, am I? What, pray tell, does that make you? Charlotte Lucas? More like Lady Catherine, it seems..."
"Fitzwilliam Darcy, obviously. I may be seen as the cold and socially mal-adjusted one, but if you analyze my actions, you'll see that I **always do what's best** for someone. It just requires that somebody get over their pride and let go of their prejudice."

Severus traded a surprised look with Minerva as Harry's shock was reflected in Ron.

Narcissa huffed, smoothed her robes, and nodded a polite goodbye to Harry and Severus. "Thank you for your hospitality; feel free to come visit whenever. Hermione, you may call on Herpy to get you home." With that, my wife turned and stalked out of Gryffindor Tower.

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I was still trying to figure out how I was anything like Elizabeth Bennet as Narcissa stormed out. *Oh, crap! She just walked away...* I got up to chase after her, but George stepped in the way.

"Um, Hermione... she's angry, let her go..." He had a calmness to his voice as if worried he'd spook me. I looked around at the other guys who nodded their agreement.

"But..." I objected, "I should go comfort her." George nodded, slowly.

"Take it from me and the other blokes here who have dated women. When she's angry, she wants you to know why she is angry before you try to approach her. Also, let her calm down a bit first." *Well, that makes sense.* I shrugged, and the fight left me.

"She's trying to get on my good side; wants to go with me to see my parents and," I cringed at the thought, "I don't even know how I'll even explain her to them." I huffed.

Harry spoke up then. "That's... not a reason for her to be upset at you, Hermione. Maybe the other way around, because she wanted to support you." *I know... am I just being too sensitive?*

―

"But, I sent my parents off by myself. I wanted to rescue them by myself as well." I responded, sitting back down. *There is something else going on here, isn't there?*

Severus conjured two cups of tea. "She seemed upset before that; in fact, she seemed quite upset when you two came to the Headmaster's Office." I looked at the tea, puzzled. "It's de-caffeinated. Should soothe your nerves." His voice still unnerved me with the raspy, broken timbre in it.

"You're friends with her, right? Why is she mad at me?" I asked, sipping the warm tea. *Merlin, this is better than Cissy's. How close are they?*

"I daresay you are profoundly ignorant, if not - entirely - obtuse." Severus muttered, sipping his own tea, "Narcissa holds you in high regard and isn't fighting the situation that has made you two... spouses. She's attempting to support you and, in return, only received rejection."

"But I don't want her help! I didn't ask to be married to her..." *God, this is unfair.* I cradled my head in my free hand, not knowing how to deal with this. *It's not some sort of exam that I just need to study for...*

Cold eyes glared at me and I looked up and met Lavender's. Her face was partly healed, but the scars did not line up. *Or was that her face not lining up?* It was not just disconcerting, but downright creepy. I gulped, and looked away.

"Hermione, take a good look at me." My eyes trailed the scars, but I flinched away from them. "All of the scars. Take. A. Look."

It was hard to focus on the red scars, since the wounds were still weeping puss and blood. "I'm...
"Oh leave off..." Her voice cracked, but sounded resolved in a way I never would have expected from her. "Collin used to say I had a radiant smile, and wanted to capture the... perfect picture of me. He got between me and Fenrir; saved my life." The last part was said regretfully, her face hardened from what should have been decades of sorrow and regret, yet no tears would come. "I knew he fancied me, and I just kept ignoring him. Hell, I could have at least snogged him once. So, to hell with you and your pouting, Granger. You still have your friends and you know you're loved. She seems to be making an effort, which is a lot better than what some of us have."

Damn, she's right. I'm being all Cho Chang for myself when other people have it much harder. Have lost a lot more. "I just don't know about Narcissa though. She says she doesn't hate us Muggle-born... but her family has a history of hatred and prejudice."

"Hermione? I was a prisoner of Malfoy Manor... Harry and Mister Dobby rescued me," *Mister Dobby? He would have liked that... "Even though we were locked away and knew we couldn't escape, the dungeon was kept warm, we were regularly fed, and given clean water to drink. If it weren't for Narcissa and her mercy, we would have been long dead before anyone would come looking for us. I'm never going to be her good friend or anything... but she was decent to me."

Ron sat next to me and wrapped me in an embrace. Harry did the same, and I was squished between the two boys. My two boys.

"You are loved, 'Mione." Ron said, his embrace firm and reassuring. It had been a long time since we hugged, and it seemed to fulfill a chasm within me.

"Thanks. Both of you." I replied as Ginny came over. Harry only had eyes for her though and left us. Ron and I chuckled at the exchange.

"Does he know he's wrapped around her finger?" I asked.

"Merlin, no. But he's happier that way." Ron replied, "Not sure I could date a bossy girl, let alone be her friend."

I was shocked at that. "Ronald Weasley, how long have you known me?"

He scoffed. "Well, you don't count..."

"Thanks, Ronald."

"Well, I mean... Look. You're no longer dating blokes like other girls do."

"Well spotted. It doesn't mean I still don't like guys, though."

"So you're saying I still have a chance?" His smile was infectious, and I beamed at him. It almost felt like old times.

"Sure, except that I have a wife to look after and a Ministry to help rebuild. And go back to school in the fall."

"So, you'll be a bit busy, I guess." Ron replied, his fingers trailing over my hand. *Weasley, where were you ages ago?"

"Hey Ron, I need to know something. Minerva and your mother didn't seem to trust me. Is it just
because of Narcissa, or is there something else?"

"Oh, yeah... remember when mum found out we were planning on ditching the Burrow right before the wedding? Apparently she was under the impression we'd be at home, safe and sound every night, as the Order somehow defeated You-Know... Vol-Voldemort," he stuttered but got the name out, "all while you, me, and Harry were safe and sound and didn't even break a nail."

I couldn't help but snort in laughter. "Merlin, they thought we were going to stay hidden as the adults took care of it?!" Apparently they have underestimated us.

"Yeah, apparently the three of us planning to abandon the Order meant that we couldn't be trusted with the war effort, no matter how much Remus argued that they should trust in Harry to lead the fight." I thought about that, and how he and Tonks died in the Final Battle.

"What happened to their son, Teddy Lupin?" I asked concernedly. Ron smiled sadly.

"Andi was going to raise him by herself... but Harry's taking his role as Godfather to heart and setting up rooms for the baby and the grandmother to live with him in Grimmauld Place. Decent thing to do, I suppose. Boy needs a father."

I yawned, not wanting to argue that two mothers could do just as well as a mother and father. "The Dark Lord wanted me to 'father' Death Eaters with Narcissa." I shuddered, glad that he was dead and gone.

"Yeah, about that... how was that - " He asked, and I answered instinctively.

"Potion." I looked around the common room and saw people either leaving the common room or going upstairs to find a bed to crash on for a bit.

"Oh, well... but how would you..." Ron was baffled.

"Ron, are you seriously asking how I had sex with her?" I wasn't sure if this was an awkward boundary issue or just something that guy friends would chat about. Of course, there were all sorts of questions from the girl dorm-mates when I was supposedly dating Viktor...

"Oh, no... I'm not trying to be some sort of leering pervert... I just don't get how you could have gotten her pregnant." I shrugged and decided to throw caution to the wind. Maybe it was the exhaustion. I cast the muffliato and pressed on.

"The potion gave me some... well, it gave me a... you know." His eyes widened in shock. Oh thank Merlin he did 'know'...

"Huh. That's..." his face went from surprised to fascinated. "How big was it?"

"Ronald!" I chastised, "Do you ask all the other boys about their... size?"

"No," he mumbled, "just Harry. I hit puberty and was told by Dad that a lot of things would change. Anyways, I'm 14, what about you?" It took me a moment before I realized he meant centimeters. Is this where I'm supposed to not hurt his ego?

"Um, well, mine was just the potion's doing, not me per se but, um..."

"Oh go ahead tell me, I won't tell anyone. George keeps saying I'm the runt of the litter, as it were." Bollocks, he won't shut up until... Fine.
"Just under seventeen. But I was told it's more about the width and girth, though." I cringed at the look on his face. *Oh this is probably the worst conversation I've ever had. Please, make it stop.*

"Bloody Hell. I..." Ron was dumbstruck. "I think I need to go obliviate myself now..." He got up and walked away as I pecked at the food on my plate.

"Might I join you?" The harsh tones jolted me, but I nodded for Snape to sit. *That potion was not just his, but him.*

"You didn't just hear that last part, did you?" I asked sheepishly.

"No, my muffliato charm works perfectly." I looked up at him in shock. "I can recognize my own spells, Granger."

"Oh, okay. May I ask about..." *Don't say cock. Please don't even think of cock... "Lily?"* Severus looked at me curiously, but nodded once. I thought it was odd, but this might be the only person who could understand.

"You did all this for her because you loved her... well, was it... enough?" *Was it enough to love someone selflessly and be utterly alone for life? Or would you have been willing to find temporary comfort with someone - anyone - just because it's convenient?*

Severus shook his head. "It didn't keep my bed warm at night. Nor did the lack of companionship fulfill my need for suitable conversation. No... in the end, we all need someone." I teared up at that. *That's what I was afraid of...*

"That being said, Misses Granger, having someone who truly does love you and will fight along side you makes living so much easier. You get that chance; don't waste it."

"I'm sorry. Do..." I looked at him, and took in the aging he had done in the past year. His neck was heavily scarred, and his hair had started to go grey in a few strands. Overall it made him look... even more ominous than before. "Do you think you'll move on and find someone? I hope I do."

Severus looked like he was about to answer but was caught off-guard. "What do you need to 'move on' from, Misses Granger?"

I bit my lip. "Well, Narcissa, obviously. That is, once I figure out how to undo the Compulsion Curse. I mean, it's no use to get annulled if I'm still stuck needing and desiring her. She... would be better off finding someone who is more compatible for her."

"I see. How many of your peers would, or even could, cite the works of Austen? Or perhaps Brontë? And of them, who would refer to their characters in the midst of a dispute that could only be termed as a lover's quarrel?"

I frowned at that. "I don't know. I just don't think that I'm ready to settle down and be married by my eighteenth birthday." *Technically, I was already nineteen due to abusing the time-turner, but I wasn't going to admit that.*

"There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of merit or sense." Severus did a rather realistic mimic of my voice, and it stopped me cold. *He just quoted Lizzy Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, and I had to agree with Narcissa's opinion of me.*

"You've been as mature as any rational, clear-headed adult since you started the D.A. Salazar knows
you were more mature than Sirius ever was." Severus said dryly, looking me over. "Although I may have been mistaken, taking your actions of late into account."

I wanted to roll my eyes at him, but knew it would only cement his opinion. *His wrong, erroneous opinion.* I yawned again, exhaustion claiming control of my eyelids.

"You should rest; there is much to do in the morning." Severus stood and started to leave the common room, and I expected to see the robes billow behind him as they always did. Instead, his gait was more of a shuffle as he favored his left leg over his right. *He's trying to hide his injuries...* I guess I could understand why. He's going to be going up against all of his former colleagues.

I thought about Bellatrix being out there somewhere with The Dark Lord's body, and not entirely sure if that was as terrible as my wife thought it was. *When did I start calling him that?* He was Voldemort, Tom Marvolo Riddle, just another megalomaniac who came to a bitter end. A lot has changed in my life in so few days, and I'm expected to just go 'home' to the place where I was tortured like it's no big deal.

*I don't think I can... but I know Narcissa is there, and she witnessed so much more... she was also tortured there. At least this place feels like home to me, even after being away for a year.* I yawned again, and exhaustion was taking over.

I knew I should make my way home, but the sofa was so soft and I was already here. It was safe, and warm, and familiar... My eyes drooped some more and I succumbed to sleep.

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Narcissa felt the sheer wrongness as she approached her home; the Dark Magic was too heavily infused and much would have to be done to repair it. *this will take more than just a redecoration; entire rooms will have to be purged and rebuilt*

"Herpy?" She called out. *no response? This can't be good...*  

Narcissa went to the kitchen and found a pile of debris that was quivering. "Herpy, it's okay to come out now. The Dark Lord is gone, and so is the snake."

"Herpy was told that before, many years ago... He returned, and will return again..." Narcissa went and cleared away some of the refuse. *She hid herself in trash to cover her scent... I didn't realize how scared the house-elves were...*  

"No, he's gone for good. Hermione, Draco, and I killed him." Narcissa let the words stew in her head. She had done it; he threatened her son and there was no hesitation. Her wife was right beside her in that moment, and they did what had to be done.

"Herpy is sorry that Herpy hasn't cleaned, Mistress." Narcissa smiled sadly at her servant. *I'd be hiding too if I could.*

"It's okay, we've got a lot to do though." The smell hit her, and Narcissa realized that the bodies were still here. Corpses of both goblins and wizards were strewn together, their bodies rotting and gasses expelling. She put a bubble-head charm over herself and directed Herpy to bring in some lavender flowers to pin on themselves to keep the smell at bay. *How should I dispose of them all? The families of the deceased would want to know... So I can't just vanish them all.*

She had to get them out of the house, she knew. "Herpy, go clear the pavillion. I'll start levitating the bodies into two different lines out there, one for the wizards and one for the goblins." There were so
many that she thought it might take a few hours just to sort through their personal affects in order to identify the bodies.  

Some were pale, some dark, some looked waxy... But all of them had that unnatural stillness, that softness in flesh that just unnerved her. Her flesh crawled as she moved the bodies, and eventually turned it into a routine.

*this should NEVER become a routine* she thought as she started to mentally check-out and just go through repetitive motions; lift body, take it through the home, drop it in line. Check pockets and place the contents on their chest. Even the House Elf joined in, pausing frequently to wash her hands.

The bodies at the top of the heap were the most putrefied, but at the bottom of a pile was a bloated corpse whose belly was overly distended. *nevermind the torn limbs that are scattered about in the pile* Narcissa cringed, levitating and moving the body carefully through the ballroom and into the main hallway. Herpy was coming from the opposite direction, and Narcissa nearly stumbled as she went by.

"Will Master be coming home?" *Master? Herpy knows Lucius has passed, right?*

"Lucius died, there's just me, Draco, and Hermione."

Herpy nodded. "Yes, Master Granger."

*Does she understand gender?* "Hermione is a woman, just like me. She is your other Mistress."

Herpy shook her head, horrified. "Herpy serves Master and Mistress, it is the way of things."

Narcissa wondered about that as a wall sconce brushed the corpse she had at wand-point, popping with an eerie flesh-rending sound. It was like wet denim being torn, and she dropped the body in disgust as thick ichor and other, less savory fluids coated the walls and splattered on her robes.

Narcissa and Herpy shuffled away from the body in fear, only to see the head snap free of the torso and roll towards her. *Salazar's snake, I'm never going to get that image nor the smell out of my mind.*

With a great deal of trepidation, Narcissa grabbed the head and put it on the torso as she levitated the body the rest of the way outside.

Coming back in, she forgot to watch her step and her foot slipped in a patch of something indescribably horrid. She would have fallen face-first into a pool of what once was blood... *Is this what it meant to be Pureblood? Is this all that's left of Narcissa Black, matriarch of the Malfoy line?*

As she sat there upon her ass in the middle of her home, covered in putrefied remains of the dead, Narcissa set her jaw as she resolved to get up and get her home back in order. She got up and the subconscious act of sweeping some hair out of her face told her that there was blood on her hands. It wasn't her own blood. And it was still wet.

It was her breaking point; she could no longer be resilient in the face of all of the horrors she had to 'be strong' around. Her cold, neutral expression as she suffered years of abuse at Lucius' hand was no longer there. The stoic face broke.

Tears started to form and she was mourning. And livid. And scared. And unsure of what the future would be. But she had a new lease on life, and wouldn't let her upbringing restrain her anymore. She had undergone so much to please her family and please the Malfoys because that was expected of her. Even her hair color had been magically altered within her body and bloodline so the Perfect
Malfoy Golden Blonde would be in their children.

She stroked to the bathroom and reached for a tissue to dab away the tears, and she took herself in. She looked horrible, covered in the death and decay of others, shabby robes, and in a broken marriage. This was where she wound up because she did what she was told all her life.

*This was supposed to be perfect, right? Perfect little dream, perfect home, perfect family, perfect little meek wife... LIES!*

Narcissa forced her eyes to look at her own hair, her signature Black family trait that was 'wrong' for a Malfoy wife. *I couldn't be 'me'... I loved my raven-black hair...* she thought as too many emotions went through her. The purity of blood was absolute bullshit, and the gilded halls here were paid and painted through the blood and deaths of others.

It was then, looking into the mirror and knowing that she could finally be herself in this new marriage... that she knew who she was, and how a muggleborn like Hermione would have always seen her as. *It doesn't matter that I killed The Dark Lord to Hermione... she knows I just stood there and watched her get tortured by my sister Bella. All she sees is a coward who fell in line.*

*And why should she see me as anything else? Slytherin's Snake, Hermione! I need you here! Narcissa looked at herself in the mirror, her eyes red and puffy, her face sunken and gaunt from sleepless nights... and she knew she been avoiding her true reflection for the past few years. I hate myself for what I've become, but I can change my station!*

She needed to undo the Darkness that had invaded the home, but there was something else she had to do first. Grim determination was her solace from the rising waters of emotions that threatened to flood her again.

"Herpy, collect all of the severed limbs and stack them outside together. Wizard, Goblin... doesn't matter." Narcissa's voice had an edge to it, but she didn't care. Looking into the mirror, she smeared the blood and grime around on her face for maximum effect. *He better enjoy the bitter harvest.*

Once the ballroom was cleared, Narcissa vanished the bloodstains and went to the library. She had a malevolent glint in her eye as she faced off the portraits of her family and in-laws. She had been trying to avoid this room, but now she had a different plan. The rage within her was burning clean, wiping away years of self-hatred and prejudice that she had taken to heart.

"Abraxas! Time to show you what your Pureblood mores have wrought!" Narcissa spat, ripping the portraits off of the walls.

"Salazar's Snake, woman! Control yourself! Where is my son Lucius? I told him to have a firm hand with you..." The portrait saw Narcissa's state and recoiled. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself! A Pureblood of your stature shouldn't be covered in such muck!"

Narcissa took on the air of her unhinged sister, throwing the portrait of her mother Druella to the ground with a satisfying crash. "Remember when Andi was considered the worst of us three sisters, and I was told to marry Lucius else I'd bring shame to my family? And BELLA was the shining example?!"

"She was a troubled girl; there was nothing we could do about that..." Cygnus Black, the portrait of her father, said that as he brushed aside her complicity in the first Wizarding War.

"No; she was the only Witch to take The Dark Lord's mark, and do you want to know what's happened to him? Huh? Dead."
"Speak sense, woman!"

"The Dark Lord. He is dead. And Andi's daughter died a hero fighting against that Villain."

"Tom Riddle was a good man, with good ideals! He just... got misguided by..." Cygnus' portrait huffed.

"The girl who married that beast?! Oh, the shame she brings onto our family!" Druella wailed, trying to ignore the glaring truth.

"Oh, misguided by whom? Where can the blame be put now? Mudbloods? Because it wasn't the Half-Blood 'Boy Who Lived' that stopped this madness. It was a muggle-born... the same mudblood who killed Lucius. And on this very property, so that Bonding you MADE us get? Well, I'm no longer a Malfoy..." Narcissa's grin was edging toward madness, and she let her eyes shine with emotion. It felt so good to express your feelings, and to truly vent after decades of repression!

"Obviously you'll need to dispose of him before you make any half-blooded mongrels..." he said indignantly.

"That's the best part. It was a witch, and the Compulsion made for some amazing sex..." Narcissa replied, enjoying the fire-brand passion in her heart.

"ABOMINATION!"

"How could you do this to me?"

_The portraits of my parents were just that, an echo of them._ Narcissa thought as she carried them out through the ruined house, room by room, out to the pavillion.

"The Dark Lord had his giant snake here, EATING PEOPLE. Of course, they were only blood- traitors, right?" Narcissa stacked the portraits into a pile, and held a wizard's broken limb over them.

"Over a thousand, more than likely two thousand muggle-borns were given the Dementor's Kiss. And the dead you see here? The survivors of Gringott's, that Tom Riddle decided to interrogate."

Narcissa dropped the limb on them. "Dead." Another arm. "Dead." A goblin's leg. "Only half- bloods or higher were allowed to have jobs under The Dark Lord's reign. So you might have known these people, cared for these victims, whom your precious V... Voldemort didn't give a damn about. All for his New World. For preserving the magic for only the 'Purebloods'."

The portraits shuddered as they were buried under the stack of dead flesh, both wizard and goblin alike. As each broken remain was tossed upon them, Narcissa repeated the word 'Dead'.

"Dead... Dead... Dead..." Narcissa paused as she found a smaller, more delicate hand. "This doesn't even begin to tackle the torture and suffering. This arm? I'm fairly certain it's of a child. An. Innocent. Child." She tossed it on top and levitated the rest of the remains to fall into a haphazard pile.

"Your precious Pureblood savior did terrible things, used Necromancy, made Horcruxes, and hid them in the family vault. I had to use fiendfyre to ensure it all was destroyed." Narcissa said coolly, her resolve firm. "Incendio."

The unidentifiable remains caught on fire, and the air began to smell of singed hair and cooking meat. The fire was cathartic, and Narcissa looked forward to taking a long shower and scourgifying her skin raw after. This would be her rebirth; she helped kill the man who made so many suffer, and
now she was ready to leave the prejudices of Blood Purity behind her.

Harry woke in a bed in the Gryffindor tower, unused to the weight pressing down on his chest. He slept really well, the first time he could stay asleep for more than a few hours in so many months. It made sense, since he had been on the run for so long.

_In the end, it wasn't him or me. I didn't have to kill him. It was Hermione and Narcissa._

He looked down to see familiar red hair on his chest. He smiled, knowing that things were going to work out. He was an Auror, Ginny was curled up with him, and he had Andi and Teddy moving into his place.

_Kreacher seemed really happy to have a new baby in the house._ Harry thought, and was glad that his girlfriend understood. _Girlfriend. Finally._

He knew he should get back to sleep until morning, that there wasn't much that anyone could do for now. _But that's when my brain likes to think up of everything and keep me awake, isn't it?_

Harry thought about the issues that had been on his mind. Ron had a point earlier; there would be a power vacuum and every two-bit Dark Lord wanna-be would be testing the Ministry and the only Auror out there is missing in action, and potentially making a bad situation worse.

_Sleeper agents, magical time-bombs set to hunt down Death Eaters and have no formal training to reduce civilian casualties. No wonder Kingsley wasn't willing to make just anyone an Auror... you'd have to trust them to not abuse the power._ Harry remembered what Hermione had said. Draco would more than likely be a target, but so could Narcissa. _What's the difference between a Death Eater, a scared boy forced to take the mark, and his mother to an Auror?_

Harry sure as hell wouldn't trust that kind of decision-making to the members of the D.A.. Luna, sure, but Cormac? Or Lavender? He shook his head at that; he knew that rounding up the last of the Death Eaters on the run would be problematic, but he knew he shouldn't make a bigger problem later on just to solve the current one.

_Right now, we have a manhunt for Bellatrix, Scabior, his Snatchers, and Proudfoot. Not to mention an entire populace that could at any moment rise up and start killing. No sweat._

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Narcissa woke up in bed, surprised at how she even got here. _Well my hair is braided and slightly damp, so I apparently did shower last night._

She looked to her headboard, and found an empty bottle of dreamless sleep. And the frowning face of Severus Snape.

"Slytherin's Muggle, Cissy. I distinctly told you to use that sparingly. Not 'for best results, use entire bottle'.'"

"Why is there a... Snapeypoo Frownyface... in my bedroom? Herpy!" She called out, wincing at the loudness of her voice, "Coffee for me and the wife." She looked at her life-long friend. "I should have you thrown out before you wake..." Her voice dropped off as she remembered why she dosed herself to sleep. _Hermione never came home last night. I had to face my home by myself._

"Herpy came for me when she realized how much potion you took last night. Not to mention the
small barbecue you had."

Herpy brought in two cups of coffee, presented one to Narcissa, and popped out of existence. Severus' lips thinned at that.

"I destroyed my parent's portraits, Sev. And the Malfoys." Narcissa confessed as she sipped the hot godly nectar.

"They were horrid parents; I daresay it was time for you to confront them about it."

"But they were my parents." Narcissa grimaced, knowing exactly what kind of upbringing he had. "Sorry. Well, I'm fine, thank you for the house-call, Healer."

"I had other things to speak about." Severus replied, "and, under the circumstances, I didn't think you should be alone."

She sighed, exasperated. "She said she doesn't love, Sev. And I can't really blame her." Narcissa took her wand and projected the arithmancy equation of her life. The gold line soared as it did before, and Narcissa added 'Hermione' as the label to the eigenfunction, and started to add variables to the matrix.

"Unwilling marriage. Loathes her wife." Narcissa re-ran the equation, and the lines went haywire. Fates intersected, and the golden line that darkened turned a full flack as it hit the 20 year mark. The other signifiers also darkened and fell sharply as well. The result said she would have a horrible life as this climate continued. "Totally predictable."

"Cissy, give her time. She doesn't loathe you. Besides, you need to account for her being affected by dark magic, and in possession of the Deathstick." Severus consoled, banishing her work, "now get out of bed and begin your day." Narcissa knew he was right; she needed to get out of bed and start her day. *Best if dressed, though.*

Narcissa gave him a look, and he turned his back to her. "Now I think you're being absurd. You've done more than just seen my nakedness. Dare I say, you've had first-hand experience there."

She got out of bed, wincing at the mental image. "It was your body's likeness, but on a witch. Don't ruin it for me, sassy straight friend."

"Oh, but you make it so easy, Cissy."

Narcissa slipped on some robes and brushed her teeth. "I'm glad you're here, really, but I'm going to be fine. Now what did you need?"

"I'll be hunting down Trixy." Severus turned and faced her as he said that. She seemed mournful of a past that couldn't come back.

"She always hated that name."

"She had worse ones for me. Will you be okay?"

"I have to be. She's family, but so is Hermione now. Bella went too far, even tried to kill my wife. And apparently the general public will be gunning for me and my son as well."

"That's what I wanted to mention, anti pureblood rhetoric is already on the rise. Harry will be leading the aurors and doing patrols to try and curb Bedlam's final solution."
"So it's Harry now? What happened to hating him for life?"

"He's grown up and willing to protect family. I can't hold onto prejudices for an eternity. Besides, I bled out in front of him and had to bare my soul to him. He knows about Lily."

"You? Letting go of the past? Who are you and what have you done to Severus Snape?"

"I mean it; you love someone, you tell them before it's too late. Don't let them have the wrong opinion of you."

"Sev..." Narcissa said kindly, then went contemplative. "You're not talking about Lily here, are you?"

Severus turned on his heel and walked out of the bedroom. "The activity room should suffice. Come along, I have a later engagement. He's going to just keep carrying that angst, isn't he?"

Narcissa followed him, realizing his gait was slightly off still. "Are you in any shape to go gallivanting after fugitives?"

"They are coming after us regardless; best if we be ready and deny them their quarry."

Severus opened the doors to the activity room (both doors at once, drama queen) and set his wand to transforming it from the fencing and jogging room to spelling practice. Human-shaped targets coalesced into existence, some with hostile poses while others appearing to flee for cover.

"I saw what you and Mrs. Granger did to defend the dungeons from the droves of drunken dunderheads. It gave me an idea... One that wouldn't involve destroying my cauldrons." His flat glare at Narcissa was met in kind. Hey, it worked.

"Just don't make a habit of it."

"And your idea was?" Narcissa asked out loud.

"I wanted to develop a non-lethal means of disabling an attacker that would leave no magical trace behind. Mrs. Granger might not be attacked, but you may well be. The last thing you need are Ministry inquiries to be opened while avoiding being charged for war crimes by the Wizengamot."

Severus' targets began to move back and forth in slow, random directions. He handed Narcissa a blue muggle pistol.

"This fires little capsules that break on contact, each containing a sleeping drought that takes immediate effect." He hit a button on the handle, ejecting a magazine. "The ammunition goes in here, the propellant is inside these metal vials, he worked the slide back, "which can be invoked with this mechanism. Single-use."

"This is muggle technology."

"Very good, Cissy. These rounds are just paint, for training purposes. I'll blend into the crowd here and try to cast spells at you, and you try to stop me."

I was in Malfoy Manor, and He was coming. He would kill all of us, if I didn't have answers ready for why the vault was breached. Try to not think about it, you have to get the truth now! I had her bound and helpless, tied by my wand with magically unbreakable rope. It was a heady feeling as I straddled over her prone form.
"YOU WERE IN MY VAULT!" I said, pressing the tip of my blade to her collarbone.

*Don't spill the Pure Blood, it is valuable...*

The sobbing in her voice was heady and delicious to my ears. She shook her head, black tears spilling out the corners of her eyes. Words failed to come out of her mouth out of fear that she would upset me more.

"Don't lie to me. I can tell when you're lying!" I whispered fanatically, "I can taste the lies upon your lips, you filthy blood-traitor!" I slashed with the blade, and straps were undone from her robes.

Her voice cracked and she shrieked in fear. It was shrill and hurt my ears as it echoed inside the walls of my skull. My fist connected with her face, and she fell silent. *The blade almost nicked her, I should be more careful.*

My lips were upon hers and the whimpers beneath me broke down into a full shudder. "P... please... no..." She begged as I ripped her robes off of her with my wand.

"Answer. My. FUCKING. Question." I asked, my body pulsing with nervous energy and excitement. She was naked and shivering on the cold stone floor. Her fear had me... *aroused*. I rolled my hips as my exposed thighs rubbed over her sharp hipbones. I was wearing the same dress from Fleur's wedding, but I didn't recall putting it on.

"I don't know... it's fake! It's all fake!" She cried, her eyes shut tightly against me.

*She knows she can't Occlude against me, doesn't she?*

A voice from behind me spoke up. "I... don't think she knows anything. You don't have to keep doing this." The sounded genuinely afraid of me. My best friend.

*I don't have time for this!*

"Someone shut her up!" I said, twisting my arm and gesturing the dagger towards Hermione. She was in her Hogwarts uniform, and it seemed rumpled, as if she had slept in it.

*How am I in two places at once?*

"It's... not real! None of... this... is!" Sobbing broke her words apart, and a rational part of my mind knew she was in real danger of hyperventilating. The rest of me was incensed at her words. I put the dagger into my left hand and pressed to metal against her neck as my right hand sought her slick folds.

"This isn't real? I'll show you it's real enough, Cissy!"

A clattering sound had adrenaline pulse through me, jerking me awake. *FU**CKING BRIGHT!* Clenching my eyes shut, my hands shot up to help shield me as I tried to remember where I was, and if I had a wand on me.

*Where was I? Ohgodohgod, was that me? Did I enjoy that?*

I cracked one eye open and a blurry image of the Gryffindor common room's fireplace was before me. *Oh Merlin, it was all a dream! A really, REALLY bad dream.*

"Mistress asked Herpy to bring Master coffee." Herpy said, holding the cup towards me. I was shivering, but I wasn't cold. *Something is wrong... very, very wrong in my head... I-I shouldn't enjoy that.* I swallowed, hard.

*Okay, I didn't torture her. I didn't hurt Narcissa. I thought blearily, cracking both eyes open. Coffee. Coffee is good. I leaned over for the coffee, and the floor met my face suddenly. Painfully.*
Just like punching Narcissa in the face as she was beneath me, scared and helpless, and I wanted to put my... I shook violently, trying to get my mind off of it.

The carpet was that of the worn gryffindor common room. I was in Hogwarts. I am safe. I'm not near her. Someone helped me up. I noticed that my breathing was short and ragged, as if I had just sprinted half a mile. The sensation of kissing her was still on my lips, and I remembered. I actually did tie her up, and did put my whole fist into her... and I loved it. I bit my lip in disgust and shame. I can't handle this now... I have to forget...

The comfort of the wand in my robe's sleeve reminded me that it could go away, and as instantly as my hand touched the handle I thought, mercifully, OBLIVIATE. A wave of relief went through me as I took a cleansing breath and recomposed myself on the couch.

I sighed as I patted the familiar wand resting in the hidden pocket, just by my heart. My head hurt, and my House-Elf had coffee for me.

"Morning, 'Mione. That's gotta hurt." Ron's cheerful words had the opposite affect on me. I sat back on the couch and took the coffee gratefully.

"Thank you, Herpy."

"Will you be coming home, Master? Mistress did not sleep well."

Neither did I, to be honest. I tried to remember if I had a bad dream or something. I couldn't recall my dreams for awhile now. Probably have been too tired to dream.

"Why is she calling you Master?" Ronald asked.

"It's how she interprets it, I think; I did take Lucius' place." I guessed.

"Master Granger is much nicer. Though Mistress seems confused. Mistress wants Herpy to call Master Granger a 'Mistress'. Two Mistress Grangers would be confusing." Herpy replied.

Ronald laughed as I understood the House Elf's logic. I nodded my thanks and returned the empty coffee cup to the elf, who bowed and started to shuffle away. "Should Herpy expect Master for dinner?" I shook my head. Her ears drooped as she heard it, but popped away all the same.

"You avoiding Narcissa now? Not sure that's a good idea." Ron replied.

I rubbed my temples and counted slowly. "Just last night I was being told to let her go while she's still angry... how do you blokes do this?" Just like when we were on the run, make a list, then make a plan, then do it. Hogwarts needs to be rebuilt, Bellatrix needs to be captured, parents need to be rescued. Then I go back for year seven.

Ronald shrugged. "Beats me, Harry and I had the hardest time finding dates for the Yule Ball..." his eyes went distant, "and we're about to have one again..." It hit me that I'd be expected to attend with Narcissa. Lovely.

Professor McGonagall swept into the common room, posting a large notice on the bulletin board, nodded a quick hello, and began to stride away.

"What's she in a hurry for?" Ronald asked as I looked over the note. Apparently, everyone who had stayed in the castle was expected to help rebuild it and the Gryffindors had been tasked with the stonework.
"Re-setting the Founder's Wards, Miss Lovegood was able to... Harry! You and Longbottom need to report to Kingsley." My head turned to the staircase to the boy's rooms and saw Ginny storming out. As I turned back, Minerva was gone.

"I've already made up my mind, Harry! Besides, you're not coming back for your seventh year!" Ginny huffed.

"I have a job and responsibilities now, I even have a godson to help raise. You ought to be thinking of your future and achieving your OWL's..." Harry retorted.

"You didn't even consult with me before you decided to shack up and play house with another woman!"

"Her old home was wrecked from the war and she lost her husband, Ginny! Try to think of others!"

"Hey! OI!" Ron bellowed.

The ginger seemed able to pause time.

"Why was she coming down from there?" Oh bugger, he's going to play the part of an overprotective brother.

"Ronald, stay out of it." Ginny warned.

"Ron, she... we fell asleep together. Nothing happened." Harry bit out, guilt shading his face red.

Blonde hair went past me, and for a second I thought it was my wife. Wait, that's Draco... my stepson... how did he just walk in here?

"...can't believe Slytherins got tasked with corpse identification and processing for burial... stonework? You lot got the easy-peasy transfiguration jobs while I have to play the part of the mortician. Wait till my f..." Draco stopped as he realized what he was about to say, and his eyes met mine.

He was still hurt, and felt very alone now.

"Ronald, the last Weasley to graduate from Hogwarts was Percy! Not you, nor Fred..." Ginny's eyes watered at that. She didn't want to cry, so she decided to be angry instead. "Gwenog Jones says I have what it takes for the Harpies, and I could go for a bit of Quidditch after all of this!"

"And you can try out next year after you graduate, Gin." Harry said as soothingly as possible.

"But this is my dream. THIS. Don't tell me that I should give up my dream career, Harry. I'd never do that to you." Ginny replied, her eyes pleading for understanding.

"Alright. I... have to go see the Acting Minister. See you at dinner?" Harry offered the olive branch, and was met with a fierce hug.

Ron was steadfastly unconvinced. "Ginny, I don't want our family to be known as a bunch of useless dropouts..." Her green eyes fumed muted rage towards him.

Neville was biting his lip, not wanting to get involved, but knew he and Harry were needed elsewhere. "We gotta go, Harry." Harry relented as Ginny and Ron looked as if they were about to explode at each other.

"Hey, mum," Draco stage-whispered, "I guess we ought to help break them up, right? Keep those two from making a scene?"
I looked at him, unamused. "Subtle doesn't work on Weasleys; I'll distract Ron, you get Ginny." I reply, standing and moving behind Ron.

"Ronald, we got work to do. Lots of levitating stones into place in some really high-up towers." As my hand gently clasped his arm, he calmed down. A faint smile played on his lips and an old feeling of familiarity coursed through me.

"Miss Weasley, would you care to accompany me today?" She looked at him, confusedly. He made a bit of a show of shielding his mouth with the back of his left hand, as if conveying a secret. "I'll let you poke the bodies with a stick..." *Somehow Draco can make that sound playful and suggestive all at once...* It took me a moment to realize he was flirting with her. She laughed. It broke the tension as she nodded her agreement and Harry looked at the Slytherin skeptically. Harry wanted to say something, but he knew better. Ginny could take care of herself.

Ginny was muttering under her breath as she went over to Draco. "Can't believe he has the nerve to say that..."

"He's family, trying to do what they think is best. Just remind him Krum was playing pro before he left school, and had some pretty lucrative endorsements." Draco soothed as they left the common room.

Neville and Harry followed them, and I was left alone with Ron at my side. His eyes met mine and a nervous tick fluttered through me, and I found myself biting my bottom lip.

"Come along, 'Mione, we got work to do, and we can't let the house elves do it all by themselves." I couldn't help the blush that was there as I nodded and we took to repairing the castle.
Narcissa felt like a prisoner in her own home. She wasn't in trouble, but she also wasn't certain that she wouldn't be randomly attacked by anyone under an Imperious Curse. And yet, seeing Hermione not come home after the disagreement, Narcissa felt like she was on house arrest for her countless sins. If the Wizarding public didn't form a mob and kill her outright.

The weight of the muggle paintgun was only slightly reassuring to her, and she decided to look into something larger and faster, just in case. She didn't want to die, nor would she go without a fight. So why not fight for Hermione? Narcissa pondered that as she put a glamour on and trekked through Muggle London.

She needed counsel, a trip to a pub, or maybe just not another damn night alone in a house reeking of death and torture. Misery was the only crop that grew in that rocky, blood-soaked earth.

She knew the girl...woman now... would be at Hogwarts. All she needed to do was Apparate to Hogsmeade and walk over. Narcissa knew it was that easy, yet something stopped her. She instead kept wandering through London as though it were perfectly natural for her, despite her hand hovering near the muggle weapon. It was non-lethal and no magic was used so the Ministry couldn't trace it back to her.

This was one ingenious bit of skulduggery; I hope I'll never have to actually use it. Her mind thought about the many faceless people out there who would be killing against their will. Too many things were being authorized by the Ministry 'for the public's protection'. She and Hermione would have to be sure that such measures were never taken again.

Nobody likes to be forced to do things against their will, and Narcissa knew this all to well. And yet you were dosing her with a lust potion, Cissy. Trying to make her first time happen with even more coercion than just The Dark Lord's. She didn't like her own hypocrisy, but the damage was done.

Her vision wavered as tears came. Sure, they had still made love to each other, but had she been truly forgiven by the fiercely independent Gryffindor? It was her first time, and Narcissa wasn't the girl's first choice.

Narcissa stopped and leaned against the wall. Lesbians are not Dark Witches that must resort to molesting the under aged in order to spread their influence! Even telling herself that, she couldn't forget the horrific things her parents yelled at her.

Back in Hogwarts when she she kissed Odette for the first time near the Forbidden Forest, Narcissa's heart thudded in excitement. I was in love, I wasn't becoming evil. The kiss was innocent, and good, and not at all any of the horrible things she had been told it was.

She always wanted to be a good person, after all. But life had a way of not letting you live to your ideals, much less those of your parents. Odette left her after they were caught by the Gryffindor Prefects, and subsequently parroted every cruel thing that was hurled at them both.

She raked her hand through her hair and tucked a lock behind her ear. It was irreversibly Malfoy Blond; a trait that would be passed down to any offspring she had with Hermione. It was a foreign thing that had invaded her body and re-wrote her own genetic code, and it disgusted her.

In that moment, Narcissa had hated herself and what she had become. She was everything her parents had warned her about, and her reflection reminded her everyday that the Malfoys had owned
her body. Not entirely, I kept some of my Black heritage, she thought venomously.

I need to sort this out with Hermione. And her only friend with a working brain might be Harry.

She pulled herself away from the wall and looked around. Surprisingly, she was on Grimmauld Place. She walked over to where it should have been, remembered that her ancestor's home was number twelve, and strode forward find the door.

It was strange; she had visited the home many times before, and could tell by the wards of the house that she was at the front door... but couldn't see anything. It was still under the fidelius charm, and the only reason she got this far was because she was a Black. She had been here before. Her nose was touching the wooden door that she couldn't see.

She knocked on the door, and the wards strained to open for her. The door fought to open against the house and the door frame, and she was worried for an instant that the clashing wards would tear each other apart. I've never known wards to fight against each other like this... they must not have taken down the original enchantments...

"Harry! Sorry about your door, but you're going to have to open it in order for the wards to reset." Narcissa called, hoping that she could be heard from the other side.

"Narcissa?" came muffled from the other end of the doorway, and Narcissa couldn't tell whose voice it was.

The door thudded and a bolt slid, unlocking it... manually. Manual lock? Must be an extra level of fail-safe.

As the door creaked open, Narcissa was shocked at the person standing there. She had come looking for Harry, to ask about how to get through to her wife. Instead, it was her sister. Family's a funny thing, isn't it? She asked herself as her eyes met painful history, dead-on.

"Hello, Narcissa." Andromeda Tonks said, opening the door all the way. "Come on in, sis. You look like hell."

Narcissa remembered she had a glamour on and cancelled it. Might as well get to the point.

"Wanted to talk to Harry," she shuddered, "maybe get some insight about-"

"-about your wife, Hermione?" the sister finished automatically. Narcissa nodded quickly, shivering for no good reason. "Are you okay? Seriously, something seems off with you."

"Yeah. My skin is itching, but on the inside."

Andi checked her sibling for a fever like you would a teen in denial of being sick before a concert. "Cissy, you're in a cold sweat. How long has this been going on?"

Narcissa winced at the implication. "Three days. Since just after I left Hermione at Hogwarts."

Andi sighed at that, understanding the stubbornness in play. "You look like you're in withdrawal. Go see her."

"I can't. It's complicated. I... Think she hates me."

"Start from the beginning and explain all that's happened between you two. Teddy's around here somewhere playing with Kreacher, so I can make us some tea."
Narcissa recounted the whole story to her sister, who watched her with rapt attention.

"...and that's how I got here. I've treated her like hell and she would rather be straight, single, and in charge of her life." Andi's lips quirked at that.

"Cissy. Why haven't you haven't told her that you love her?"

Narcissa was dumbstruck. I don't love her! "We're... In a complicated situation, is all. One that she wishes to leave."

"Merlin's pants, you don't even realize you love her yet!" Okay, wait a minute... do I?

The next few days went as well as expected; the Gryffindors were lifting, reshaping, and rebuilding the stone walls using only the spells directed by Professor McGonagall. The Ravenclaws were restoring the charmed items and defensive spells that we had never even known were in place before, and had to test the mobility of every stone carving and suit of armor that came to life to defend the school.

The Hufflepuffs were on cleaning duty for the school, the grounds, and ensuring that nothing Dark was left to take root near the school. I hadn't even known that Herbology was a natural remedy for extracting Dark energy. Perhaps I should start a garden in my Manor...not that there's anything Dark there.

The Slytherins were given the gravest task of all. To look at the dead, and to be immersed with the cost of lives for sheer prejudice and hatred. It felt vindictive, but this was probably the best way to ensure the lesson that Pureblood Supremacy means nothing. We are all equal, particularly in death.

"When do we get lunch?" Ron asked, complaining yet again this morning. I yawned, and tried to shake the sleep off of me. It didn't do much good. I would need a full night's sleep soon, or else I might get incoherent.

"We're not under any geis here, Ronald. You're a grown adult and can leave at any time." I snapped, the lack of sleep making me edgy.

"I don't wanna quit, just want lunch." Ron huffed.

"Then go get lunch." George said, tilting his head towards the empty air, where Fred would undoubtedly be. "Blimey, I miss him." It would have been such a Fred and George thing to say together.

It got quiet and awkward, and none of us knew how to handle it. Pretty certain there was no counseling services in the wizarding world, either.

So, we worked. It would have to do. And I knew I was using it as an excuse to avoid Narcissa. The first night, well, I was tired. But then I got busy; and I would need a good explanation for being gone for a full 24 hours. Then it was 36. Then it was two days. Three. And no excuse good enough existed.

Now I'm just dreading the upcoming confrontation.

I'll admit it. I've been a coward to go back and see Narcissa. I remembered the state of Malfoy Manor when it became mine, and if Hogwarts were any indication, then her handling her home by herself would be much worse.
"Oh thank Merlin!" Ron said, putting down the rock he was working on. I looked up to see Molly leading a cart with food and beverages, with a half dozen house elves eager to assist.

Molly couldn't seem any happier though as she fed Ron both with food and cheap lines to use for my attention. *she's barely said a word to me though, after I told her off for her 'did Narcissa touch you?' line of questioning two days ago...*

"Mum, I'm famished! What's for lunch?" Ron asked, having a plate shoved into his hands.

"Roast chicken and potatoes. I am having to twist arms in the kitchens, but I think we're going to have tacos this week. Bloody elves think tortillas are muggle sorcery." Molly huffed. We all decided to break for lunch and tucked in.

"So, 'Mione, what do you reckon Ginny's up to?" *oh, this line of questioning again.*

"The same thing as the rest of the Slytherins." I replied lamely.

"But she is supposed to be over here with us. What does Draco want with her anyways?"

"Ronniekins, I'll demote you to Hufflepuff." George threatened. Ron wanted to retort, but he saw the look that everyone else was giving him.

"She ought to be returning to Hogwarts like 'Mione is. Don't you agree, mum?"

Molly puckered her lips in a grimace. She's been holding her tongue on a lot of things lately, and it wasn't doing any good. "I tried telling that to the twins. I tried telling that to you. And everyone got after me like I was on You-Know-Who's side when I tried to keep you safe and in school. Ginny went to Hogwarts with three Death Eaters there, and she and her schoolmates got tortured by the Carrows. So if you're grown up enough to call yourself an adult, and want to go run off and risk your life, I can't stop you."

Ron knew enough to look chastised with his tail between his legs. "I just thought that it would be the best for her." He walked over toward Molly.

I sighed, hoping that whatever I said would get through to him. "She can still sit her NEWT's at the end of the year. In fact, I'll be sending her study guides for when she's on the road in order to do her best on her exams. In fact, you can come back and sit your NEWT's too!"

"I don't need them to help run a joke shop."

"So you're okay being a dropout and getting a hand-me-down job to boot?!" I snapped, the exhaustion and anger getting to me.

He paled at that. Everyone looked at me in shock. "Sorry. Haven't slept well."

Molly muttered something to Ron in the corner of my eye as George nodded his agreement with me. "If you were a bloke, I'd say you are in need of a bit of trim."

*Did he just suggest that I get laid?* Molly either missed it completely or is having selective memory.

"Tea, 'Mione?" Ron offered, which I took gratefully. It wasn't as fragrant as my wife's, and I was certain that Ron couldn't make tea to save his life. I only pretended to sip the wine, remembering Mad-Eye's 'Constant Vigilance!'

"Thanks, Ron."
"So, Shacklebolt said he could get your marriage annulled." Did Ronald even know the word 'annulled' before his mother fed him this line?

"I know, but I'm still under the Compulsion, so there's no real reason to go through with that if I'm still magically bound to her."

"You're a brilliant girl; I'm sure you'll figure it out." Ron said brightly. It bothered me to hear him call me a girl, but we've been friends for ages and decided to let it go.

Fleur watched Firenze whittle arrows with a shaky hand, and she yet again wanted to offer to use magic to make the process easier. He was going to cut himself at this rate.

But she knew he was proud and would not accept help from a witch. It was difficult enough to let her clean and bandage his wounds after the first day, yet he relented as they agreed to help mend each other. Fucking racists, she thought angrily, those damn Healers deciding that I'm not human enough to bother healing.

Severus limped into the transfigured classroom, bottles clacking from leather straps he had in his hand. "Here you go, Misses..." he made a low noise of apology. "Your potions, Fleur."

Sharp, avian eyes met stoic onyx. He was only trying to be polite, but Fleur was still coping with the loss of her husband. Though the Weasleys were known for being open-minded to muggle-borns, Fleur received nothing but hostility from Molly before the wedding and it got worse after his death. Molly is just angry and blaming me for his death; she's mourning. I shouldn't take it so personally.

However, it did become personal. Overnight, she went from Heroine (or maybe the notorious sidekick to The Boy Who Destroyed Gringott's) to an anathema to the Wizarding World. She was stripped of her status as a witch by the Ministry and therefore had no rights, either. She saw the irony there, since the anti-muggle laws that defined who was a recognized Wizard or Witch were made by Voldemort, so the subsequent repeal of anti-muggleborn legislation left legal discrimination in place against half-breeds like her.

She didn't realize how many 'rights' existed until she didn't have them. The right to not be turned away from the hospital, the right to simply be in public without harassment by the law, and the right to not be refused service in any establishment just because she looks different. Nevermind actually find a job...

"This will have to do for the foreseeable future; you might be able to get Draco or Misses Granger to brew for you if it becomes dire." Severus said. His voice was still gravelly, as if shards of broken glass were a part of his windpipe now. It was disturbing but no longer distracting. Fleur couldn't tell if he was getting better or she was just more acclimated to it.

"Wait, where are you going, Severus?" Fleur asked, fearing his reply.

"I have a job to do." An arrow crossed before him and hit the door before him. "I see Firenze disagrees."

"You are in no shape to duel able Death Eaters; this fool's errand would be nothing more than a prolonged suicide mission for you. Stay. Heal. And train." Firenze replied, "Mars is still as bright as ever."

Fleur stepped towards him, stretching her arms as well as her wings. There was a twinge on her injured side still, but she was pretty certain she could fly on it if it was needed. "I'll go hunt them with..."
you, but after the Ball. That gives you a few days to get your leg in full order."

"I do not wish to be applauded by sycophants." Severus bit, "nor do I deserve an Order of Merlin for killing Albus."

"I'll go on your arm. That should frighten away anyone foolish enough to want to shake your hand." Fleur replied, entreating his less than gregarious nature.

"I will keep that under consideration." His voice was that of someone trying to end the conversation. Not if I can help it.

"Draco and the Grangers will have to be there. It's all over the Prophet. I'm surprised Rita hasn't eviscerated the girl in print yet."

Severus frowned at that. It was common knowledge to those who could read between the lines that they hated each other.

"You know Bellatrix would want to do something... big."

His frown became a scowl. "I shall meet you there. On time."

"Of course. You have suitable robes?"

Severus rubbed his face with his left hand, holding back a snarl. He realized he had been played, and expertly. His eyes met hers directly, and they were not amused.

"She put you up to this. She who? Narcissa? She hasn't seen Hermione in days and needs to ensure she has quality robes and a salon appointment..."

"Of course not! I just..." His eyes just stared through her. She warned you he can sense lies, and he's looking right into you! She blinked a few times, and looked away.

"Fleur. We'll go shopping in Paris' Wizarding District tomorrow. The four of us." Wait, the four of us?

"What do you mean?"

"The Grangers have been avoiding each other for days now, I can tell. I won't let this game of cats paws continue. You figure out how to get Hermione to go; I'd suggest you taunt her inability to dress herself and make her defiantly go with you just to prove you wrong. I'll use a different technique on Narcissa."

Fleur looked at the Potions Master and smirked. "I think I would have enjoyed Slytherin House."

"Your education would have been multidisciplinary in ways you could not even begin to fathom."

Molly wasn't at dinner, and I really didn't give a damn. Only George seemed to have my side, but even he wouldn't have stood up to his mum like I had.

The Great Hall was finally cleared of patients, only the more serious injuries having been transferred to St. Mungo's. The tables were no longer segregated by house; though the Slytherins were still being isolated by the rest. Even after the Sorting Hat told us to come together, we still kept the Slytherin House at an arm's distance.
That was, until Harry and Neville showed up and joined Ginny among the seated Slytherins. Was there a rivalry between Harry and Draco for Ginny? Harry waved me over, and didn't seem jealous or angry around him.

As I made my way over to sit, I realized exactly how quiet it had become. The Dark Lord was defeated not by the Chosen One, but by a scared young Death Eater, his mother, and Harry Potter's best friend. They all wondered if we were good, and the war was truly well over, or if we were evil and were going to be worse than Riddle had been.

"Hey Hermione. So Auror training is a blast!" Harry said, pulling me into a hug and casting the Muffliato, "we need to show a united front, so we can rebuild the Ministry without suspicion."

I looked over at Draco, who winked at me as Neville and Ginny made their hellos. "Draco's idea?" I replied quickly, pulling away.

"Came to see Ginny, actually, then go home to Andi and Teddy." The look in his eye told me it was her idea. I would have to ask her about this later.

"So what have you two been up to?" I asked, glad to see him looking this happy.

"Mostly paperwork, registering my wand, and learning proper procedures. They really frown on the whole 'make-it-up-as-you-go-along approach." He cracked a grin at that.

"Probably for the best." I replied, chuckling. I looked at how Harry was looking at Ginny, and my heart ached at the sheer level of love and devotion that was there. I someday hope to have that for myself.

"Ginny, would you care to accompany me to the Ministry Awards Ball this weekend?" It was obvious what she was going to say, from the grin on her face.

As they made plans, I wondered if I would have to go. A look from Harry, along with a letter from Draco's owl, told me I would. Looking up from his letter, Draco put on his classic Malfoy sneer as he looked me over.

"Fleur will be taking you to Paris tomorrow to hopefully find... something... that will be suitable. Best if you see about fixing," he gestured to all of me, "all of that." His face was trying to show bored disgust, but his eyes weren't selling it. I gave him a 'I see through your scheme' look.

Harry, of course, fell for it. "Hermione can find a dress well enough on her own!" As he saw me, he realized something was off. He was alone in his impotent rage.

"Harry, she needs an evening gown and could use a Makeover. You and I are going for new formal dress robes, too. And a haircut." Draco replied.

"You planned this." Harry stated, figuring it out. "What's in France for you?"

"Well, seeing as I am on Probation by the Ministry, I can't really leave the country without an Auror escort. You see, I believe Hermione here when she says there will be another goblin rebellion, and am relocating my financial assets from Malfoy Industries to a bank outside of goblin control. Probably best if you do that as well."

I was impressed by this, and it made me consider the small fortune that I had inherited. "What's the status with, um, my company?"

"I asked our Solicitor about Wizarding Business Law. It's better to construct it as a bankruptcy and
buyout rather than a re-branding attempt, so Mother suggested you buy it out with Granger Enterprises. That way you can break old business contracts easily." Granger Enterprises exists? Knowing this family, they probably already set it up.

Ginny was impressed by this. "What all does Malfoy Industries do?"

"Oh a little here and there; we owned the patents to some potions, Spellotape, Magical cleaning supplies, own a significant minority in Witch Weekly, but we were making hand over fist with Quidditch supplies, team management, and endorsements." Draco said nonchalantly.

"What about-" Ginny started.

"The Harpies are completely witch-owned and operated. You've earned your shot there on your own; apparently a scout for the team saw you play against Ravenclaw for the Cup." As Draco said that, Ginny beamed.

"So that's how the Slytherin team got new Nimbuses!" Harry exclaimed, making the mental connections. "Viktor used to endorse those brooms I recall, but then kind of disappeared for awhile." Draco nodded guiltily.

"Yeah, I never knew what happened there. Some falling out with my father, I bet. Another reason for the buyout; you won't have to repay nor honor any arrangements made by Lucius."

We all sat and talked about a little bit of everything, and I was glad for the reprieve into normalcy. I'm going to have to move my money out of wizarding Britain. We have a family solicitor on retainer. I can do this.

After we ate, Harry asked me to join him for a private talk. I joined him as Draco kept the others entertained with a riveting story about his work with Puddlemere United. The muffliato went up as a formality at this point.

"Brilliant use of inverting the notice-me-not spell." Harry said, as I noticed how my eyes were being drawn to the Malfoy. That's why nobody was approaching us, bloody brilliant. Stealth and guile are things that I'll need to learn from him. We walked out of the Great Hall and ducked into an storeroom on the same floor.

"Anyways, I figured my way around the magical Non-Disclosure Agreement as an Auror. For some reason, Unspeakables came in and had me doing paperwork, specifically barring me from mentioning and informing others about Horcruxes."

"I always thought that the Unspeakables were researching something so secretive that they had to keep silent." Or were they the spook squad? How many layers of bureaucracy exist here?

"That's what they want most people to think. They are in charge of keeping the dangerous information out of the public eye, keeping others from speaking up about it. But the point is that the Ministry is in shambles, and they're trying to clean it all up. Point is, a lot of them are scared, and kept a lot of secrets away from Voldemort when he tried running things. So as an act of good faith, I have to help prove that the Ministry I'm helping to reform with Kingsley is a stabilizing force. But that's why the Horcruxes haven't been brought up publicly, and same for the Deathly Hallows. I don't trust unchecked power with Shacklebolt, but Harry? Him, I trust.

"But I already know about horcruxes... oh. Brilliant." That's why he can talk to me. Well done, Harry. "So how is the Ministry able to cover it up? I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing."

"Me either, but now you know. The Unspeakables don't seem to answer to the Minister of Magic,
which was good during the war, but now it makes me wonder." *Could that explain the gaps in my memory?*

"Harry, do you think that they are wiping the memories of people in order to keep certain things secret?" Harry shook his head, doubtful.

"No, they don't like doing things that way, from what I gather. Memory gaps show up, and people get suspicious. They let us keep our knowledge about Horcruxes when Dumbledore told us... meaning that they might be willing to sway things certain ways, or try to keep some sort of balance. I can't figure out why they didn't stop Tom when he was getting the information from Slughorn, unless back then they never expected the rise of Lord Voldemort."

"So you don't see them as a threat?" I was vaguely scared by this, and couldn't figure out why.

"What I can gather, they opposed Voldemort once they realized his agenda and the best Tom could manage was to make his name taboo, not Unspeakable. They aren't coming after any of us, and they are suppressing the Deathly Hallows... they could have the wand and stone. Don't worry, I still have the cloak, though."

"Actually, um..." I have it. I've not used it, well, I may have. But I don't know if I did, because if I did, I was only wiping my memory. I don't even know why I would erase my own memory, but I guess that was the point.

"What is it?" Harry asked, innocence on his face. The way he was looking at me was unlike how everyone else was starting to look at me, and I wanted to keep it this way. The *Boy Who Lived is not a man I can trust to do the hard decisions.* I shrugged it off, and took a dismissive tone.

"I feel like I'm missing time. Probably from all the stress and changes in my life. I'll be fine. You get back to Ginny and spend some quality time before you two part ways for a bit."

Harry nodded, and went back to Ginny. I was done for the day and didn't want to deal with any more staring.

I made my way up to the Gryffindor tower and went through my regular pattern of showering, getting ready for bed, and staring at the ceiling for hours as I wait to pass out.

*What are you going to say at the Ball to Narcissa? Send me an owl the next time you feel randy, and I'll come with the whips and chains? More like she would be the one coming...*

The thought of a bound Narcissa entered my mind, and I couldn't turn away from it. The mental image of her wearing the nightgown spurred on my desire for the woman, and my mind began filling in details, such as blindfolds, ball gags, and hearing my wife moan in pleasure as she asked me to use her favorite crop. *I bet her pale skin would welt magnificently...*

I bit my lower lip slightly and gasped at the thought of my lips dragging ever so lightly over her own, my fists clenching and twisting up the sheets as my legs rubbed against each other in need and I succumbed to the fantasy. I grew wet at the thought of it, my pulse racing and my sex throbbing in need for release. I closed the curtains to the bed and silenced the surrounding area, using nearly every charm for concealment I knew from my time on the run.

Nervous energy went through me as I thought about it. *Everyone is still downstairs eating dinner, so I should be safe. Oh Merlin, I'm really going to do this here and now.* I gulped, unclasping my trousers and the tips of my fingers going under my pants. I listened one last time to be sure I was alone.
Damn, how is it that simply thinking of Narcissa can do this to me? This never happened with any other guy...

When I was sure it was safe, my fingers deftly slid down and probed for moisture so I could bring myself to orgasm. I was more than adequately wet for myself as my index and middle finger traced my slick folds and circled my clit. It has been too damn long, I thought as my feet held no purchase and slid on the bed sheets. I sucked and licked my two longest fingers before delving into myself.

I had a great imagination here, and knew the exact outfit I would wear to entice both myself and Narcissa. It would be leather, black, and shiny; snug and perfectly accentuating my curves. She found me sexy, and the look of naked lust in her eyes was the sexiest thing I have ever seen. My wife would, of course, be wearing nothing at all. Except maybe a collar or some restraints to keep her hands tied away from me. She would beg and whimper just to touch me, and I would make her earn it. I began to wonder how long it has been since I last touched myself, and when the dreams included Cissy, but quickly put it out of my mind as the nimble fingers found their goal inside me.

"...cissa..." my jaw quivered as I put the tip of my wand on my most sensitive bits and cast the vibration charm. A gasp shuddered out of me as I imagined her mouth and fingers pleasing me, on my command, because she wanted to.

Three fingers pumped in and curled, over and over, at a furious pace.

She would please me because I told her to.

I began to feel the waves of pleasure crest upon me.

I could reward her in kind while keeping her bound, gagged, and blindfolded. She would be thrashing as she tried pulling her cunt away from my lips, begging for me to stop... but I wouldn't...

I came quickly and cathartically, savoring the moment of release.

Because that woman is now mine.

As I basked in the afterglow, I cast cleaning charms to rid all evidence as well as cancelling the privacy spells. Why I was fantasizing of bondage and beating my wife with implements? Fearing the answer, and why I thought I owned her, I cast Obliviate...

Harry was nervously waiting by the house point hourglasses when Ron went by, levitating a large stone boulder behind him.

"Harry, what are you doing here? I thought you and Neville were at Auror training." Ron asked, dropping his load onto the floor.

"We were, but I've got plans today. Gotta get prepared for the Ball." He busied himself by straightening his robes, hoping to not look disheveled.

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about that." Harry looked at his friend in confusion. "Ginny spending the night with you and all. You gonna start dating her again?"

A smile came to Harry's lips automatically at the thought of that.

"Yeah, I love her. Now that Voldemort is gone, she and I can... resume." Harry was hopeful as he said it, but it made Ron feel uneasy.
"I... yeah, I guess you can. You'll treat her right, or I'll come after you."

Harry chuckled. "I know. But today Draco's taking me to Paris with him."

Ron sputtered at that. "Blimey, Harry, that's what I meant to tell you. They have been joined at the hip lately; I haven't been able to get her alone long enough to ask if he's trying to date her. Hell, they were here at Hogwarts for a whole year while we were on the run!"

Harry quietly chuckled at that. "Pretty certain that he's not dating her. Draco had zero prestige during his seventh year here; he was as much of an outcast as she was. Remember he failed his mission and displeased Voldemort while he was in charge here."

"You pity him?"

"Voldemort wanted me dead, which didn't take too long for him to do. Draco was going to be punished, quite cruelly, for a very long time. Between quick and painless and slow grueling suffering, which would you pick?" Ron paled, nodding his understanding.

"Wow. Sorry Harry, I just thought you should know."

"Well thanks, but if I were worried I'd just ask her. And I'm telling you there is no way those two are involved."

Ron looked at his friend skeptically. "You seem way too certain about this. What aren't you telling me?"

"I trust my girl is all."

"Oh, well he did take the Dark Mark, so he's probably gay."

"Are you mental? Voldemort was all about blood purity, in fact, he was about to mandate Purebloods to marry and breed like cattle by passing some sort of Pureblood Restoration Act. The Aurors were going to be tasked with enforcement. Imagine if he - or you - were forced to marry Millicent Bulstrode and had to", he shuddered at the thought, "do it every week till she's pregnant and have one child every year!"

Ron blanched at that. "Well, um, there's nothing wrong with getting married and having kids. Normal, you know." Harry looked at his friend like he'd never seen him before.

"But he'd be taking away your right to love who you want!" Ron has to understand that's a horrible thing!

"Harry, my grandparents were an arranged marriage. At first, yeah, they kind of hated each other. Ginger temperament, I suppose. But they found things in common and got along great and had loads of kids and turned out to be really nice people." Harry noticed the correlation that only the good Wizarding families had a lot of children.

Harry thought back to something Ron had said. "Why did you think that Draco's Dark Mark means he could be gay?"

Ron shrugged at that. "Common knowledge mate. Grindelwald was, Voldemort never married, and there was a lot of speculation around Albus. You can even look at his family; Draco was an only child."

"Bellatrix was married, remember? And I was an only child, too." Harry retorted, hoping his friend
could see reason. Draco approached behind Ronald, listening in on the conversation.

"She's also insane. And now that Hermione's 'married' to Narcissa, she's starting to look a bit unhinged." Ron's sarcastic use of that word was obvious, and it bothered Harry to hear that.

"That's our friend you're talking about!" Harry scolded.

"And my step-mum! She's loads better for my mother than Lucius ever was." Draco added, surprising the Weasley.

Ron shook his head, resignedly. "She'd be even better married to a bloke and having babies." He seemed unable to not mutter that last part under his breath.

Draco cut in. "Ready to go, Auror? Cast your perimeter jinx on me and I can Apparate us there." Malfoy knew that he wouldn't be allowed more than 50 feet away from Harry, but some freedom is better than none.

Harry nodded, and jinxed his 'prisoner'. "Actually, I scored us a portkey."

Draco shook his head at that, smirking. "Bugger that, I can do it much smoother than any portkey. Ready?" Draco snaked his arms around Harry's waist, something akin to a lover's embrace. He smirked at the young Auror and arched an eyebrow to signal he was doing this just to annoy Ron.

Harry gave a soft laugh and nodded as the Slytherin vanished them with a whispered pop.

Narcissa woke up, again, to the sallow face of Severus Snape.

"Did you drink yourself to sleep? Please don't make a habit of this, Cissy."

"No, I cried. Bastard. I went to talk to Harry last night and instead ran into my sister Andi."

"I had heard that he took her in." Narcissa noticed the clipped measure in his words.

"I also met Teddy, my grand-nephew."

"Ah, I see. Perhaps a bit of retail therapy will do you some good." Was he trying to change the subject?

"He was such an adorable and well-behaved baby. In fact, he was morphing his face just like Nymphadora."

"Could we reminisce on such trivial matters at a later time and allow me to take you to Paris today?" Severus definitely was trying to change the subject at hand.

"What bee got into your bonnet?" Severus frowned at the question, but my silent stare forced him to answer.

"I'll tell you over beignets." Severus didn't usually get snappish and speak through clenched teeth, so it must have been bad.

"You're being oddly cryptic."

"I'll order a side of fatalism that you can wash down with a goblet of LEAVE OFF, Narcissa." Really bad.
"Fine, we can go to Paris. I probably should get a new dress for the Ball." Narcissa replied, noting his explosive retort.

"Perhaps you should update your look; you could look years younger now that you're no longer married to Lucius." She bristled at that comment.

"Are you calling me old?" Her eyes met his momentarily, and Severus' face was schooled to be perfectly neutral.

"No, I'm just reminding you that your wife is nearly half your age." That was absolutely bitchy of him. Narcissa couldn't remember the last time her friend sounded like the girls who used to bully her back in school. It's his coping mechanism, don't fall for the trap.

"Severus Tobias Snape, vindictiveness notwithstanding, I can tell you're trying to distract me from what's bothering you."

"I need new robes as well." Severus, willing to go out and shop for new robes? Cissy knew that whatever it was, it was bad. He'll bring it up when he feels ready.

"You have a date for the Ball? This about the mystery girl after Lily?" As Narcissa said that, Severus' face fell from the forced neutral to something darker.

"No, and said girl is deceased." I knew the man had ghosts in his past, I never thought it was literal.

"Deceased? Oh, Severus... I didn't know. How did she -" Severus shrugged it off violently, rubbing his forearms as if cold. Or was he scratching his fading Dark Mark?

"It was Nymphadora. Then I slew Albus and she married Lupin. Even after all these years, a bloody Marauder still shreds apart any romance I have." Narcissa's heart broke when she realized he had fallen for her niece, the Auror.

"Severus, I... you had to keep your cover. I put you in that position with the Unbreakable Vow."

Narcissa had tried her best to comfort him, because in all the time they had been friends, he was equally there for her when Lucius got too rough in attempting to 'correct' her sexual desires. She felt sorry for him, but they each did what they had to in the war to survive.

"I RESCUED HER FROM A BAND OF SNATCHERS! Had to first convince them I wanted to... buy her... for prurient reasons." Narcissa flinched and cowered, an echo of her past with Lucius. Severus noticed it and slumped, ashamed of himself. I am not a victim of the past, and this is my friend. He needs me. She kept her voice calm and soothing.

"Did she know what you did for her? What all you did for the war?" You're a good man, Severus. Don't ever forget that... She knew it would be fruitless to say it now to him.

"For about a week. But the knowledge was too dangerous, so after I nipped all of the loose ends-"

"You killed bad people willing to sell my niece into slavery. I think you were being kind to them. I would have done much worse."

"I wiped her memory of our time together, letting her think the worst of me."

"I'm sorry. You deserve happiness."

"I deserve solitude. I deserve the well-learned lesson that love simply isn't the panacea to the world's ills." Merlin, no wonder he's morbid.
"Okay, we both need some retail therapy. We can stop by Silverthorn's Apothecary and get you a new set of cauldrons." Severus' dark eyes looked away in regret, yet was already calculating. *When did this man become so moody?*

"I'm persona non grata with him."

"You may have been, but now you're a war hero and vindicated spy." Severus thought about it and agreed.

"Very well. Let us go."

---

I woke up oddly refreshed from a full night's sleep, something that has been unusual lately. There wasn't any aftertaste of potions in my mouth, so I must have passed out from sheer exhaustion. *What am I doing today? Oh, shopping in Paris with Fleur today. Right.*

But the bed was warm, comfortable, and here. I burrowed into the comforter, enjoying the sanctuary it has given me. Sleeping in was something I rarely enjoyed when I was at Hogwarts, and I was going to milk this for every minute I could.

"Non! I have an appointment with her, you silly boy!" I cringed at Fleur's voice, knowing who the 'silly boy' would be.

"You are going to have to go through me." Sure enough, it was Ron. I wasn't sure why he was sounding so hostile, though.

"You are foolish to court the wrath of a Veela, much less one whom saved your life!"

I sat upright, casting cleaning charms on myself quickly and got dressed in hopes to diffuse the situation. *Ronald was only going to make this worse, wasn't he?*

"What do you want with her?" His voice was getting louder, and I could only imagine how much he would be puffing his chest out at her.

"It is up to her to tell you. If she does not trust you, zat iz not my concern!" *Her accent is returning, this can't be good...*

"She IS my concern!" *damn Ronald and his... ugh!*

Stomping down the stairwell as fast as I safely could, I found myself in a standoff. A pointed wand on one side, fiery hands threatening a fireball on the other. The other Gryffindors stayed back, either unsure how to diffuse it or were too scared of the Veela. *Who started escalating this?* Deep down, I knew who had, but didn't want to have to admit it.

"Put your wand down, Ronald, you're just makings things worse." I said, hoping he'd listen to reason.

"What are you doing with the Veela?" Ron sounded accusatory, almost jealous.

"I'm going shopping with her." He scoffed at that. I should have realized that it sounded a bit preposterous, but I was tired of being the better person. "We're going to Paris; I need something for the Ball."

"I don't believe that; apparently Harry is there with Draco." *What does that have to do with me?*
"Oh, I get it now. Ronald is being left behind and doesn't like it." Fleur sneered, and I was torn between defending Ron (not likely at this rate) and agreeing with her, which wouldn't help things. So I tried for a neutral answer.

"I'll be back in a few hours."

"You expect me to believe that you're going shopping, with Fleur, in Paris?"

"I expect you to act like a supportive friend. Failing that, I expect silence on your behalf." Ron realized he had seriously messed up.

"Hermione, I'm sorry."

"I'm still a girl - woman." I sighed, willing myself calmer. "The Ball will be the first time I will be seen publicly with Narcissa since the final battle. And I have been dreading facing her so I had better put my best foot forward."

"Blimey, you've not said a word to her? That's going to make asking for an annulment harder." The blase way he said that bothered me.

I won't make any hasty decisions, no matter who pressures me either way.

"I think that's my decision to make, Ron."

"You can't possibly be considering keeping this sham marriage with her."

"Why not, Ronald?" Fleur backed off, avoiding the impending argument that was stewing.

"Do I have to say it? She's... Draco's mum, meaning she's old enough to be yours, too."

I stared him down, and he cowed. "Did you ever bring up the age issue to Tonks and Professor Lupin? No. So the problem is you don't like the idea of two women in love with each other." Not that I'm in love with her, I'm just tired of his homophobia.

"It's not that at all, 'Mione. I just don't like the idea of you with her."

"Just say it, Ronald. What's your problem with my wife?!" I shouted at him, exasperated at having to beat around the proverbial bush with him.

"Because at the end of the day, she's still a Malfoy!"

"She's not a bad person!" His eyes narrowed, and I knew he thought I wouldn't like what he was about to say, and was taking a sick pleasure in it.

"Shows what you know. Mum told me she once took sexual advantage of a witch in school, and got her involved with You-Know-Who." He's talking about Odette Parkinson, isn't he?

"My wife didn't put a wand to Odette's head and make her take the mark, Ronald! Besides, Bellatrix was the only witch among the Death Eaters!" Ron's eyes bugged out in shock as he took it in.

"You... Knew. All this time, you already knew it?! How are you okay with her doing that to others?" He looked at me like I was the enemy, and it really said something about how deep the prejudice went.

"Doing what, exactly? Did your mother tell you that Narcissa and Odette were actually dating back in Hogwarts?"
Ron scoffed at that. "Dating is how we blokes figure out if we want to marry a woman; two witches can't technically date each other. Besides, she was arranged to marry Lucius years before that." Oh god, he really believes the tripe he's spouting.

"Still, they were romantically involved with each other, and not in any kind of evil way. She just likes women." I waited as I could imagine the gears slowly turning in his head.

"But... well, she was still a Death Eater's wife." Ronald was grasping at straws now.

"And she hated it and was glad to see him dead. So why do you not like Narcissa!?" I had him proverbially pinned the the wall, and my jaw was clenching at this confrontation. Just say it. Whatever it is.

Ron's face reddened, which didn't look good among the ginger hair and freckles. He finally exploded.

"BECAUSE SHE HAS YOU!" I knew it. He's fancied you all this time, and never said a damn word. You knew it, but he was too damn proud, or scared, or whatever to say it.

We exchanged guilty looks at each other. Happy now, Granger? The damn was broken, and he was finally opening up to me.

"When you were getting tortured in Malfoy Manor... I lost it, Hermione. I knew I loved you. Have for a long time now. I should have realized it when you went with Krum to the Yule Ball. But then I met Lavender Brown and she was easy to talk to, didn't make me feel inferior... and I knew she fancied me, so one thing lead to another.

"I can chalk it all up to bad timing, but after Lav and I were done, you were smiling about it and I was pretty certain you were waiting for me to ask you out. But I had cold feet, because of the coming war and all. When Harry dumped Ginny, I was was livid at him... but I understood why he did. I swore I'd tell you that I loved you once the war was over and we both survived it." Ron took a deep breath and steeled himself.

"Then we got caught and were at Malfoy Manor. I heard you screaming, and Bellatrix cackling, and I just realized I was going about this all wrong; I waited too long. Then Dobby came and rescued us, and we went up to rescue you, and everything was going okay for once, but we lost you again. I lost you again."

I licked my lips in thought. Don't blow this, Granger. "I was your friend then, and I'm your friend now. That hasn't changed. What has changed is that I have a family to protect and care for. They need me, and I swore I wouldn't abandon them to 'The Dark Lord, and I'm not about to just drop them now." God, I do think of them as family now, don't I? When did this happen?

Ron's eyes looked hurt and watery. "Why do you say that?"

"Say what? I am your friend. And Narcissa's my wife; I feel compelled to stand by her side and defend her and Draco so they don't get punished for Lucius' role in the war."

"Not that. You called You-Know-Who 'The Dark Lord', like the Death Eaters do." Oh, that?"

"It's become a habit, I guess. Picked it up from them." I really did just pick up the habit, too. His eyes betrayed worry.

"You were only there for about a week. You've changed, Hermione." I clenched my jaw in an attempt to bite my tongue.
"Of COURSE I’ve changed, Ronald! I’ve killed people to save YOUR ass in Gringotts, and before all of this is over, I might have to leave a trail of broken and dead bodies behind me in order to prove that I should NOT be challenged!" Holy crap! Did I say that?! So much for biting your tongue...

Gryffindor Common room went eerily silent. All eyes were on me, and I could almost hear the thoughts now. A cold shiver went up my spine, and I didn't like it. My fingers were touching the Elder Wand in my sleeve, and I wondered if I could make myself forget this. Would I even know if I have wiped my own memory? The sensation of Déjà vu made the cold shivers worse, and I silently willed away my memories of this morning. *Obliviate.*

I blinked, as everyone stared at me in open shock and Ronald was crying. *What just happened?!* I stepped forward towards him to ask, but he bolted at my movement and slammed the door behind him as he ran off. I looked to my right and Fleur was there as if in support of me. *Going to Paris, shopping. Okay.*

"We should go, Hermione." Fleur said, standing by my side as if nothing had happened. I turned my head and nodded to her, as she lead me out of the tower. *Huh, I feel like I slept really well last night...*

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Draco lead Harry through the back door of L’Enchanteur, and the Auror felt like he was back in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Draco, are we allowed to just Apparate into France? Don't they have customs and immigration to go through?" Harry asked, his eyes sharp on the French wizards who all seemed to be staring at him now.

"Not at all. A while back, there was this talk of a Unionized Europe, so it kept our various Ministries on friendly terms for easy travel and commerce. Going to the Americas, anywhere in Africa, and some parts of Asia can be right difficult. Australia's right out, of course." Draco said off-handedly.

"Why Australia?" Harry shot back, partly curious but also concerned for Hermione's parents.

"Before we had Azkaban, the Wizards and the Muggles shipped off their prisoners to the furthest, most remote island we could find. After a generation of that happening, they took offense to it and rebelled."

"How did that go?" Harry was regretting his inattentiveness in History of Magic, now that it would be important in his job as an Auror.

"Exactly how you'd expect when you deport all of your worst and most hardened criminals and leave them to rot on a giant island you think is uninhabitable. When the Hit Wizards came to break the rebellion, they were surprised to come up against trained, armed regiments. Wizards and Muggles working hand-in-hand had picked up a few new tricks, and had absolutely no Statute of Secrecy to hinder them. Even now, it's very tough for the magical community to have access there." Harry swallowed the lump in his throat as Draco sat them down at the bar.

The bartender came to them and Draco began to order a drink.

"It's not even noon, Malfoy."

"So just a single Glenlivet on the rocks." The blonde deadpanned.

The bartender chuckled at the interaction. "I don't want to get your boyfriend mad. How about some iced tea?"
Draco sputtered at that as Harry guffawed at it.

"I'm not... um, Harry here isn't..." Draco muttered quickly, taking in his surroundings for the first time. He knew the symbol on the window, the triquetra knot, but the rainbow flag that was hanging? _No wonder my mother brought us through this way-station for Paris all the time..._

"Ah, you two are just here for the parade, then? Should pass by here in a few hours." The bartender said, and Harry decided to mess with Draco. Throwing an arm around the blonde, Harry snuggled in close and flashed him a flirty smirk.

"Oh come on, sweetie, you know how much I love a parade." Harry said, his lips almost touching the other man's cheek. He didn't miss Draco's instant blush.

"He's not my boyfriend. And I'll have the Glenlivet." Draco chirped back, pressing his lips thin in frustration.

"We're no longer in London; you can quit pretending we're just friends." Harry ordered a beer from the bartender. "Alright Draco, might I ask a question?" Draco was completely lost at why Harry was teasing him this way. _Is the bloody Boy who Lived Again actually trying to flirt with me, or is he just being cruel about this?_

Draco nodded, "As long as I can ask one as well." The bartender returned with the draft beer and Harry enjoyed a sip of the amber ale.

"Ron warned me that you and Ginny had seen a lot of each other lately, and he thinks you're trying to make a play for her." Harry said it with unusual neutrality. Draco's response was to bust out into raucous laughter. It shocked the people around them for a second, but they ignored the outburst soon after.

"Do you have any idea how thick that sounds?!" The blonde took a deep gasp of air, but was still shaking with his laughter. A tear rolled down his cheek. "You're asking me, in a gay bar no less, if I'm going after your bird."

Harry looked at him and started to join in on the laughter. "Okay, yeah. I knew to trust her. And I can get that you two became friends last year. I guess I'm saying that I trust you, too." _Harry Bloody Potter trusts me?_

"Well, she's absolutely beautiful mate, but no. I'm not interested in... well," Draco's eyes flicked to Harry's, then back to his drink, "Yeah. How come nobody has tried for me?" The abrupt subject change confused Harry for a moment.

"I guess because you look straight." Draco shook his head, dismissing the Auror's answer.

"That's not what I meant. I meant Proudfoot and his insane plan. If the magical community has been turned into secret, programmable assassins, how come I'm still alive?"

"Oh, that. You've been lucky, you haven't left Hogwarts?" Harry shrugged at this question, he had not expected it in the least.

"Slytherin Lesson for you: Begin by assuming the worst-case scenario is true. You'll live longer."

"So you're not on the list. Maybe Bedlam didn't see you as a threat."

"That's just it, who is? Has anyone _actually_ spoken to Proudfoot?"
"No, we just guess he's out hunting Death Eaters like Severus is."

"So, what you're telling me is that he doesn't have to report in, and has carte blanche to use Unforgivables to turn the wizarding populace into hit-men? If I were evil, know what I'd do?"

Harry help up one finger as he took a long swig of his beer. *I'm not sure this boy can hold his beer. I ought to pump him for information right now...*

"Make a long monologue while stroking a snowy-white cat on your lap, using one of those muggle swivel-y chairs?"

Draco rolled his eyes as his jaw set. "Turn an Auror."

That got Harry's attention.

"Are you mental? Aurors can't be turned." Draco looked at Harry incredulously.

"Don't be so naive. I'd do almost anything if my loved ones were threatened. Look what my mother did for me and Hermione. Besides, I heard whispers of a program. Something called 'Unmarked'."

"What kind of program calls itself that?"

"The secret kind!" Draco scratched at his Dark Mark. *Buggering itch, go away.* "There could be bad guys hiding in plain sight, just like what Proudfoot is doing now."

Harry gulped. "They wouldn't even know that they are..."

"That's not my worst case scenario, either. They are waiting for the right moment, when something or someone triggers them, and their target seems the most vulnerable. Or alone." Harry shook his head, not wanting to believe it.

"That's just... No. The war's over." Draco finished his drink in one gulp.

"Not for them."
A Day in Paris

Chapter Notes

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is an actual group dedicated to secular ministry and outreach in the GLBT community. Their mission: To Promulgate Universal Joy and Expiate Stigmatic Guilt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fleur and I arrived by portkey to the Wizarding district in Paris, and as we exited the portkey room, I heard upbeat, peppy dance-club kind of music. I was fairly certain it was Madonna, so I was confused when I noticed the patrons here were all men. Large, manly kind of men...

"Do we have time for brunch?" I asked, seeing a bar area and hoping they served food. Fleur nodded, so we went to go sit at the bar... Next to Draco and Harry.

"Mon Dieu! How did they... Never mind."

"Welcome to Paris, Hermione!" Draco said jovially. He seemed oddly happy to be here, but I realized it was probably where he could completely be himself and escape from the stares and whispers he'd get back home. He wouldn't have to hide his emotions as much here, would he?

"I needed money moved fast and some decent robes for a ball. My solicitor is here. As for you, I know the place for your makeover. Mother swears by it." oh, Merlin... not her, not today...

"Is she going to be here today, too?" I asked, knowing she could show up any second if she wanted to. I'm not ready, I'm not ready... Draco shook his head.

"I haven't heard a thing." Harry decided to join into the conversation.

"Hey 'Mione, good to see you out and about. How's married life?"

"No idea, I've been avoiding her. But not on purpose... At first."

"That doesn't sound like the Hermione I know." He said, and I restrained the urge to stomp my foot petulantly.

"I know, but there aren't any books on this! I can't just pick it apart and research it; it's all about feelings, and compatibility, and I know magic is at work here, forcing two jigsaw puzzle pieces to fit. Do they actually fit, or is it just some glamour making it look like we do? I'd never have looked at her before, because she was married and... well, but now that I know her... I like her... but how much of it is actually 'me'?"

"And you worry that, without the magic, it doesn't work?" I nodded to Harry's question. He continued, "I mean, to follow the puzzle pieces analogy, there's got to be a larger portrait, right? What's the bigger picture for you two? When I invited Andi and Teddy to live with me, I never even
second-guessed it. I knew they were family and I could help.” Harry replied, a concerned look crossing his face. He looked towards the bartender who had served their food.

"Did that have... ugh-" Harry bolted from the bar towards the restroom. Draco was on his bar stool practicing his french with Fleur as he was magically yanked backwards off of his stool and he scrambled to stay within the distance jinx before he got thrown off of his feet again.

The bartender just laughed at what happened, possibly having known that it was going to happen. "English stomachs cannot handle a little bit of spicy food.” He muttered under the laughs. Draco was now helping Harry up and guiding him over to the restroom. How come those two are getting along so well, they don't even have a Compulsion...

I turned to Fleur, wondering if they had done the same thing. "Did you and Bill do the Bonding?" Fleur shook her head sadly.

"No, but it used to be the norm for my parents' generation. I know what can happen with them, why?"

I bit my lip, unsure if I should say it. "I um... I don't have any other women to ask this about, but I'm pretty certain this isn't normal. When I was... well, I orgasmed at the same time she did."

Fleur's eyebrows raised in surprise, which made me feel judged and awkward. I really need some more female friends. "Perhaps it was just good timing between you two?"

I shook my head. "She wasn't doing anything to me." She wasn't, was she? Why... Can't I remember? "She was... um, unable to."

"What do you mean, unable? Was she, like, tied up or some..." I paled at that. No, I wouldn’t ever do that. Felt a cold sweat beginning to seep through my skin, my hearing and vision tunneling, and I knew I was about to pass out if I didn't sit down... I think I dreamed... no... did I dream that? Or did I actually do that? Get off by torturing my wife? I shrugged off the idea, forcing myself to focus on what was before me. Oh gods, what's happening to me? FOCUS! Shake it off, Granger.

"Hey, Hermione... Okay, you're back." I gulped and nodded briskly. I think I did do... those things... Why can't I remember? Is there something Dark in me? Or am I... Fleur looked at me, worried. My mind was drifting as my body twitched and itched, and I felt distracted. Confused. Yeah. Focus. Right.

"Nevermind. I'm fine." I lied. I have to be, I can't let myself hurt Cissy.

Fleur frowned slightly, but shrugged it off. "You need a gown, and I know exactly the man for the job...” Fleur turned to leave the pub, and I hurried to follow her. My fingers touched the handle of the Elder Wand in my sleeve as I willed myself forget this.

it's better to forget. Obliv...

"Fleur? Oh my god, it's you!" The voice was deep and as I looked towards the source, my mind had to take it all in piece by piece.

He was a nun. In drag. Whiteface. Rainbow Glitter. Large Cornette Wimple. What in Merlin's name am I looking at?!

"I'm sorry, I don't know... Michael?” Fleur said, her eyes widening in utter shock.

"Oui. But I now go by Sister Maria.” He (or do I use the pronoun she?) was large for a nun. The
bartender recognized him and had an iced tea ready.

"Merci." He turned to face Fleur. "It's been years since..."

Fleur recomposed herself. "Yes, Tri-Wizard Tournament. I wound up marrying him."

"Oh, well, congratulations. I'm... a gay nun now." They shared a smile as he took a long sip. "In fact, I'm in the parade today." My mind was utterly blown by his... everything. Do people take him seriously while he's dressed like that?

"Excuse me, but what does a gay nun actually do? And why is there a parade today?"

"Oh, well, I do a type of ministry for those who have been rejected because of their lifestyles, as well as promote safer-sex practices, AIDS awareness, and anti-violence." Oh. Like a real nun, I suppose. "And sweetheart, you mean to say you're in a gay bar on Pride and didn't know?"

"I.. um, just got here from London." The nun looked between myself and Fleur and was thinking.

"So Fleur, where's your husband? I know you're monogamous, and sweetheart here is totally not your type." As soon as he had said that, I felt oddly out of place. She is still mourning losing her husband, I'm sure.

"Died in the war." Fleur said bluntly. "I got too angry, and changed... permanently. Never realized how much of a freak show I'd be this way."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, Fleur. You're still an elegant, brilliant, and beautiful woman; just remember you've not lost your humanity at all. That you've been able with bear his passing says a lot." Fleur smiled sadly, a tear rolling down her cheek. Did Veelas usually not survive the death of their spouse?

"Thank you. You always knew the right thing to say." He opened an arm to her, and she took it as a cue and crashed into a bear hug with him. A guy in drag, dressed like a nun, is hugging Fleur. He seemed to even know how to avoid her wings. My mind was catching up to everything as Draco and Harry came back to the bar, arm in arm.

"Besides, with all the others who will be dressed up in costumes and everything, you will blend in today!" Fleur chuckled softly at that.

I decided to try and introduce myself. "Hello, I'm-"

Fleur pulled away and wiped her tears. "Sorry, I should introduce you. This is Hermione Granger, my friend. Hermione, this is... Sister Maria, my ex-boyfriend from Beauxbatons." He nodded his greeting in a very feminine manner that had me confused. Do I treat him like any other guy, or girl?

"He is your ex? And you two are on good terms?" I have no idea if I could be friends with someone whom I ended things with...

"We were inseparable at one point. He began to realize he was gay, and I stayed with him to defend him from rumors. He graduated a year before me, but wished me well before I went to Hogwarts for the year. We lost touch with each other shortly after I returned. I think I see why."

"I thought this might take some explaining." He said, gesturing to his nun habit.

"Not really. You were always a good listener; loved helping other people, but..." Fleur started to ask.
"Why 'Maria'? The Sound of Music." Fleur smiled sadly as a moment passed between them.

"How do you solve a problem like Maria?" Fleur sang quietly, as if reminiscing.

"How do you catch a wave and pin it down?" He replied, singing another line in the song. "And if I'm right, you're coping by throwing yourself into work. Owl me if you need to talk to someone." Fleur nodded as Michael - Sister Maria - turned to look at me.

"Now, sweetheart, what's eating you? I just met you but can sense there's something... off."

He's just making this up. He can't really tell. His eyes narrowed as something crossed his features. I knew he wasn't using legilimency, but it felt like he was in my mind.

"Before you doubt me, I think the word I want to use is... 'missing'. Someone is missing here, or part of you is missing here, but you're not complete."

"I recently got a wife." I said reservedly.

"Oh, congrats... You didn't use the word 'married.' How come?"

"Long story."

"Well, make it simple. Do you love her?" Do I love her? I don't even know what love really is!

"I... Don't think so. I mean, I don't know. She's beautiful, and I'm magically attracted to her, but she has a son my age. I just don't know where the magic ends and actual feelings begin."

"Honey, you don't marry someone if you don't know if you love them." It's not like I had a choice.

"Oh, I... You went to Beauxbatons with Fleur? I won the wife in a duel when I killed her husband."

His eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh. Won a wife in a duel. Okay. Why were you two trying to kill each other?"

"He was one of Voldemort's Lieutenants and I was a prisoner there, trying to escape." He nodded in acknowledgment.

"Yeah, I can see how this is complicated. Does she love you?"

Yes. Or at least she thinks she can. "She seems quite okay with the arrangement..."

"Well, do you two at least have enough in common to figure out if there's a chance of a friendship? Or if there could be more than just that?"

I thought of our time in the lift at the ministry, and her wishing to help change the Wizarding World for the better, and I was very certain we were on the same page when it came to reforming the laws to treat the Purebloods and Muggle-borns equally.

"Well, we do. But I've been noticing certain things about myself. My desires have been changing, and I am scared. I'm scared that I'll hurt her. As bad as her husband did."

As I looked at Sister Maria, it hit me that my worrying that I'd hurt her meant I was better than Lucius ever was to her. He seemed to think so too.

"Oh? Sweetie, I don't think you'd even want to hurt a fly. Unless you mean the fun, kinky type of sexy pain. Have you brought this up with her? See if she might be willing to try it with you? You
never know, she might enjoy it."

I shook my head fearfully. *I couldn't do that! That's just... no...* 

"Why not?" He asked it so flippantly as if there was absolutely no problem there.

"Well, it's... wrong." *It is wrong; you don't hit the one you love. Probably shouldn't even tie them up, either.*

"People used to think two men loving each other was wrong and wanted to make it illegal."

"And they were wrong for that!" I blurted out in response.

"Why?" The nun asked, and before I could stop myself I found my answer.

"Well, whatever two consenting adults want to do with each other isn't 'wrong' just because someone else finds it repulsive." He and I stared at each other as my own words sank in. *Oh.*

I looked over at Fleur, who was doing shots with Harry and Draco. *It's not even noon!*

"Hey, stepmum, you gotta try one of these." Draco said, giggling.

"Ugh, don't call me that... son!" I replied as the bartender poured me a shot.

Harry's giggles turned into a laugh. "Pretty sure it's butterscotch schnaps cut with a giggling draught! Who knew drinking could be this fun!"

I looked over to Fleur, who was biting her bottom lip from her own drink. *Merlin, are they all getting drunk already?*

The bartender pushed the shot over to me. "The effects wear off in ten minutes, and there's barely any alcohol in it. But you all could use a shot of laughter, it's Pride today!"

I looked over at the nun, who was also taking one. "They are quite refreshing."

"What's it called?" I asked, seeing the peach color of the concoction.

Harry and Draco had an arm around each other as they answered in unison, "Frisky Nipple!" and they kept laughing like schoolgirls around each other.

*Well, here goes my Gryffindor boldness.* I took the shot, and my mouth filled with the flavor of butterscotch and... *giggles.* There was no other word to describe the flavor quite as astutely.

*I have a frisky nipple in my mouth, and I can't help but want to laugh as I swallow it!*

Bearing my chin down, I swallowed the drink, smiled at my friends, and planned out which stores to hit up in Paris. *It would be a good day after all.*

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Narcissa's eyes were closed as her hair was being washed and nails were being attended to, and she had a mimosa on the way. *It's been too long since I've been properly pampered,* she thought to herself. *I ought to do this with Hermione sometime... see if she's up for this.*

David Mallett knew of her unique hair issue and had stumbled onto an idea, causing him to suggest such a radical attempt to change her hair. The patch of black hair at the crown had always been an eyesore to him, but she was proud of her Black heritage. They had argued about it many times before
years ago, but now she seemed amenable to this, and he was certain the new wife has something to do with it.

"So you're saying I can bypass the magical genetic recoding with a simple switching spell?" Narcissa questioned skeptically as he began to towel-dry her hair. He was a wizard, but preferred doing a lot of his work the muggle way because it could stand up to magic better. He was also brilliant at charming hair to do outrageous styles, but he preferred to stick to his muggle roots.

David had passed his NEWT’s in transfiguration, potions, and charms, and was certain about this. "We aren't trying to hide or destroy the blonde hair this way. Nor are we covering up the blonde on any of the strands of blonde hair; we're simply re-arranging the hair itself. Besides, dark lowlights with this blonde hair is very in right now. This should make you look at least 10 years younger, and you can seduce your wife this way."

Narcissa frowned at the suggestion. "But we're married already."

"Narcissa, the look on your face says it's not a happy union. Probably should spice it up."

"The thing is, she didn't really get much choice in the matter."

Rolling his eyes, David started combing through and clipping the hair in parts, trying to isolate the black from the blonde. He remembered when she first came in talking about her impending wedding to the 'Arrogant Pureblood Arse'. He knew of her orientation and frowned as he did her hair for her Bonding Ceremony. "Well, did you ever woo her, or did her parents just sign the paperwork and expect you two to sort it all out?"

The Slytherin huffed in resignation. "It's complicated."

He *tsk'ed* loudly. "I'll take that as a no, and no wonder she's not interested. You've got to make her feel desired and not like... Well, like somebody waved their wand and was forced to be with you. She chose you for a reason."

"Well, that's just it. She never did choose." *This is new Cissy time. No longer a pureblood fanatic, spouting empty rhetoric that never made any damn sense. I am going to be honest to my friends, and prove my love to my wife.* "It wasn't a traditionally arranged marriage where she could have requested to opt out through any myriad of machinations."

"Hm. Hold on here, this might sting a bit... I'm going to try the spells and then seal it so it won't accidentally reverse with a 'finite'."

David began with switching spells to the scalp, rearranging the location of the black hair so that it layered the same way that he had seen pop stars to lately. "As for your marriage to her, that doesn't seem legal. I mean, here we are trying to fight for legal marriage equality, both in the muggle and wizarding worlds, and she gets magically bound to you without any choice? She's a person, not a possession."

"I definitely don't consider her property, if that's what you think." Narcissa had been coming to this guy for a long time, and he even knew about her ex Odette soon after they first met in Paris. She felt like she could tell him anything, and he had been her only gay friend for so long. Now she had the possibility to live out as a lesbian, she was scared.

"Cissy, does she love you?"

"I um... I'm not -"
Severus stalks back into the salon and sat down nearby, clutching a bag from Silverthorn's Apothecary. "I've never seen someone more stubborn stick around and prove her loyalty to this woman than Hermione has." Narcissa frowned at that. *For a girl who doesn't love me, she sure does seem to act like she does.*

As David liked the end result and trimmed the edges to layer right, Narcissa saw the transformation of her hair and her jaw dropped. She felt like a new person, looked like a new person, and was willing to do whatever it took to win her wife's heart. "Alright, Severus, let's go find me a gown that makes my wife's heart stop."

She paid and tipped the man, finished her mimosa, and walked out with a new level of confidence she hadn't had for years.

Severus almost smiled until he realized that this would probably be an all-day affair. Instead, he nodded as he followed her into one of the more shallow layers of hell.

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After we had a round of the giggles with our shots, a red-haired witch in a slate grey suit and matching highwayman cloak entered the bar and nodded to Draco. At first glance, I could tell that she was barely any older than I was.

"Misses Granger, I'm Helena Harker, the legal solicitor on retainer for the family, which you've also inherited." How old is this girl? She's the lawyer whom I'm supposed to trust?

"Pleased to meet you. Forgive me for asking, but is it just you, or are you part of a firm with more experience?"

"Believe me when I say, I have a few lifetimes of experience. Your step-son Draco-"

"-Don't call him that." I interjected, and she nodded immediately.

"Your wife's son, Draco, had informed me that you believe the economy of the UK will be affected by a goblin rebellion." I nod, unsure exactly how the goblins would attack the Ministry in order to obtain more power in the negotiations afterward.

"I've already taken the liberty of opening up accounts for you in both the muggle and wizarding worlds outside of the control of the Goblins. I just need your signature to approve the transfer. I also take it that you've been appraised of the company restructure and that now you're the CEO of Granger Enterprises?"

The facts were being tossed out to me quickly, and I had to muddle through it all, fast. "I uh, yes... I have been told." Why does it feel like they planned this out already? Are Slytherins always this devious, or are they thinking of me with their best intentions?

The witch pulled a scroll out of her cloak. "Then this should set everything right." She handed me the document and a self-inking quill before turning to Draco. "Now you wanted to shunt your inheritance into a trust, and diversify your investments into the muggle world. Correct?" I signed the document and looked over it; the wording was up-front and as I returned the paper and quill, she handed me a billfold with muggle paper currency and two cards.

"For your shopping today, Hermione. It's attached to your new corporate account, so get the receipt." Helena muttered, matter-of-factly.
I eyed Draco curiously. *What the devil is he up to?*

Harry said what I was thinking. "Draco, what are you up to?"

Draco's lips pressed into a wan smile. "I'm either going to go to muggle University or do market research and expand Mal- um, Granger Enterprises. Helena, I might also want to change my last name to match my mum."

I choked at that. *Draco Granger?* "Um, you really don't have to do that..." I hedged, feeling awkward about him having my last name.

"I haven't decided yet, but the Malfoy name is mud and I don't need to serve as a reminder of my father." Draco replied as Fleur took my hand.

"I think it is sweet. Come, Hermione, we should get to Avenue Montaigne..." Fleur lead me away from the bar and paid our tab.

As we walked over to the fashion district, I was worried that we'd wind up spending all day trying to find the perfect dress. "Fleur, I don't want to take all day... I was hoping we could stop and I could get a haircut. Draco mentioned that he could get me an appointment with David?"

"David? David Mallett? Wow, I've never even... he's a wizard, right?" I shrugged, and assumed so. "Wait... I heard he was hard to get into, and even then, it would cost 40 Galleons for a haircut..."

"That's about 200 pounds!" I replied, shocked. *Well, if this is the place Draco says that Narcissa goes to... he must be worth it...* I idly wondered what my parents would have thought of me spending this much.

We arrived at the store and a sales woman saw Fleur with me and looked curiously at us. "Bonjour... English?"

I nodded sheepishly. *I should have cast a translation spell...* The sales clerk's eyes tried to not stare but kept glancing at Fleur.

"You... you're dressed up for the parade, I imagine. What can I help you ladies find today?"

Fleur's smile was tight and repressing a bit of rage, so I took the lead. "I have a ball to attend to this weekend, very posh thing, and I need something to just... stun everyone."

"You do know this is a very expensive store..." she warned. I also had a tight-lipped smile.

"I just inherited a part of the Malfoy Estate. I think I can afford a dress." I didn't feel like keeping the venom out of my voice.

She nodded, looking scared yet impressed. "Lucius and Narcissa are well-known here." She swallowed quickly. "Draco must be a... lucky man."

I wondered if I should correct her, but explaining to a muggle that no, I'm not engaged to Draco but rather that I killed Lucius might be a bit too much for her to handle.

"This way, madam. What color or cut were you looking for?"

"Something in a dark blue, perhaps midnight blue or a bit darker than sapphire. As for cut, A-line, off the shoulder... something that will attract just a bit of attention, but not scandalous." I reply automatically, not being used to sit and have someone bring me gowns to try on and fit me into.
It took only about an hour when I found the right one. It had a halter top, and was adorned with a single bit of embroidery, housing a Sapphire at the neck and dangling a tear-dropped one at the bottom of the embroidery. There were pleats starting at the natural waistline and it overall gave a sophisticated yet sexy look.

When I saw myself in it, I wished I could charm my hair straight to get a good picture in my mind and decide on any jewelry I'd wear with it. *We're in the muggle world now, I can't just reach for my wand.*

"Magnifique," Fleur tells me, slightly stunned. "I am not into women, but I am into this look." I smiled and tried not to blush. *I hope then this works for Narcissa.* My heart skips a beat at the thought of seeing a look of surprise on her, of her eyes wanting to undress me right there on the spot.

I had hoped that it would take less time to find the right pair of heels (same kind of style, with an ankle strap, that I can dance in) and sure enough, we were out of there in record time and Fleur had us in a cab to see David.

"Did you see the look on the shop girl's face when you asked where David Mallett's salon was?" Fleur said as she laughed about it.

I laughed as well, relaxing and nearly enjoying my first car ride in over a year. Naturally, we were there before I expected it.

Once inside, I was floored. It was extravagant as much as it was just a bit unusual. There was a stuffed ostrich in the middle of one room on display, and a pair of albino peacocks in another. *Okay, this guy totally is the kind of eccentric that a Malfoy would like.*

A middle-aged woman passed by me, holding a bag of salon goodies and a glowing expression on her face. "Oh he'll do wonders for you, dear! Those curls..." Her cell phone began to ring and she answered it as she exited.

The pair of peacocks sprang to life and turned to face me. "David, we have a new girl here! And a Veela!"

"A Veela? Be right there!" A masculine voice said from another room.

I was baffled at this. "You can talk? Are you alive?"

The peacocks looked at each other. "We used to be. Then we got better."

David came into the room and pet the re-animated... *holy crap those are re-animated?!!*

"Ah, you must be the witch Draco said was coming. My familiars only move once there are no muggles present. Well, former familiar."

The peacocks turned to nuzzle his hand and blinked, the moves looking almost entirely natural. *It's not a simple transfiguration, it's actual necromancy!*

"You couldn't have raised these from the dead!" I stated, horrified. His eyes widened, affronted.

"I did no such thing! They were getting up in age, and I offered them the Draught of Living Death. They never died, they chose to stay with me. Getting them to talk out loud, now, that's my own doing."

"The Draught of Living Death was only designed for humanoid use..." I said in wonder. *He's*
creepy, but knows his stuff.

"Well, I'm decent at potions, but I don't like using magic on hair. Too easy for a spell to unmake it and cause problems. Now what do you want to do here? I see you need a trim, maybe a new style..." He ran his fingers through my hair and jerked his hand back in disgust.

"What?" I asked, unsure if I should be offended.

"You use that shite Sleekezey's. It's horrid." He replied, directing me to sit in the chair by the basin. "I'm washing it out and conditioning your hair to repair the damage." He turned on the water and checked the temperature by hand. *He's at least thorough, the last time I got my hair cut the water was freezing.*

"Damage? It's the only thing that works on my hair!" *I am offended! It's worked wonders all this time!*

"Chemical additives... designed to overpower hair like it's a beast that need to be conquered... ugh." He poured a bit of the shampoo and started to lather it into my hair, and the smell was absolutely divine.

"Ooh, what's that?" I asked, curiosity getting to the best of me.

"Ginger. Hydrates and refreshes your scalp. All the cheap product out there is alcohol-based, making your hair feel dirtier faster and making hair like yours frizz more. If you had thin, fine, super-straight hair, you'd look like a drenched cat with that tonic." As he washed my hair in the basin behind me, I looked up at his face. He had an olive tone and dark, spiky hair. He looked to be in his 30's, but I could tell he was older. I could have placed him as a rock star or an academic from his style. He started to lather in a conditioner that smelled absolutely divine.

"But humidity makes my hair go all frizzy!" I replied, shocked.

"Only if you don't dry it right. By the way, who cut your hair last? The layering here looks abhorrent, no wonder you're dealing with your hair poofing out!" I wanted to snap at him, but I knew he was right.

"David, I had to cut my own hair. I was a bit busy, being on the run from the Ministry."

His eyes widened as he looked me over. "Oh shite you're Hermione Granger! News takes a while to get here, but I heard about the war. You survived on the run for months... I don't think I could handle a week without my familiars, my friends... not to mention reliable shelter. Well, since you're here and Draco set your appointment, I guess the war's over and your side won?"

I nodded slightly, enjoying the sensation of someone else washing my hair. He rinsed out the conditioner and began to towel-dry the hair by hand, and directed me to a different chair.

"Yeah, 'we won', if that's something that can be easily sorted out. There are loose ends and the cleanup still to deal with. And impossibly boring awards banquets I have to attend as a bloody Heroine." I muttered, almost wishing to be anonymous again. He looked at me, trailing my hair down to frame my face as he judged the length of it.

"Well, I'm glad the Big Evil is gone, but right now I'm facing battle with split ends..." Taking his wand out, he casts a diagnostic spell *(you can do that for hair?)* and nods once, canceling the spell with a quick flick.

"What was that?" I asked, curiously.
"Oh, just a severing charm. Saves me time in trying to isolate all of the split ends." He said it flippantly as he grabbed a pair of scissors and began layering and shaping my hair.

"You've got amazing hair and wonderful curls... You just have to learn to work with what you have before you."

"Ugh, it's such a bloody pain though. I've been essentially a bookworm all my life and now I've got to look my best for some public function."

"Look, baby, you're born with curls. Stop trying to fight them with that potion and just work with it. Here, let me show you how to section it off and finger-curl..." He sat me up and used a series of clips to part my hair and then wrap small locks of hair around his finger, squeezing the water out as he got to my scalp.

It only took him about ten minutes, and never once did he resort to using magic. "You can look so much better if you just embrace yourself rather than live in denial of having this amazing head of curls..." He muttered as I started to see the curls forming and working with each other as opposed to every strand fighting to curl chaotically.

"Oh, I'm not sure I'll have the time to do this everyday..." I said, loving my hair but not the effort it would take. *I usually just stuck it in a bun or a clip and kept it out of my face.*

David turned me around and gave me the 'unamused' look. "You'll make the time. And don't charm it, it'll not work as well."

"Okay, I'll try." I said as he began to spray what was labeled a coconut oil sealant on my curls. *Funny, it doesn't smell like coconut...*

"You'll impress all the boys when they realize it's not spelled in place. No surprises by a random spell, either. You have no idea how many hairdos have been ruined by having muggle electricity nearby."

"Oh, I'm... married." I said sheepishly.

"My apologies; your husband will love it still. Huh. You... seem almost too young to be married."

"Tell me about it. Wasn't even my idea, really."

"What's his name?"

"Um, it's a woman. Long story."

"Merde! Let. Me. Guess. Blonde lady, regal and slightly stuck up? Draco calls her 'mother'? Wow. She's a knockout, girl. But you two need to have rings to warn other people off." *What did that mean?*

"My friends think I should get an annulment."

"Your friends need to be supportive of you until you decide she's not worth it. Did you see the parade today? That came about because there was so much negativity and hostility towards the gays, and the lesbians, and everyone who was different that they needed to reassert themselves. Besides, one look at you and she's going to melt like candy in your hand."

As I looked in the mirror, I couldn't help but agree with him. *Holy crap, my hair looks good like this!* Even Fleur was surprised at the transformation, and I knew that the dress and heels I have will
work perfectly.

We paid and tipped the guy (*I tried to not balk at the cost*) and Fleur and I walked our way back to L’Enchanteur so we could portkey back to London. She carried the bags for me as I got the door for her.

"What are you going to wear, Fleur?" I asked as we entered the bar again. It was oddly comforting to see the rainbow flags and collection of gay and lesbian wizards and witches. The music wasn't the pop dance music from before, but instead... Kareoke. I grinned at the thought, and looked for the machine and stage as I listened for the singing.

*She's not doing bad at all, considering...*

'*... She said come baby, You got a license for love - And if it expires, Bring Hell from above because...'*

'*In the midnight hour she cried 'more, more, more' With a rebel yell she cried 'more, more, more' In the midnight hour, babe 'more, more, more' With a rebel yell, 'more, more, more... More, more, more'*"

Billy Idol. *I used to love that rebel when I was growing up.* Moving through the crowd, I idly wondered if Ron and Harry were still here. I came across the bar and ordered a Gin and Tonic. The bartender was a cute girl who was busy pouring a few pints of beer and I caught myself glancing at her bum over the bar.*Okay, I'm definitely into women. Can't deny it.*

'*She don't like slavery, she won't sit and beg But when I'm tired and lonely she sees me to bed What set you free and brought you to me, babe? What set you free? I need you here by me, because...'*

'*In the midnight hour she cried 'more, more, more' With a rebel yell she cried 'more, more, more' In the midnight hour, babe 'more, more, more' With a rebel yell, 'more, more, more'*"

"Here you go, bloke at the end payed for it." The bartender said, and I looked down the bar to see a dark-haired man turn and walk away from the bar. *Who was... nooo...*

I take my drink and see Fleur, and I nod my head towards where the man was headed. *Was that Severus?*

*'He lives in his own heaven... Collects it to go from the seven eleven Well, he's out all night to collect a fare... Just as long, just as long it don't mess up his hair'*

I step through the crowd and see the stage. The woman onstage was blonde with black streaks bleeding through near the ends, framing her jawline and making her pale skin stand out beautifully. She was wearing a black pencil skirt and matching overbust corset top, something that seemed a bit gothic and punk at the same time. Her bangs were blonde and black...

...and she was looking at and winking at me through the instrumental. *Holy crap it's Narcissa, she barely looks thirty now..."Misses Granger, your mouth is open." Severus said, smirking. Blinking myself back to reality, I take another sip of my drink as I see her crooking her finger to invite me onstage with her.* *Pretty sure I'm blushing from embarassment...*
I got nudged from behind, and turned only to see Fleur there. "Go!"

**But I can't... I should... oh!** I gathered my wits and stepped up on the stage as the drum solo started, knowing that everyone's eyes would be on me. Her eyes were only for me on the stage as she sang, straight to my heart.

"I walked the world with you, babe
A thousand miles with you
I dried your tears of pain, babe
A million times for you"

With a deft movement, she lowered the mic and stole a kiss from me onstage, and it ignited the spark of desire that was burning within me.

"I'd sell my soul for you, babe
For money to burn with you
I'd give you all and have none, babe
Just to, just to, just to, to have you here by me, because...
"

Narcissa put her arm around me and belted out the lyrics, holding the microphone between us. And I sang along, not even looking at the prompter.

"In the midnight hour she cried 'more, more, more'
With a rebel yell she cried 'more, more, more'
In the midnight hour, babe 'more, more, more'
With a rebel yell, she cried 'more, more, more... More, more, more'..."

I took a sip of my drink as she gave me a look of smoldering desire. *She's touching me, and Gods how I've missed it!* My chest was beating rapidly as she sang to me.

"Oh yeah, a little baby
She want more, more, more, more, more
Oh yeah, a little angel
She want more, more, more, more, more..."

The crowd applauded, and I buried my face in her shoulder from the attention. That's when the wolf-whistles started, and Cissy lead us off the stage.

"So, Narcissa... You're here." Furious blushing was on my face, and I tried to hide it by turning away. Her gentle fingers touched my chin and my eyes locked onto hers.

"Hello, Hermione." Uncertainty was in the creases of her eyes... *did she think I was going to run again?*

"Let me guess. Severus." Narcissa nodded, and I realized we were both set up here.

"Yeah. And Fleur brought you." Cissy's reply was carefully neutral, so as to not spook me. *Just... be honest with her, Granger.*

It was awkward, and I bit my lip. The conversation entered that awkward silence phase and I couldn't speak up. Narcissa, however, did.

"You didn't come home."

"Well, there was work to be done." I muttered. She glared at me, and I felt a whole new level of
guilt. "You helped save the world, you're allowed a day off, 'Mione! You need to take responsibility for your own happiness. And mine."

"Why am I responsible for..." I didn't sign up for... But in my heart, I knew she was right. We had to be in this together.

"Because your happiness is my responsibility, too. You didn't come home, so I assumed you were happier... avoiding me." Her frown was a dagger to my heart. I've been miserable away from you... don't you know?

"Well you were mad at me." I said, "and I've been dealing with some strong, um... desires involving you that kind of scare me." As I said that, a hurt look crossed her features and I found my hand cupping her cheek. I had to soothe and comfort her.

"I wanted you to come home so we could talk. My body has been literally aching for you! And I'm not mad anymore; I just need you. However you want me, however you desire me... I don't care. I need you; I need this."

"I need you too..." I replied, rubbing at my arms, "you've been like this... itch... that I can't scratch away." Narcissa reached for my hands and I gave her my right hand as my left still scratched my wrist.

"Andi thinks it's a symptom of us in withdrawal from each other; we shouldn't ignore the Compulsion."

"Well, there's really only one sure way to deal with this..." Narcissa says, coyly. I tremble; spasms travel up and down my spine begging us to close the distance. My hand trembles and latches onto her shoulder, thumb sliding around to put pressure around the neck.

"Yeah, and I think I know exactly how I want you." I closed the distance, hungrily taking her lips in mine. Gods above, why did I run from this?!

Narcissa melted into my embrace, and it was a heady feeling to have this woman be putty in my hands. I pulled away, licking my lips only millimeters from her own.

"The same reason I ran, Hermione." Did I ask that out loud? I thought as I looked into her eyes.

I nodded and gathered my courage. "Do you trust me?"

Narcissa nodded, her eyes wide and needy.

"I trust you." I pull her into an embrace and apparated us back home, to our bed, where we made love the first time.

I pulled my wand on her.

"Levicorpus."

Narcissa nodded to the woman before her, though it felt like they had never met before in their lives.

"I trust you." The world went away, tight bands pressing around the pair of them. They landed in their bedroom of Granger Manor. Narcissa was still re-orienting herself as to which way was up as the spell filled her with dread.
"Levicorpus."

_Holy fuck._ The world was turned upside down, or at least that's what it felt like to the blonde. She was dangling by an ankle, her pencil skirt bunching up around her knees as blood rushed to her head as well as the lower parts of her body.

**What is she up to?** Narcissa thought as her knickers were ripped off of her. _Oh, that..._

Hermione stalked through the doorway and paused to lower the lights with a flick of her wand. _She's dimming the room to be more like... oh._ From Narcissa's upside-down view, she saw a wicked smile on her wife's lips. _Holy. Fuck._ She's _dual-wielding wands, and one of them is the DeathStick._ Cissy wanted to know what was about to happen, but before she can ask, conjured ropes begin to slither around her wrists and ankles as a wand-tip traces down the back of her spine, a severing charm cutting through the laces of her corset.

The Slytherin shivered in anticipation and fear as the top was removed, and another wand-flick vanished her skirt altogether. _Bugger, I liked that skirt!_ Cissy thought as a slow lap of her wife's tongue on her quim wiped all thoughts from her head.

Hermione moaned, pleased with herself as the blonde was dangling from one ankle and her thighs trembled slightly. The ropes continued to wrap themselves and pulled her towards the ground, the _levicorpus_ spell ending slowly as the older woman was gently dropped in a kneeling position in front of her wife.

Hermione paused as she transfigured her dress into a form-fitting black PVC halter dress, so short that it barely covered anything. _How is it that this woman has such painfully beautiful curves?_ Narcissa's breath was thready in anticipation as her wrists were struggling against the rope ties behind her back. Heat and wetness begin to pool in her sex, and she worried that her own moisture will begin to run down her thigh.

Hermione stood before her, eyes locked on hers with ravenous hunger. Narcissa couldn't even focus on the claustrophobia... _my eyes can't leave her. It's like I'm mesmerized... watching and waiting for the serpent's strike. So much for her being a Gryffindor._ Hermione's panting is quietly apparent but then again she's just used quite a few intense spells in short order. Honey-brown eyes blaze with anger, need, and pure unadulterated lust.

_Slytherin's Snake, I could spontaneously combust from her look alone._ A slick pool of moisture ran down Narcissa's thigh as their eyes met and Cissy quit fighting the restraints. She realized she was captured, naked, and vulnerable to the woman before her. The fear was palpable, and was mostly responsible for the wetness pooling around her knee as she was on the floor.

Hermione's prurient smile and wicked glint in her eye was as sexy as it was unnerving for her wife.

"Please don't hurt me," Narcissa whispers, pleading.

_Hermione?"

Hermione's mouth drops open slightly in surprise, and Narcissa nuzzles her wife with her cheek, looking up to her with nervous eyes and her bottom lip dragging between her teeth. Slowly closing her eyes, Hermione leans over until their noses touch, and as the lips almost meet, Cissy's breath hitches in her throat. Hermione's fingers stroke a cheek and runs through her lovers' hair.

The Gryffindor's voice wavers for a moment, a hint of the nervous girl beneath the confident
"Cissy, tell me that this is okay. That... we both want this. That it's not just some fucking spell forcing me to want you, or forcing you to let me take advantage of... you..." Hermione took a deep breath, her eyes and jaw clenched shut in the fateful moment.

"We still have free will; look at the past week. It sucked, but we're here by choice. This isn't just magic, I want this. The rope, the bondage, the illusion of fear. I want you and I trust you."

"Even though I'm uh... going to use you as I see fit?" Hermione said, her heart pounding furiously in her chest.

Narcissa nodded. "I... I consent and gladly give... myself to you, wife." Narcissa was almost sure she heard her wife purr at that. Hermione nuzzled her cheek against her wife and savored the moment.

"O... okay. Hmmmmm... Have I mentioned I love your new hair?" Hermione says huskily. Narcissa's soft moan in reply is barely audible, and as their eyes meet again, the look is wary, like she doesn't know what's happening.

Taking the initiative, Hermione pulls gently on Narcissa's hair, tilting her head up to kiss, forcing her tongue between her lips and into her mouth. Hermione groans as Cissy whimpers in delight; hands embracing her and pulling them closer. As the Slytherin is still bound and fighting the rope ties, something breaks in her and Narcissa finally kisses Hermione back, hard, needy, and possessive. Tongue and lips twist and duel each other, seeking dominance and passion. She tastes divine.

Hermione pulls back suddenly, the collective breathing ragged and mingling. Where do I stop and she begins? Narcissa's hands quit fighting the restraints as Hermione's eyes narrow in question.

"What are you doing to me?" Hermione whispers, confused.

"Kissing you... Ma'am." As Narcissa says that, Hermione's eyes look down, ashamedly.

"You... um... said not to hurt you."

"What?" Cissy was confused, needing to return to hungry kisses, the quenching of desire...

"Just now, you said for me to not hurt you... I thought it might be fun to try being a little rough?"

Oh... that's why she's nervous.

"We... have never really done this before." Narcissa stares up at her wife, her own thighs trembling in need.

"I've never been so turned on before. And being assertive, Domineering is so – hot." Cissy made a small sound of amusement as she realized the bookish intellectual was at a loss for words when this far aroused.

Hermione's eyes widen slightly, filled with wonder and lust. It's a heady mix, and Narcissa swallows her panic instinctively. Hermione's fingers thread through and grip the blonde-and-black-streaked hair as she grinds her pubic mound on her wife's face, fisting the hair between her knuckles.

Oh my... Please, tell me to please you and I will, Hermione... Narcissa's teeth almost chatter from the sexual tension, and she has to remember how to talk again.

"Exactly what did you want to do to me?" Narcissa breathes, astonished. Hermione helps her wife
stand up, hands unable to stop themselves from brushing up and down Cissy's arms.

"I want - need - to possess you. I want to inflict some pain, assert myself, and make you mine. And I'm frustrated and aroused because you said you'd trust me, but also to not hurt you..." Her eyes glitters dangerously as her hands traveled lower, fingernails trailing her hipbone as her right hand clamped down on her lover's thigh.

"I want you Cissy, and I want you now. And if you're not ready for me to try hurting you just a little – which I think you just might like – I'm going to fuck you over this couch right now, hard, for my pleasure, not yours."

"Oh, I know I'll like it, Ma'am. I'll let you know if it gets to be too much." Mental note for later: teach her what a safe word is...

Hermione moves quickly and her hand is cupping the blonde's sex, one of her fingers sinking slowly inside. Her other arm holds her firmly in place against the couch, bending the Slytherin backwards as Narcissa tries to suppress her moaning.

"This is mine," she whispers aggressively. "All mine. Do you understand?" She eases her finger in and out as she gazes down at her wife, gauging her reaction, eyes burning.

"Yes, yours," Narcissa breathes as her desire, like molten metal, surges through her veins, affecting… everything. Everything was alight with passion and desire; nerve endings, ragged breathing, heart pounding, and blood thrumming through her ears. Nothing else matters nor exists, it's just me and her, and I belong to her. I am hers utterly.

Abruptly, Hermione moves, doing several things at once; withdrawing her fingers, leaving Narcissa panting and pleading, undoing the rope restraints, pulling off her own knickers, and shoves Narcissa down onto he bed, face up, so that the Gryffindor is straddling on top of her.

"Hands above your head," she commands through gritted teeth as she kneels upright, her own quim hot and clenching in need. Narcissa places her hands above her head, and Hermione once again binds her wrists together.

The moment between the women is electrified as their need spikes. Hermione's crawls to re-position herself, moving her hips to meet Narcissa's face – I need to taste her, now, just like this – "I'm going to fuck your mouth, rough and hard." Oh… the anticipation. Narcissa's mouth opened and her tongue darted out, just barely too far away to touch her lover's folds.

You fucking tease! Please, closer... Narcissa gasped as a wand was at the tip of her clitoris and the vibration charm was cast. Sweet Slytherin, yes...Hermione's hips rolled forward and Cissy did what was expected of her.

"This will be quick, and it's for me, not you. Do you understand? Don't come until I do, or I will punish you," Hermione says suggestively as she looks down upon her whimpering wife. Narcissa nods the best she can under the circumstances, and is rewarded with a stronger vibration charm.

The vibrations on her clitoris were making Narcissa's hips rock into the air wantonly as she kept eye contact on her wife, alternating from delving into her wife with her tongue and sucking on the swollen clit before her. The sensation of being used and pleasured at the same time was building the orgasm within her and a thread of panic went through as doubt settled in.

Holy crap... how do I stop?

Hermione moaned loudly, gutturally, her hips rocking as she reveled in the sensations. Her left hand
fisted the crown of Narcissa's hair and shuddered as her thighs began to quiver from their lovemaking.

_No, this is fucking. And I am loving it._

Narcissa reveled in the restraints, being pinned down, forced to please her wife this way. She beheld the pert breasts swaying slightly as Hermione bucked her hips to get the perfect angle for the blonde to please her.

They kept at it, rocking and sucking, licking and tongue-fucking hedonistically as the vibrating wand-tip was threatening to push the Slytherin over the edge.

Hermione arched forward and made eye contact with her wife as she began to tremble and move faster and with total abandon, her throat breaking into a passionate moan as she finds her own release, wave upon wave of pleasure cresting and crashing.

"oh fuck Hermione, I can feel your... I can't hold off..." Narcissa pleads from between her lover's folds. The wand is pulled off of Narcissa's sensitive spot and both hands seize upon the former Malfoy's head as Hermione comes fully and loudly, her body full of micro-tremors as her skin flushes red and she rolls off of her lover, cancelling the rope restraint charm.

Hermione lies beside her lover, studying Cissy's naked form and grinning at the result. Narcissa whimpered as her body was on the verge, needing completion by her wife's permission.

"Do not touch yourself; I want you to remember feeling this frustrated. Once you understand this, you will never again deny me what's mine." Her honey brown eyes shone darkly, cravenly.

Cissy nods, panting. "Please let me come Ma'am." The Gryffindor smiled wickedly as she put three fingers in her wife's mouth, making her lubricate them before she suddenly fucks the blonde with them.

"You are mine, little slut. SAY IT." Hermione demands, using her fingers' rhythm penetrating her wife to accentuate her words, "You. Are. Mine." The immediate wetness and sudden stretching had Narcissa out of her mind at the moment and could only obey.

"I am yours, Ma'am. This slut is all yours. Yours, yours... May I come please?" As Cissy begged, a stray thought went through her mind, _was this all my fantasy of just hers?

Hermione nodded, beginning to kiss her wife fervently as if a ritual. "Come for me..." And Narcissa exploded, moaning and screaming as their kiss grew deeper as they shared the moment, the orgasm, and their thoughts.

_Gods, I love you, Hermione._ Narcissa thought as their tongues danced about each other between their lips.

Where one ended and the other began was no longer a fixed, knowable point. Hermione's cunt felt sore like Narcissa's despite what happened. Narcissa's thighs gave way though she hadn't been on top.

"You feel better now?" Hermione asked, curled on her side with a leg thrown over Narcissa, planting soft kisses on her neck.

Cissy nodded. "I didn't know you could..."

"Me either. But I'm a Gryffindor; Fortune favors the bold. And I've been wanting - _needing_ - to
possess you like that. Um, if that's okay with you."

Narcissa yawned, noticing their relative ease around each other now. "That is more than okay. I've missed... Belonging... To someone like that whom I entirely trust." Narcissa rolled onto her side and Hermione spooned in behind her, curling her arm around her protectively.

*Oh this is comfortable. This feels right...* Her eyelids grew heavy and she closed them, savoring the scent of thier comingling.

Hermione was gobsmacked at that. "You trust me?"

"Of course, 'Mione. I love you." As the Slytherin fell asleep in the bed, the Gryffindor's eyes were wide in shock at the pronouncement.

Chapter End Notes

Here are a few more of my musical associations for the characters here. (Yes, I've found a NIN song for EVERY main and supporting character here) Because I don't want to release any spoilers, I'll be timing the release of the songs with their characters as they develop.

Severus Snape: Hurt (Post-Lily) / I do not want this (Post-Tonks)
Fleur Weasley: Something I can never have (Flyleaf’s cover conveys Fleur really well in my opinion)
Kingsley Shacklebolt: Everyday is Exactly the Same

Hermione: (Mid-story) Me, I'm not
Narcissa: (Mid-story) Terrible lie
I woke up in the middle of the night, and rolled over to see my wife sleeping peacefully after a night of assignation. Her arm had been draped over me, which I had found comforting as I had slept. *Maybe this is love?*

It wasn't sun-up yet and I felt peckish. In fact, I couldn't recall much about last night except from amazing sex and what my wife had said.

*She said she loved me. I'm not ready for that...*

I couldn't think on an empty stomach, so I got out of bed, put on a dressing gown, and sought my way to the kitchen. Herpy was asleep on a blanket by the kitchen and clutching a small stuffed unicorn foal. It looked like it might have been something a young Draco might have had, and the feeling of home only grew stronger with me. I crept past the elf and found leftover food under a stasis charm. Pork cutlets and seasoned potatoes. It was basic, yet seasoned impeccably and just enough to tide me over.

"Can Herpy serve Master Granger?" The elf whispered blearily.

"No, I am fine. Please go back to sleep; I just needed a mid-night snack." I replied, and the elf nodded and flopped onto her makeshift bed.

After sating my hunger, I walk back to my bedroom and crawl back into bed, lazily opting for a tooth cleaning charm as I spooned behind a somewhat-sprawled Narcissa. *I'll do a proper brushing in the morning...*

Pulling my left arm over her, my fingers grazed her forearm as I found a crevice and her arm covered mine, our fingers threading together as if it were second nature. *Maybe that's what love is, in the long term.*

I recalled what I had overheard what other girls said about their romantic interests back at Hogwarts; it was overwhelming and powerful, as if it were something that could be explosive. *Like Romeo and Juliette, without the whole double suicide.*

What I had here with Narcissa seemed more like what my parents had, a pair that had been on a long journey together and grew stronger after all if the storms they had to weather.

I remembered the snake tattoo that was still on my right wrist, and I wondered if Narcissa would stand by me, no matter what Darkness might claw its way out of me. *It's not a Horcrux, so The Dark Lo - Voldemort - is dead!*

"Then why are you still here?" I whispered into the darkness.

"Hum... 'Mione?" Narcissa asked blearily. *oh she's waking up!*

"I'm here... Hon. Go back to sleep." I kissed the top of her head, and watched in amazement as it calmed her and she fell back asleep. *She must feel very safe with me like this; but then again, so do I.*

As I realized that, I too, drifted back to sleep.
It was morning, and the light shining through the window was not welcomed by either occupant of the bed.

The first one finally said something to fill the bleary silence.

"We better... get back to London."

The other grunted in regretful agreement.

"Wait... What all happened?"

"Hermione and my mum ran into each other."

"Right. Yeah, but who are we here... was... why... Ugh. Words. Fail me."

"Too much words. Jager frisky nipples."

The two boys started to laugh, but quickly stopped as searing hangovers hit them both.

"Headache. Salazar's trouser snake, I need a hangover potion."

Draco sat up, slightly unsteady. He flopped back down onto the bed as he remembered his legal solicitor had gotten a room for the boys after all of the paperwork was handled and the 'celebratory drink' may have gone overboard.

"Here. Severus left us some." Harry said, sitting up in the bed and taking a swig. "Nope. Not a hangover remedy. Just more jager."

"Ugh no more of that shite. was my Godfather with us last night? He brought mum for a haircut and shopping..."

"Room Service!" A witch called through the door.

Draco turns and raises his eyebrows at Harry. "Last thing either of us need is a tabloid catching us together in a hotel room."

Harry understood what he meant and sprung out of bed, pulling the Invisibility Cloak out of his pack. "Tell her to piss off."

The door opened as Harry got the cloak on and stood in a corner by the closet.

Draco leered at the room attendant, making it obvious that he didn't want her there. As she took out the trash and avoided eye contact with Draco, Harry slowly tip-toed his way around her.

Draco tried to not laugh as the witch turned and thought she felt something. He could have sworn that Harry didn't stifle his own laughter well enough.

After the room attendant vanished the refuse and replaced the towels in the lavatory, she skittered out of the room frantically, slamming the door behind her.

Conjuring two tall glasses and filling them with water, Draco handed one of them to the empty corner where Harry was standing.

"How did you know?" Harry said, pulling off his cloak and taking the water. As they both gulped it down, they realized that they were quite dehydrated.
"It's your Invisibility cloak, not a silencing cloak. I heard you."

Harry frowned at that, and would remember that in the future. Draco noticed that, and decided to say something else to cheer him up.

"By the way, letting Ginny follow her dreams in Quidditch? That was the best decision you could make."

"Even if I lose her?" He asked, dejectedly.

"Guys wanted to date her, you know. She wouldn't even think of it. Wish I had a girl as dedicated."

Harry looked at him in confusion. "But I though you were."

"-let's not get hooked up on labels. A lifetime of being told whom I'd be forced to marry, I'm glad I am free now."

Harry nodded. "Who were you-"

"-Pansy. No subtlety there, and her willingness to sell you out like that made her seem like a coward."

Harry stood there, stunned. "I didn't know you cared so much."

"I knew which side I wanted to win back when you carved me open. It was quick and thoughtless, infinitely more merciful than The Dark Lord ever was. And I knew again when I had Albus at wand-point and couldn't kill him. I never wanted to be a Death Eater. Even now that I know he was dying anyways, I'm still not sure I could have done it."

"You're horribly morbid, you know that?"

"Comes with being a Slytherin."

"You know Ginny will want to know what happened, and why we didn't come home last night." Harry said, his voice betraying his concern.

"Tell her the truth. It's the only thing she'll believe." Draco replied, casting a refreshing charm on his clothes.

"I got piss drunk and woke up in bed with you. I doubt she'll believe 'it's all a blur' or 'nothing happened'." Harry said guiltily.

"It's really not coming back to you, is it?" Draco said, chuckling. "Well as much as I'd love to hold this over your head and tease you about it, you were the perfect gentleman. Even helped me up to the room."

Harry's sigh of relief was audible. "Thanks, man. I don't know what I'd do if I... you know..."

Draco arched an eyebrow, reminiscent of Snape. "Yes, because the thought of me is utterly repulsive..."

Harry rolled his eyes at that. "Not that, idiot. Just... I don't want to cheat. Not when everything is going good for once."

Draco frowned slightly, but nodded. "Let's get home them."
Severus and Fleur were at the Leaky Cauldron, sharing a pint over their well-done scheme. *It has been awhile since I got to pull something off like that.* Severus looked at the Veela, even with her pale-yellow feathered wings, avian eyes, and beaky face... she was still as stunning as she ever was. *Not that I'm looking at another woman since Lily. Or Tonks, for that matter.*

"You're still not ready for hunting Bellatrix." Fleur warned quietly.

"I'll prove you wrong in the Room of Requirement, Fury."

"I have no doubt as to your conviction. But do you trust Kingsley to keep his word?"

"He is honorable enough; as long as I keep my side of the bargain. My concern is more for Narcissa and her family."

She nodded. "As mine is to Hermione. I heard of her passion defending the House Elves; loyalty is not wasted with her. I hope she and Narcissa figure that out. " She took a dram of her beer in thought. "They both have to overcome their own fears and prejudices."

Severus nodded, sipping his drink.

"And accept the radical notion that they are worthy of being loved, even if others see it as unconventional." Severus replied bluntly.

They sat in the empty silence as the uttered words sank in between them.

"I'll resume my training in the Room of Requirement."

"I'll go check on Firenze."

The two of them said it at the same time, paid their tabs separately, and left the bar at the same time. Both wanted to be alone in their thoughts as they trudged up to the castle, side by side.

Hogwarts was almost as good as new, and the volunteers were thanked for their work as they all began to pack up and get back to their lives. Ronald felt uncertain about where to go now, so he found himself at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where most of the final battle was waged.

The world had gone mad, it seemed. The good guys won, but the winning blow came from Death Eaters. Snape was a hero. Narcissa lied to You-Know-Who in order to protect Harry. Draco and Hermione stood together as they cast the killing curse at him. *Even Neville killed Nagini with the sword... where's my glory?*

"Ron? Your sister Ginny is looking for you." Lavender said, unsure how to treat him now.

"Yeah, okay." He responded, distractedly. *And the woman I love is married to that evil dyke bitch. And I have to just be okay with it.*

"So what are you going to do now?" She asked, hoping to begin a conversation.

"Help my brother's joke shop." He replied automatically. "I'm done fighting for now. Too many scars." He turned to her, ashamedly. "Uh, sorry, poor choice of word-"

"-I know what you mean."

"Hey, question: will you transform next full moon?" Ron asked, curious. *Bill never really mentioned what happened, but then again, he never really turned, did he?*
"No idea yet. There's an unbreakable silver cage in the Ministry's magical animal regulation department that's being offered to me to find out. I... would really like it if I had a friend there."

"But if you change, won't you...?" Ron said, worried. Lavender shrugged it off.

"Nothing you haven't already seen before." She said, enjoying seeing Ron blush at that.

"I guess that's fine, but... you have to come to the ball with me." Ron grinned, hoping she understood he was being playful about it.

"Sure, I'd love to."

"Great, I'll... meet you there."

Getting ready in the morning and doing our makeup in front of a large mirror proved to be a taxing yet educational experience. In Hogwarts, I just got up earlier so I could read as the other girls fought over the sink space and twittered about and gossiped.

With Narcissa, it was a delicate dance of 'pardon me' and 'I need the sink' and 'that spot has the better lighting'. It would have been annoying if not for her silky sleepware that had me admiring her bum.

"A lady does not ogle another lady's derrier during morning ablutions, Hermione." Narcissa said, smirking.

"Pretty certain I'm allowed as your wife." I replied, playfully swatting her arse. Cissy pouted at that, bending over a bit more for show.

"If you're going to do that, put some honest effort in." I stood behind her and grabbed her waist and hips possessively. She rocked back into the embrace, her head thrown back towards me. My lips graced the shell of her ear and I smiled on the inside as I saw her shudder.

"Do you mean that, Cissy? I've been having some Dark fantasies of having you, controlling you, and administering you some... discipline..." My hand cradled her bum as my fingertips delicately trailed over her sensitive spot on the last word.

"Merlin yes please!" She replied in supplication.

"You need to be taken, need to be needed, don't you?" I asked, my voice dropping to a throaty, seductive tone.

"...yes..." She gasped, surrendering herself as I charmed the silk off of her body.

"Then say it. Ask. BEG." I commanded sweetly.

"Take me, 'Mione. Please."

Neither of us needed coffee to wake up this morning.

Andi was feeding Teddy as the door swung open. She smiled, grateful to the hour of reprieve she'd get now that Harry was back.

Except it wasn't Harry.

Ginny called out, "Harry! Where the bloody hell have you been?!" She muttered to herself.
Teddy cried out loud from the outburst, and Andi was too late to cast a quieting charm. "Ginny, keep it down!"

Ginny came into the kitchen, and frowned sheepishly. "Sorry, I just... Harry was supposed to meet me before the Ball tonight. You have any idea where he might be?"

Andi nodded. "Yeah. He took Draco to Paris, something about cleaning up and looking all proper for... you..." She frowned at that. "I think that was supposed to be a surprise. But he was supposed to be back last night so I could arrange a sitter and accept Nymphadora's Order of Merlin tonight..."

Andi wished she had a clock like Molly did. The two women faced each other, both worried and without any way to solve their dilemmas. "Shall I make a cuppa?" Ginny offered as Teddy's plaintive shriek hit the air and the grandmother went back to feeding him.

Ginny tried for a conversational tone. "So... how long do you think you and Teddy will be here for?"

Andromeda winced at that. "Well, see... Harry said that he absolutely hated being alone, and always wanted a family like yours. In fact, he asked me and Teddy to move in so he had someone to come home to."

"Oh. I see."

"I mean, losing my husband and my home in one fell swoop was horrific; I've missed work and couldn't explain, 'oh, you see, secret war's been going on and all...'. I might just try to find work in the magical world again, save up enough to get a flat somewhere for me and my grandson..."

The water was boiling as Ginny found some fruit-flavored teabags, glad to have her hands busy. Ginny winced at that. "I understand. I guess I was hoping for there to be time for just me and Harry to be..."

Harry entered, giving a jovial greeting, and was greeted by two very cross-looking witches. "Oh bugger."

Kingsley was faced with running the entire Ministry, and was at least glad to have two people he could trust spearhead problems he was facing: Snape was going after the rogue Death Eaters, and Harry was helping maintain the calm as the Head Auror.

Reports were trickling in that the goblins were acting unusual, that the muggle-born community was still in hiding, and that the Ministry would be running a deficit due to misappropriation of funds and an outflux of taxpaying Wizards.

"I need a good story in the Daily Prophet..." He muttered to himself as he looked over the preparations for the Awards Banquet and Ball. Hit-Wizards would provide security (I think they are hoping for the bounty if a Death Eater decides to crash the party)

As if his prayers were answered, Percy Weasley approached him with an advance copy of the Daily Prophet. He still doesn't know if he can trust the boy or if he's a ladder-climber like Umbridge appeared to be, willing to side with anyone and go back and say none of the bad stuff was her fault.

"You... you're not going to like what Rita's done now."

Sapphic Scandal: Honest Accident or Granger's Greed for Galleons?
Exclusive Expose by Rita Skeeter

Now that You-Know-Who was back-stabbed by his own followers, we are all expected to be grateful to the former brains of the supposed 'Golden Trio', sidekick of 'The Chosen One'. *(For more, see my article 'Harry Potter: Disturbed and Dangerous!' Daily Prophet, 1994, and 'The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore', in bookstores now.)* I know that I was quite concerned seeing that manipulative little girl flanked by Narcissa and Draco as they cut down an admittedly bad man. But would I, Rita Skeeter, just parrot whatever story she would convince the Minister to disseminate? Of course not, dear reader.

So we have to ask ourselves, do we really know the true story behind Hermione Granger? In 1994, I reported on her two-timing the famous and wealthy Harry Potter with none other than hunky Bulgarian Seeker Viktor Krum. *(see my article 'Harry Potter's Secret Heartache', Daily Prophet, 1994)* It should come as no surprise that the muggle-born witch had her eyes set on fame, but could it be that she had eyes for their fortune instead?

It is now being reported that, in the midst of the war against You-Know-Who, that Hermione Granger found herself 'married' to none other than Narcissa Malfoy! Currently, there are no laws banning so-called 'marriages' between members of the same sex, so this is an issue that must be taken up by the Wizengamot.

Now I'm sure, gentle readers, you are wondering how such an immoral union could have taken place, much less with a servant of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, under his own proverbial nose? You see, the conniving Miss Granger took it upon herself to twist Pureblood Traditions in order to secure herself a spot among the Death Eaters' ranks.

The circumstances surrounding Lucius Malfoy's mysterious death had been covered up for quite sometime but today, I am able to report to you that he was killed, *in his own home*, by none other than Hermione Granger! The reports are sketchy as to how such an encounter could have happened, but I have it on good authority that she hit him unawares just like how she physically assaulted Draco Malfoy back in early 1994. *(Of course, Headmaster Dumbledore quashed any formal investigation so charges couldn't be brought up against her. This seems to be a pattern with the girl; escalating the types of crimes she gets away with, but I'm getting ahead of myself.)*

Now, whether or not you thought Lucius was a shining example of what a devoted, Pureblooded husband and father should be, he donated to many decent charities in his lifetime and was exonerated from his actions in the first Wizarding War due to being under the Imperious Curse.

That didn't seem to change Miss Granger's mind, who was as biased and prejudiced as Harry Potter, if not more so. Upon interviewing former classmates about the unnatural nuptials, Pansy Parkinson said "She never looked done-up when in class, I wouldn't be surprised if she were a [CENSORED BY MINISTRY]."

Hermione also has had an unusual affinity towards using Dark Magic, and even argued with Hogwarts Faculty about the usefulness of using curses. "She liked proving how clever she was," said Marietta Edgecombe, "and used to argue for actually using Dark Magic in Umbridge's class." It is rumored that Hermione Granger is responsible for the permanent disfigurment curse on Marietta, who refuses to speak at all about what happened to her face.

None of her friends seem concerned about her power-hungry ways, however. Fellow Gryffindor Padma Patil had this to say, "I guess it doesn't really matter if she's with a woman; it's not like they can reproduce and make more of their kind."

But the best quote, of course, I saved for last. What does the woman, trapped in this life-ling
Bonding against her own will to the very woman who murdered her husband, have to say about Hermione Granger?

"I will see this mudblood rot in Azkaban if it's the last thing I do."

Harry was in his Wizard-cut tuxedo, complete with a red-lined cape and a rose for his girlfriend Ginny. Hermione was biting back giggles as she wanted to see him with pull out a pointy white eye-mask and make a cheesy one-liner about saving a certain Moon Princess.

He looked back to Hermione, who was two couples back in the queue to enter, puzzled at the look on her face.

"You look, um, quite dashing, Harry." Hermione replied as she heard a loud voice announcing the couples entering the Banquet. Harry shook his head as Ginny kissed his cheek, confirming his friend's compliment. *I never knew they would actually announce us entering...*

Ron's face was pinched in anger, and Harry realized that he was pointedly ignoring Hermione since they met up outside on their way in.

"*Arthur and Molly Weasley.*"

Hermione must not have noticed, "Your mother can clean up nicely, can't she, Ronald?" The brunette asked, trying to diffuse the tension from having Narcissa and Molly that close to each other moments ago.

The announcer bade them step forward, and Harry waved the guy off. "Hey, Ron, what's up?"

Ron shrugged it off, adjusting the fit to his own dress-robes. "Nothing. Let's go." Ron pulled Lavender around and had themselves announced to go in.

"*Ronald Weasley and Lavender Brown.*"

Fleur frowned, putting a hand on Hermione's shoulder consolingly. "You two have fought before; this will pass."

But as Fleur tried to soothe her, Hermione seemed more upset and panicked. "What... why is he mad...?" Harry looked at her and realized she had no clue.

"Hermione, you and Ron got into a fight, right before we left for Paris." Fleur reminded her.

"What? No... I did? I..." Hermione said nervously. Narcissa's arms enveloped her wife as if it were second nature, and Harry couldn't help but be touched by it.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, other people in the common room told me about it. You scared a lot of people, apparently. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Fine." She replied, pushing herself out of Narcissa's arms. "Let's get in there."

Narcissa nodded, and turned to give Severus a knowing look that Harry caught. Severus nodded back once in return.

"*Um... Hermione and ... Narcissa Granger.*"
"Ginny, Harry, I believe we all are going to have to sit down and have a discussion about Hermione." Severus' face was stoic yet worried.

Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt was a mess of nerves; he could handle his own when ducking behind cover in the midst of a firefight against forces of the Dark, but to give a speech? Use enough platitudes to make rival groups work together for a unified, cohesive future? Point me toward something I can defeat with magic, and I got that. Make people get along.. that's impossible.

Kingsley wondered if he would ever get the Wizarding World back together. Hit-wizards were the security tonight, after intel came in that the Goblins have gone really quiet and withdrawn from Wizarding society. Kingsley hoped that Hermione was wrong, because there would be almost no way to afford another war now.

"Severus Snape and Fleur Weasley."

At least some things are going right. Kingsley went over and shook Severus' hand, eyes fixed on Fleur. She was in full Veela mode, something the Aurors called "battle mode" yet her poise seemed relaxed instead of confrontational.

"Good to see you, Severus. You recovery is going well, I take it?" Severus nodded to him, as Fleur stood by his side, stalwart and slightly intimidating. Veelas are always like this, aren't they?

"It is. I'll be hunting down and executing the rogue Death Eaters forthwith."

"Actually, Severus, you only need to bring them in-"

"...of course I'll try that. But I won't be risking my life or hers in the attempt." Fleur nodded once in solidarity.

"What? I... very well." Kingsley said, distracted as he saw Hermione Granger. Where was that communique from? Latvia?

Kingsley excused himself and approached the newlywed couple. Merlin, they won't be happy once the Prophet goes public...

"Misses Granger, Hermione, good to see you two. I... need to ask you something." Narcissa nodded her own greeting and gave them a bit of privacy.

"What? I... very well." Kingsley said, distracted as he saw Hermione Granger. Where was that communique from? Latvia?

Kingsley excused himself and approached the newlywed couple. Merlin, they won't be happy once the Prophet goes public...

"Misses Granger, Hermione, good to see you two. I... need to ask you something." Narcissa nodded her own greeting and gave them a bit of privacy.

"What is it, Kingsley?" Hermione looked stunning in blue, though her eyes held wary concern.

"Who were you paired with when we rescued Harry from his aunt's house, and what kind of broom did you ride?" He asked, his hand hovering near his wand.

"You, and we rode Thestrals. Why are you asking me this?" The Minister sighed in relief, waving Percy over.

"Some foreign country reported that you were skulking about, asking questions and whatnot. Percy, who told us that?"

"Um, Romania, I believe, Sir." Percy said, pulling out a notebook and quill. "Shall I inform them that it was some sort of impostor?"

Kingsley nodded. "Someone looking for a bit of fame, I'm sure. You haven't gone anywhere, have you?"
Hermione winced. "Just to Paris for this dress and a haircut."

The Minister shrugged it away. "You're just going to have a lot of fans trying to emulate you. We'll inform them that it wasn't you."

Narcissa and Hermione split at the party, and the Slytherin saw the various stares of shock and went about greeting and soothing the other well-connected witches in the room. *I was just standing next to my wife, not like I was trying to even kiss her in public...* Arnie Peasegood gave her a friendly nod and went about being security with the other Hit-Wizards. *It's like the war isn't totally over, or are they still worried about reprisals?*

Narcissa had a quick bit of small talk with Griselda Marchbanks, and the gossip was quite illuminating. *She seems happier since resigning from the Wizengamot in protest of Umbridge's becoming Hogwarts' High Inquisitor and is now in charge of the Wizarding Exams Authority. And that means Tiberius Ogden's reinstatement makes him the ranking member of the Wizengamot, a well-known supporter of Albus and Harry Potter... he can help Hermione's goals in rebuilding the Ministry. The Slytherin smiled inwardly, knowing that this intel would be well-received by her wife.*

As the blonde turned away, a sharp grip was on her arm and her wife was on the other end of it. A *livid* Hermione. "What are you doing?"

Cissy turned to her old habits and appropriated the ice-cold demeanor when interrogated. "I was being polite, doing my best as a Slyth-"

"You were *flirting* with her." Hermione hissed. *Who, Griselda?! Give me some credit, I'm no grave robber!*

Narcissa sighed to calm herself down, and turned to go outside. "Let us not make a scene."

Hermione lead the way, and Narcissa followed astride her, keeping her hands behind her back in an attempt to seem restrained and prim. As they both made it to the courtyard, Hermione cast the Muffliato and faced her wife, rage making her face red.

"Are you going to resume fucking your way to control everything? No wonder Lucius was cruel and vindictive!" Narcissa had never seen her wife this livid before. *Severus was right, she's dealing with something alright...*

"Damn it woman, I am who I am; I'm a snake and a viper. In fact, I spared a lot of people a lot of grief by attempting to win them over through guile than letting Lucius resort to force."

"I didn't like seeing how you were smiling to them. You don't flash a big grin, but I could tell, and I thought that smile was something special for me!" *Damn it, Hermione, you are special! I just... this is how I work...*

"Hermione, you are special to me. But if I'm smiling to them, it's because I'm using them."

"Just like you're using me, right? God, I should have known better. You said you loved me, and we've only been together for... just over a week!" *Holy shit, I said that out loud?* Narcissa thought as she felt her emotions bleeding through her face.

Narcissa's face pinched shut, a flicker of hurt wiped out as the composed neutrality took over. Her voice, however, betrayed tears that would never fall now. "I... I didn't say that to *manipulate* you." Her wife's face said that she didn't believe her.
"Oh, I'm sure you didn't. It's obvious to me now. You probably say that to every girl you fuck... How can I even trust you?" Because you can... because I trust you, 'Mione!

Narcissa's lips pressed shut as she finally exploded. "Because in that moment, I was being completely honest with you! Salazar's Snake, Hermione, it was right after some of the best lovemaking in my life! I let my mask slip and lost my mental filter for a bit, but I will not apologize for saying that I love my wife!"

"Was this your ploy when you were trying to get Rita to write what you wanted? It's pathetic." This isn't the Hermione I first met; maybe Severus had a point. Narcissa decided to try to reason with her and hope that logic would calm her and de-escalate this issue.

"Gods, no... but try to be pragmatic about this! Having the paper on your side will make so many of your objectives easier. The PR battle itself to reverse tradition is going to be difficult enough as it is."

"You're doing it again, aren't you? Just going to bat your eyes and sleep your way around to power?! You are Estella! Is she being jealous about my past?" Narcissa noted the reference to Dickens and retorted in kind.

"Do you want me then to deceive and entrap you? Fine. I have not bestowed my tenderness anywhere. I have never had any such thing." [1]

"Very well, you claim to love me. Why do you go about like you do, then?"

"I was under the assumption we would be doing the carrot and stick routine; I'd be the diplomatic carrot, and if my attempts fail, you're the stick." Narcissa couldn't help but add a bit of venom to the last words, she was getting annoyed at her wife's attacks on her character.

"I will NOT be like Lucius. I'm a Gryffindor, and I will clearly make my case and society will opt to change because they will see that it's the right thing to do!"

"You really think the world works that way? I've thought quite a few disparaging things about you before, Hermione, but never did I think you were a naive, ignorant, little girl!" Narcissa's head felt like there was a spike driven in it, but she kept herself stoic as her fist clenched and the sensation of her fingernails biting into her palm kept her on her feet.

Kingsley stepped in, confused as to the situation between them. "Misses Gran... Hermione Granger, I forgot to mention something. Might I have a word with you, in private?"

Narcissa nodded her assent, and took the moment to stride away in repressed rage.

Severus was in his best robes, meaning that he didn't dress up any more than his usual teaching robes. The black cravat that hugged his neck was snug on his scarred neck, a reminder that he survived once again while a woman he began to love had been laid to rest.

Why did I ever let Nymphadora into my heart? Salazar knows the story behind the Bloody Baron's chained torment should have been enough of a warning. Severus pulled on the knot as Fleur stayed by his side and scanned the room for any potential threat. He was impressed, and actually glad that she decided to help him hunt down and catch Bellatrix.

Someone will have to do this, now that the Order is dead. He thought darkly, looking over at the remnants of the rag-tag organization. Hagrid was in a corner, awkwardly trying to not get in anyone's way but still being just enough of a klutz to make a scene. Minerva was consoling George as Charlie worked to get his parents away from the open bar as they drunkenly and loudly argued over Arthur's
fetish for muggle technology. He even noticed Ginny had smuggled in a flask of something and restrained a frown at the family.

"Mother, this is not the time or the place for this..." Charlie pleaded, taking her drink away from her and handing her a glass of water.

"I thought things would be different after the war. Better. Instead I'm married to a drunk failure who will poke at a selly-phone more than he will his own wife!" Molly sniped as Arthur walked away with a drink in his hand.

"The Muggle phone doesn't get drunk and bitch my stiffy away." Arthur muttered under his breath.

Severus actually frowned at that exchange. And they have a problem with Hermione with Narcissa because it's against their so-called 'family values'?

"Severus?" Fleur asked, her hand poised to be placed into his arm as if he were escorting her. He turned, grateful for the distraction.

"Hmm?" Severus replied, curious as to what kind of security question she'd have for him.

"There's no real threat here, but as I look around, I get the feeling that I'm your bodyguard." Fleur replied, offering her arm to him in the traditional act of chivalry. Yes, because I'm going to put my waifish hand in her arm and be the chittering girl...

Severus almost frowned at that. "My story was leaked by Harry Potter, and I've heard that I am now one of the most eligible bachelors in England."

"Exactly. The witches are circling you like hungry hyenas looking at a wounded animal."

"I. Am Not. Wounded."

"We all are, Severus. They all heard what Harry said: you loved his mother all this time. How did you find the strength to move on?" Severus' eyes met Fleur's, and he saw the pain reflected there. She needed to know.

"It was difficult, and I lived with a purpose until someone else came and cracked my cold, sodding heart open again. Now I just live for vengeance."

Fleur's eyes went from curious to distant. "Vengeance is good enough, I guess."

Harry beamed as he had Ginny on his arm, giving a knowing nod to Draco as they approached each other. Draco went for a scandalous wink at the pair of them, which only made the Weasley girl blush harder.

"Told you you'd look good in those robes, Harry." Draco said, and Harry wasn't entirely certain that the Slytherin wasn't flirting right then.

"Draco, thank you for dressing him. I can't wait to take him home and tear them off of him." Ginny said, giving smoldering eyes to her boyfriend. At this attention, Harry felt overwhelmed and knew that he would be utterly hers.

"Well, Ginny, if I have to give a speech, I'll put out there the shortest one you've ever seen." Harry's reply was supposed to be seductive, but he scrunched his face at the poor wording. "A short speech, I mean. Not that... yeah."
Draco and Ginny shared a good laugh together, and Harry had enough of a good sense of humor to laugh at it too. "Trust me, 'Chosen One', I'm certain your wand is more than adequate. I used to shower with a quidditch team... it was like they were smuggling twigs."

Ginny giggled at the exchange. "So you two got too pissed to come home last night? Here I was worried you were taring around with some trollop."

"No way, Gin. You're the only Witch for me. Even Draco wasn't looking at another girl." Harry said, kissing her gently. Ginny put her arm around Draco as she beamed at him.

"Warn a girl next time you two stay out." Ginny play-scolded at Draco, which made him roll his eyes at her.

"Yes, Misses Weasley." Draco teased back, making a show of kissing the girl's forehead.

"Oi. She's soon to be Misses Potter..." Harry said, smirking as he pulled Ginny back from Draco.

"The next Mr. Weasley seems to not get it." Draco said, lifting a glass of champagne from a house elf walking by.

"True, he's slow, but means well." Ginny said as they laughed together.

"You two really did learn to get along, didn't you?" Harry said, beaming at them both. They shrugged it off as Andi came back with a butterbeer for herself and Ginny.

"Draco, have you seen you mother? I heard she and Hermione had come in..." Andi said as an angry Narcissa strode back in from the courtyard. "Ah, nevermind."

"I don't get it, why are they staying together if they keep fighting?" Ginny asked the group.

"It's not all fighting; they get along perfectly most of the time. They just don't see eye-to-eye in the more... delicate... matters." Draco replied.

"She's not hurting 'Mione, is she?" Harry asked, concernedly.

"More like they are both hurting themselves at this point. They are both bloody stubborn." Andi said, clinking her butterbeer with the redhead.

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I was livid. I couldn't believe that my wife couldn't understand me at all, and wanted to parade about and leave me as some sort of hen-pecked husband. *I bloody agreed to defend my wife and family, and she repays me like this?!*

"Hermione, did you hear me?"

"Yes!" I spat. *No, you didn't Granger. "Um, no. Sorry."

"Marital spat? We might not be able to undo the Compulsion, but we can legally recognize a dissolution between you two so you're not seen as legally nor socially responsible for her." His baritone voice was comforting.

"No, she meant well in the war, and I won't abandon her to go to Azkaban for... being the type of woman she has been trained to be. I just wish she could... not be so... frustrating." I said, keeping my teeth from clenching.

"Sounds like every other married couple I know." He said, curiously.
"Is there really a difference?" I snapped back.

"Actually, about someone meaning well... that's what I came to tell you about. The recipients of the Order of Merlin will be seated at the front and-

"I know where to sit in a crowd. Reading is a skill I may have picked up from time to time." I gestured to the reserved seating sign.

"I will need to you comport yourself with the utmost sense of civility. Rita Skeeter-

"what about that insufferable little insect?!" My jaw was set as anger coursed through me. A shiver had my hands rubbing my arms for warmth and my left fingernails dug in and found a good bit of purchase.

"Okay, Hermione. I know you two had a spat in the past with her articles, but the eyes of the world will be here tonight as you both get awarded the Order-

"SHE IS GETTING WHAT?!" I screamed, my eyes burning with rage. "She went around trying to ruin my life and the lives of my friends as an unregistered animagus, and she's getting an Order of FUCKING MERLIN?!

"She came in after the war ended, with documentation that she used her, admittedly unregistered beetle form, to help spy and overthrow Voldemort-"

"And we're just going to pardon all of her past crimes just like that?"

"She made a deal. And honestly, we can't charge her with that and ignore the hexes, curses, and unforgivables that you and your friends used when it wasn't directly in self-defense."

"We were fighting a war! How dare he blame me for trying to survive!

"You were caught using the confundus charm when shopping in a muggle grocer."

"Well I couldn't just walk into Gringott's and ask to get money from my vault!" Kingsley's face contorted in annoyance.

"Don't even bring up the Goblin bank. As of tonight, they are closing their doors. Deliberately to instill panic with the wizarding populace and give themselves a bargaining chip, I would gather."

"Wait, they're doing what?"

"Closing the bank. They say it's to expedite the repairs, but they are refusing entry to all but their own kind."

"You'll allow them to do this?" I asked, conflicted between my loyalty to inter-species cooperation and wrecking the economy.

"I don't exactly have dominion over them, Hermione! Besides, they are demanding we pay for the loss of their Dragon as well all damages done by 'wizard trickery', and have demanded your head on a pike. Literally."

"That's barbaric! They should never have imprisoned and tortured-"

"-I agree with you, Hermione, but they don't see things the same way we do. You arrived and left with the dragon, so they think you stole it. They dare not blame Harry Potter and they are scared of the Veela as well, but since you withdrew your billions of Galleons out of a Goblin-controlled
bank..." The Minister shrugged, letting the thought explain itself.

"The Goblins are going to start another rebellion, Kingsley. Which kind of puts my drama with Rita in perspective." I sighed, but unhappy with it. "I'll be civil."

"Just for tonight; we will deal with the Goblins tomorrow." Kingsley nodded and departed, as I gathered my thoughts and went back inside.

As the night progressed into the more formal event, Draco escorted Ginny to the front row of non-recipients as Harry went ahead.

"Splitting me up from my boys. I'll be applauding the loudest, my love." Ginny said, kissing Harry's cheek and letting Draco lead her to her seat.

Draco quietly fumed until they were seated, and he took her hand in his, demanding eye contact.
"Miss Weasley, I do not now nor will I ever belong to you. Is that clear?" There was a hint of fear in her eyes, and Draco kept the stoic expression in order to drive the point home.

"Yes." Ginny's eyes watered as she said it. Draco let go of her hand like it was disgusting.

"Merlin, I can smell the alcohol on your breath. Didn't you learn any sense of propriety growing up?"

"Sorry, Draco." A tear rolled down her cheek. "I just get nervous having to dress up and be all girly, with all these strangers' eyes on me, judging me by my appearance." Oh bugger, why am I being such an arse to her? Do I need to see her gutted or something?

Draco pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to her. "Dry your eyes, love. I'm sorry I got short with you. After getting marked and groveling to The Dark Lord, I don't want to be anyone's property. And so you know, you are truly a vision of beauty tonight." Ginny sniffled at that.

"You think so?" Is she so blind to her own beauty, or just fishing for a compliment?

"I wouldn't say it otherwise."

"You're just saying that to appease me." Ginny dismissed his compliment entirely, but handed over her flask. "I shouldn't have this right now."

Draco took it and slipped it into his jacket. "Girl, I ought to put you over my knee until you do believe me that I think you are quite attractive. I'm certain the red colouring on your cheeks would do you some good." He clenched his jaw at his honesty. First I sound like a prat and now I'm flirting with her and suggesting she needs a spanking. I ought to just down some Veritaserum, recite some sonnets like a tosser, and call it a day.

Ginny giggled a bit at that. "Promises, promises, Mister Malfoy. Here I thought you fancied my boyfriend all this time." Bollocks... did she mean what I think she meant? He put a 'devil-may-care' look on his face and played it down.

"No crime in appreciating both sexes."

Ginny leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Have you ever..."

"Ugh. No. I don't kiss and tell. Nor do I shag and tell." She smirked as if she figured something out.
"Words of a virgin."

"I'll have you know I've done things with both wizards and witches..." Draco's eyes met hers, and through sheer force of will, made her smirk disappear. "...at the same time." Her jaw hit the floor and Draco smirked at that.

"Oh, I've left you speechless. I like you better this way."

Fleur and Severus were in the middle of a crowd, yet they both were utterly alone together. Vengeance is all I can live for now? So be it.

Narcissa approached us and Severus’ eyes locked onto something as his stance changed. "Cissy, are you okay?" Fleur then realized that the woman looked pale and furious, and that Severus did still have a heart under all those robes.

"Hermione called me Estella. I'm not hollow. I've been made hard, yes, but it was to survive." Narcissa's fingers came away from her ear, tinged red with blood. "I may have lost my temper and insulted her."

Severus flicked his wand and cleaned up the offending blood. "Let's not have you drip and leave bits of yourself for others to find. Remember she is a Gryffindor and she will fight everything to the bitter end; your tactics, your bond, even your admission of feelings."

Narcissa's cheeks reddened. "How did you know?"

Severus replied with a shrug. "I didn't. It was an intuitive leap, judging from what I could hear from you two over the latest row between Molly and Arthur. I cannot fathom why they are still together; Molly was happier just before the war fully broke out because Arthur was reassigned away from muggle stuff."

"I could care less about them, as long as they cared less about my and mine."

"Look, she's over there with your sister. Keep a civil tone and talk it out, Cissy. Fleur and I can find our seats on our own." Severus replied, and took the Veela's arm and let her lead them to their seats.

Harry was a nervous wreck, craning his neck around looking for any of his friends for moral support. Hermione wasn't here yet, and Ginny and Draco were apparently joking about something. I'm glad they don't hate each other, now if only Hermione and Ron can get over whatever row they are having now. As Harry thought about it, he had always assumed that those two would become a couple and it would eventually turn out horribly. He knew that his friend would want a girl to grow up and be just like his mother, and that's the kind of woman Hermione would never be.

Ron plopped down next to him in the row of chairs, seemingly teeming with nervous energy from his bouncing knee. "Hey Harry, think this will be some long-winded speech? I mean, it's Kingsley, so I doubt he'll be as boring as Fudge was."

Harry shrugged, unsure of what to expect. "As a Minister and my boss, he's pretty down-to-earth."

Severus sat down next to Ronald. "He's also under scrutiny of the entire magical world. He's going to have to sound like he's in charge and not just making this up as he goes along."

"So I'll never be Minister of Magic..." Ron joked nervously as Harry and Severus frowned.

"Harry, I take it you're the de-facto leader of the Auror Guild?" Severus asked.
"Yeah, well, it's supposed to be Proudfoot-

"...consider Proudfoot compromised. He should have come in by now, or at least have been reported as dead." Severus cut in, his wand-hand scratching his left forearm. "Bloody Mark hasn't faded at all." I can't just assume an Auror is now a bad guy! Harry thought as he looked over to Draco.

"Draco said the same thing. You really think that-" Ronald perked up.

"Oi. What's with you and Malfoy being all close now? He your new mate?"

"We get along is all. He's also our best friend's... uh... step-son." That really doesn't sound right.

"Yeah, we lose Hermione at his place and now she's all shacked up with that tart? Dodgy, if you ask me." Ron's face sneered in disgust.

"And that is precisely why, Mister Weasley, nobody asked you." Severus replied, his tone ending the conversation.

The blonde witch who sat next to Severus couldn't keep the malevolent glint out of her eye as she looked over the wizards seated. "Oh, I do believe I need to break up this... oh, what's the opposite of a hen party?" Rita Skeeter said, voice dripping with sarcastic seduction. The opposite of a hen is a cock, right? Severus shook his head ever so slightly as his eyes pierced Harry's.

"Stag Party." Ron answered, pleased with himself. Harry could have sworn he saw Severus clench his jaw in frustration. Severus is doing his best to not get involved, isn't he?

"Very good, little ginger. Now, quit answering the rhetorical questions and let me speak with the big boys." Rita replied as if to a stupid child, her quill and paper already out and taking notes.

"Severus, is it really true that the only reason you risked it all for oh so many years was for the unrequited and borderline creepy obsession you had with Lily Potter?" She asked, her quill was already scratching away though no reply was forthcoming.

"Did you have any other friends growing up, other than the man whom Harry's best friend killed in cold blood? How does it feel to have to stand up on that stage and be honored alongside the Gold-Digging Gryffindor?"

Harry wasn't about to take any more of this. "Isn't there some Press Box... or jar... you should be in? These seats are reserved."

"Oh, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. My next book detailing my heroics will definitely outsell anything you could ever put to paper."

Severus turned to look at Rita, and the look in his eyes left the reporter silent and fearful.

"I will find out how you fen-angled your way into being called a Heroine in this war. You seemed too busy attempting to destroy Harry's reputation here and infer that I was a homosexual for you to do anything to help the war effort." With that, he turned back to Harry and put a finger to his lips as a warning to them both.

Andromeda was having a bittersweet moment as she caught up with Narcissa, glad to have a sister back though still mourning the loss of her husband and daughter. She never really knew Remus Lupin, except that he was a constant source of heartache for her Nymphadora until he finally relented and married her. Still, I have a grandson and family to help raise him. She thought sadly, grateful for Harry's generosity.
"I am glad you found a sitter for Teddy tonight; I wasn't sure if we ever would have met under different circumstances." Narcissa said, feeling a weight being lifted from her.

"I knew you weren't happy with Lucius for a long time, but neither of us were in a position to be able to see each other. You would have liked Ted." Andi held back tears as she said that.

"I kept track of Nymphadora, and was secretly proud to see her as an Auror. If only I-" Cissy looked on the verge of tears.

"-oh hush, I forgive you. You wanted to keep the peace and make our parents happy. I rebelled and eloped, so they came down harder on you when it came out that you fancied women."

"Yeah, now if only I could make it work with Hermione. She doesn't get what it was like to be raised in a Slytherin household."

"Nobody should have been raised like that; we merely survived it. Bellatrix didn't."

"Oh, I just... Andi, I told her I loved her."

"And...?" Narcissa looked confused. "What did she say?"

"I fell asleep. I was really out of it, but I meant it. And now she thinks I'm just some sort of scarlet woman, one that she cannot trust." A sullen Hermione was coming over, and Andi had to think quickly to change the subject.

"I have to say, Cissy, you would love what Harry has done to Aunt Walburga's home. It is positively radiant now; you'd be amazed what a bit of wallpaper and brighter lighting does for the place! In fact, Teddy's playroom..." Andi glanced over to her new sister-in-law, and acted pleasantly surprised, "Hermione, I was just telling my sister about Grimmauld Place. Harry's been like a godsend to us, helping me raise my grandchild. Have you two thought about having or adopting children yourself?"

Nailed it, Andi thought as she saw both of them utterly gobsmacked, now they'll have to talk this out.

"Um, well, I'm pretty old to have children now..." Narcissa frowned.

"And I'm so not ready for that myself..." Hermione added.

"Oh. Well at least you both agree on that point. I see an open seat by Severus... oh. I'll just go and leave you two be. I'll see you both later, okay?" Andi assured, stepping away and giving them some privacy.

I wasn't sure what I walked in on, but Andi seemed quite excited about her new living arrangement and asked if my wife and I would have children. I always wanted two children, but... not yet!

As Andi walked away, I was left alone with Narcissa. She looked absolutely stunning in her backless gown and I was jumbled between my anger and hatred that seemed to be just under the surface and an overwhelming desire to just slam my wife against the nearest wall and claim her as mine. She ought to have a ring, show the world she's mine... keep the other witches off of her.

"Hermione, I want you to know I'm going to prove my fidelity to you; but please understand that I know how to be gregarious and to glean what appears to be extraneous details and... well, interpret that which others clearly overlook. I am sorry that I made you jealous, because I..." she took a shaky breath, "I do love you." Her eyes met mine and my body was demanding that I just say it's okay, and kiss her, and learn to understand our differences... Merlin, why is this so hard?
"Cissy, I'm still getting used to us being married, so seeing my wife talk to other people... I realize I was being unnecessarily jealous. I... I'm sorry for blowing up like that. I don't really know what kind of relationship you had with Lucius, but I'm not him, and I don't want to see you cavort with others." I said, apologizing.

"Well, I did find out that the ranking member on the Wizengamot is pro-Muggleborn, and was a strong supporter of Albus. Most of the old guard that believed in Pureblood Supremacy are dead or are appalled at what The Dark Lord had done."

I nodded in understanding. "Oh, okay. So you weren't actually trying to..." Get with her? Merlin, what's the proper term for that? Narcissa shook her head, smiling slightly. Her eyes wrinkled ever so slightly by her eyes, and I couldn't help but find it endearing.

"She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me, and I am in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men." [2]

"That's Darcy." I said, stifling a smile.

"I wanted to tease you a little to make you less sad: I thought anger would be better than grief. But if you wish me to love you, could you but see how much I DO love you, you would be proud and content. All my heart is yours, sir: it belongs to you; and with you it would remain, were fate to exile the rest of me from your presence for ever." [3]

I couldn't help but smile at that. "You really like your regency era fics, don't you?" She smiled back, and then I saw the difference in her eyes. This was a smile just for me... Compulsion be damned, I do like this woman! I thought as I gave her a chaste kiss, my fingers resting on the small of her back. It was scandalously exposed, and the gentle brush of my fingertips reminded me how much I wanted to run my tongue all up and down her flesh... Okay, more than just 'like', I definitely lust after her, and we do get along... Cissy's eyes caught mine and pulled me back into reality.

"Yes Hermione, I do enjoy that genre. Now you go get your Order of Merlin and when we get home I'll..." What? I'm a randy teen again, aren't I? "...why is Rita sitting there?" Whatever heat that was pooling within me was now ice water.

"Somehow, Rita is being awarded an Order of Merlin as well. She's also now a registered animagus, making my little-known secret useless against her."

"Her secret? Wait, what were you thinking? We should be trying to make her an asset and not an enemy!"

"Absolutely not! Cissy, I want you nowhere near Rita Skeeter! I will handle that bitch myself." I couldn't help but spit that last part out.

"What exactly happened between you two?"

"She ridiculed my friends and targeted me with her lies! I cannot respect that woman, and I'm disgusted at the thought that you were once her lover!"

"If you don't want me to... Fine. But she's in my past, and I won't ever sleep with her again. But can I at least use my charm to persuade her?!!"

"Fat chance of that. She doesn't exactly like me since I kept her in a jar."

"You did WHAT?!" My anger started to burn out, and I felt a bit sheepish at having to admit this next part.
"I... uh, kept her in a jar so she couldn't publish any more lies. Because I figured she was getting her scoops by getting close as an unregistered beetle animagus."

"Hermione Jean Granger. Unlawful imprisonment and blackmail. I'd be more impressed if it weren't a world-renowned reporter! What where you thinking?!"

"She needed to learn to quit spying on me!" I snapped, my anger cresting. "And how dare you go and slut up to her again!"

Narcissa stared at me, her jaw clenched in caution. "You are angry right now, and if I'm not mistaken, you're dealing with the aftershocks of Dark Magic. So I'm going to back off, and you're going to calm down and sit next to Andi and be collected and gracious." I nodded and we went to our respective seats. I think she was right, I'm not one to have so many outbursts.

Ronald felt out of place, sitting between Harry and Severus. The two of them didn't seem to want the attention nor fame (not to mention the Galleons attached to the OoM Award) while he was already planning out how he'd spend his reward money. Kingsley also looked reluctant to be there, which only made him think he'd do a much better job if he were in charge.

"As the sun rose upon May the Second at Hogwarts, the War between the forces of Light and Darkness came to a conclusion as Tom Marvolo Riddle, aka 'Voldemort', was killed. Most of the Death Eaters were summarily captured and are currently being detained at Azkaban, awaiting trial for their crimes against fellow Wizards and Witches.

"Any Death Eaters or other rebellious factions who are still at large are no longer under any protection of the ancient laws of war, and will not be given any quarter as they will be hunted down by Ministry-appointed specialists. They may turn themselves in peacefully for trial and will be spared from the Dementor's Kiss. Thus, the war begun by Voldemort has come to an end.

"Today we shall now look to ourselves, for in our recent struggle to overcome the Dark, there have been beacons of light that shined a path through the strangling fear and division. Many of them were unfortunately extinguished, but here we stand, ready to acknowledge their sacrifice for the good of all.

"The Order of Merlin, First Class is hereby posthumously bestowed upon Former Minister and Auror Rufus 'Bulldog' Scrimgeour, Auror Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody, Auror Nymphadora 'Chamelion' Tonks, Auror Andrew 'Rocky' Williamson, Auror Hawkes 'Hawk-Eye' Hawlish, and Auror Selina 'Siren' Savage.

"The Order of Merlin, Second Class is hereby posthumously bestowed upon Auror John 'Steady' Dawlish, Remus Lupin, William Arthur 'Bill' Weasley, Fred Weasley, Dean Thomas, Nigel Wolpert, Leanne Runcorn, and Romilda Vane."

"Leanne was Runcorn's daughter?" Ron asked, but was met with a hissed 'shh' by someone nearby. He thought he felt a rumble nearby, but dismissed it as his stomach telling him he's hungry again.

"Your sacrifices to help us have a brighter future will not be forgotten, and we who live shall not let your efforts be in vain. As for those who have fought valiantly and are still here, The Order of Merlin, First Class is hereby..."

The rumble was there again, but most definitely under his feet. Is this what they called a dirt quake in Muggle Studies? Even Kingsley noticed it and it disrupted his speech. His eyes seemed wide as his hands brandished his wand as Severus and Fleur stood at alert. Even Harry stood up and it made Ron nervous. Would I have to fight again, be in the thick of it? His nerve was gone, and he knew it.
Losing his brothers had been too much, and he needed to recover from it all.

"Peasegood! What was that? Check our perimeter, our defenses should still be up."

"They are, Minister! Nothing out there... wait... LUMOS MAXIMA! Goblins! They have wands!"

At that, wandfire erupted non-stop, and one wall was pounded repeatedly as if hit with canon balls. The floor shook again as everyone began to panic, and the wand fire's impacts were coming from all sides now.

Ron scrambled out of his chair and crouched on the floor, pulling out his wand. It'll never be over, will it? Just more death, more destruction, until nothing is fucking left anymore?! He looked around and realized most of the people around him did the same, but looked steadier than he felt.

"They surrounded us, didn't they?" Kingsley spat, leaving the podium and directing Percy to begin evacuation procedures.

"Minister, you have to come with us!" Percy argued, then looked in horror as a few poor souls attempted to disapparate, splinching themselves to pieces and one actually getting beheaded. "They put up wards! Don't apparate!"

Ron saw wizards trampling over each other as they went for the fireplaces, hoping that the Floo Network was still open. Illegal portkeys were being made without securing the landing would be muggle-free, and a few daring wizards took to the air on brooms that they must have smuggled in.

A window shattered as a semi-liquified Hit wizard went through it, the scream drowned out by the cacophony of violence that was exploding just outside the crumbling wards. Fleur's eyes were focused on the crack in the middle of the massive hall, her hands alight with fireballs at the ready.

Harry's eyes turned to the crack. And so did Severus'. And Hermione's. And everyone. Ron gulped as he summoned the courage to look at the opening chasm, as if only this would make it really happening. The floor began to give way as a wan arm pushed through and the rest of a rotting corpse stood to face the people there. Its eyes were glazed and empty, but it could see everyone. Ron's mouth was dry, and he couldn't find his voice. Or his wand. He stumbled backwards as another dead body came up from beneath them, lurching towards the living with only the need to attack and kill.

"INFERI!"

Chapter End Notes

[1] - Quotes from Great Expectations. The 2013 remake had quite a few stars from the Potter movies and I highly recommend it.


[3] — Jane Eyre, Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë
Rise of the Goblins

Draco’s pulse raced as his hands instinctively had his wand out, shielding himself and the people around him from the flying glass as the remains of a hit wizard flew through the room, leaving a red streak until it collided with an elderly witch and knocked her over. *Salazar's Snake, she was right!*

Harry and Neville exchanged a look as they knew what to do.

"Neville! Plan D!" Harry began to take down the wards so people could Apparate out as the wall crumbled around them. Fleur was in the air, casting severing charms to hack the animated bodies apart so they would quit advancing on the bystanders. Severus was doing the same, carefully beheading them without hitting anyone behind his target.

Neville's voice was amplified by the Sonorus charm: "Dumbledore's Army, on me!" Luna, Angelina, Cormac, and Ernie turned up immediately, wands at the ready. They took up a classic firing line, making a barrier against the swarm of Inferi coming up from beneath them.

Harry's voice also was magnified, and Draco fell back as the wall collapsed and more Inferi came in from the outside. "Hit Wizards! Fire at will; lethal magic is authorized to neutralize any Wizards behind the attack!"

Next to him was the Minister and Percy, both talking over each other. "Percy, you need to get the people out of here..."

"Minister, you need to get out of here, but our defenses have us trapped inside!"

"Harry is working on the defenses; you open up the floo network, make portkeys, do whatever it takes to get them out of here!"

"But, sir..."

"Get these people out and safe!"

Harry looked out into the crowd, and he found the Blonde Slytherin. "Draco! Take care of-"

Draco nodded automatically. "With my life. *Go!*" Draco saw the flash of ginger hair and went to her, pulling her away from the fight. Ginny, however, had other ideas.

"No, Draco, Damn it! I can help fight!" With her free hand, she backhanded him and he saw stars for a second.

"Bloody hell, girl, don't you know that in magical warfare, defense wins the game? Come on, we'll do more good over here..." She followed him obediently as he took to an outer edge of the pit where the Inferi were coming from. "Mum! Severus! Circle!" He cut his hand and grimaced in pain, running the blood along her wand. "Ginny, stand over there, about 15 meters from me!"

Severus and Narcissa realized what he was up to, and did the same on the opposite side. Molly flocked to her daughter and tried to pull her away, but found a fiery Veela between them.

"What are you doing? Who is left in the Order to fight?" Arthur yelled, watching helplessly as Hagrid was busy loading his crossbow against the Inferi coming in through the open wall as Hermione dual-wielded wands and was throwing a lot of green spells outward. *Good thing she's on our... Slytherin's Snake, she has the Elder Wand...*
"The Order is dead!" Hermione yelled back, over her shoulder.

The hit-wizard that was his mother's friend, Arnie Peasegood, stumbled back in with a massive gash in his arm. "Minister, there are too many Inferi to count, and they have us surrounded. More than two hundred, and I can't even make heads or tails out of the spells the Goblins are using. How do we stop them?"

Kingsley's voice boomed over the chaos. "Inferi Protocol: Blast them to bits, chop them up, and later on we'll burn the body parts. Citizens, do not be alarmed. Please calmly evacuate with the floo network. These are only animated corpses, they are slow and can't really hurt you if you keep your wits about you. Again, STAY CALM and EVACUATE THROUGH THE FLOO NETWORK."

Narcissa had already cleaned and patched Arnie's wound and was in position as the Hit-Wizard laid down cover fire.

"Minister! Some of them... oh god, they died at the Battle of Hogwarts... These are our friends, we can't burn them!" Peasegood's eyes went distant as Severus' sectumsempra cleaved a head entirely off and it rolled a few feet away. Thick red pooled out of the head slowly, the congealing dead blood making a sharp contrast to the pristine marble-colored floor.

"Arnie, it's them or us. And they are already dead. I'm sorry." Narcissa said, burning a rune into the floor. "Ansuz! Ginny, do Uruz! Draco, Algiz. Severus..."

"Tiwaz, got it!" Severus replied as we all carved our runes in respective corners. Ginny, however, panicked.

"Draco, I... I didn't take Ancient Runes! What am I carving?" Those aren't ancient, not really...

"Wonky-looking door frame, like it belongs under a staircase! It will power the circle up!" Draco replied, hoping that there was enough of his blood on her wand for the curse to work. He was certain Narcissa did the same with Severus as the protective circle went up, a light-red tint proving the barrier was erected.

The Inferi hit the barrier and it repelled them like an invisible wall. Narcissa and Severus nodded their thanks and went back to join Hermione at the collapsed wall, were Inferi were starting to stagger in.

Draco looked to Ginny, only to be caught in her arms as she was elated and burning off excess adrenaline. "Draco, that was bloody brilliant!" He smiled back at her, and bit his inner cheek to restrain himself here. It's just the heat of the battle. Don't look into this to mean something.

There was cheering behind me, and I turned to look to see a protective circle, effectively penning in the Inferi that were coming in from beneath us. Bloody brilliant, now you lot get over here and help!

As if on cue, the Hit Wizard was by Narcissa's side and we continued to mow down the Inferi coming in. It was difficult work to cleave through inches of human tissue and bone, and the DA was doing little more than knockback jinxes. After all the work and training, they are still using childrens' spells like this is some game.

"Snape, can you find the wizard out there who animated them?" Peasegood asked, deflecting a hailstorm of spells that made it through a gap of the Inferi. The goblins are using the dead as shields to attack us, those bastards! I then realized the implication of the Hit Wizard's words. Either the goblins had been prepared for a long time to do this and knew exactly how to raise the dead as Inferi, or they have Wizards, possibly rogue Death Eaters, helping them attack the Ministry.
Severus cast the *Hominem Revelio* spell and shook his head once. "There are no living humans out there; either the Goblins made the Inferi or the person who did is no longer here."

"Kill the wizard, kill the zombie army?" I asked, hoping that was the case. My wife nodded as she started to lob explosion curses past the doorway to thin the incoming herd some more. There were so many bodies coming in, and so many more held back by the circle... It was horrific to realize how many died in the Final Battle and were now trying to kill all of us.

Seamus' panicked voice cut through the din as the hair stood up on the back of my neck. "Um Harry..."

I turned to see what it was; apparently a few Inferi weren't trapped in the circle and... my heart was in my neck, strangling me. *Why you? Of all the people...* Nigel stumbled forward, his jaw broken and skin torn and rotting away so I could see the jaw and teeth. His eyes were yellow and clouded over, utterly dead yet taking in everything around it, having to turn the whole head instead of just the eyes as it lurched forward to attack.

He was utterly... void. There was nothing to him, no spark of life as he trudged forward, wandless as his wan arms reached out to grab and kill. I couldn't move against him, not when he still reminded me of the little boy with hope in his eyes as he hoped to get Harry's autograph.

Seamus cringed as he sent a spell at the animated corpse, and the creature moaned in fear as his outer robes caught fire and scared him, causing him to stagger around even faster, setting everything around it on fire as well.

Harry turned to survey the mess and was also frozen in the moment. It was the one friend who still hero-worshipped him, even after Harry had asked him to stop. *He would have been barely 15... he shouldn't have died. Not yet.*

The inferius kept moving forward in a half-shuffle, yet it was Fleur who took care of it. Her hands were on fire as she swooped in and grabbed his head and wrenched. There was a bone-cracking snap and even I felt squeamish at it.

And still Nigel flailed and singed Fleur's dress.

"Fleur!" Severus said, casting a gust of wind to blow out the flames on the pair of them.

The Veela bared her teeth and yanked again, and the sound of tearing flesh and meat let me know that the young Gryffindor was beheaded. Fleur let the body fall to the ground and looked at the head in her hands, fighting back tears and revulsion as she took to the air and threw the head outside, glad to be rid of the disembodied part.

I turned back to the oncoming crowd of dead and channeled my anger, frustration, and violence into the wands I had out. Fiendfyre erupted, and the two-headed fire beast began swiping and devouring the Inferi outside. A wave of satisfaction blossomed within me, and it was a heady, pleasurable sensation as the spell strengthened and a third head grew out of the fiery mass. The heat was so intense that it sliced through the flesh without setting the flesh or robes on fire. It was so quick, so clean, so... beautiful. *To hell with the Goblins, their attempting to ruin the economy, and their looting the dead just to send them back to kill us. Fuck Magical Inter-Species Cooperation, they all deserve to be burned. Alive.*

Narcissa's hand was on my shoulder, her lips near my ear. "Hermione, let it go. We can handle this; end your spell. Please."
"I warned you all the Goblins were up to something! DON'T TOUCH ME, CISSY!" I screamed, enjoying the sight of the fiery creature live, grow, and kill. They all fucking deserve it for this.

The wizards and witches let up their attacks as the Inferi quit advancing and all began to drop, cleaved to bits. Whatever Goblins that were out there had gone to ground, quite possibly in a literal sense.

"Hermione." It was Harry. "The threat is over now. Look behind you."

I didn't want to, but I knew it. The Inferi behind the protective barrier had 'died again'. Whomever was animating them either died or ran away, and the spell wore off. I lowered my wands, and the Fiendfyre creature dissipated.

Tears ran down my cheeks as I realized I was finally able to Dark Magic. And I didn't want to.

Arms wrapped around me and I knew it was my wife, and I let her hold me. "I've got you, 'Mione. We're okay."

I nodded, shivering though I didn't feel cold. I just needed someone to keep the darkness at bay.

Narcissa held her wife, attempting to ignore the heart-thudding fear she had when she witnessed something unnatural come over Hermione's features. She's just been going through a lot; losing memories, dealing with stress, killing people... Merlin, no wonder she's being influenced by the Dark. She wasn't sure if the tattoo from The Dark Lord or her wielding the Deathstick were the culprit, or if the two of them together was having an exponential effect on her.

Molly was giving her an icy glare, but the Slytherin didn't care. She stared back, giving Hermione a reassuring squeeze as Arthur was pulling his wife back to tend to their children. Draco and Ginny witnessed the exchange between their mothers and split up, each going back to their respective family.

"You okay, mother?" Draco asked, and Narcissa nodded tightly. He understood and gave them some space.

Kingsley had handled the situation remarkably, all things considered. Once the circle was raised and 'Dumbledore's Army' put up a firing line to keep the Inferi from entering the building, the wizards and witches seemed to feel safe and the near riot turned into an orderly evacuation that trickled to a halt as the threat was over. It has to be the shock of it all, that has to be the answer.

Harry took charge of the Hit Wizards and searched outside for Goblins as Neville had the D.A. start helping heal people and fix up the damaged area. Kingsley took a look at the circle and cautiously approached it.

"The Inferi are now... inactive?" Narcissa nodded, wondering what he was thinking.

"These people need to be catalogued, families notified, and given proper burials." Kingsley nodded to himself, wheels turning in his mind. "House Elves! Can you pop these bodies into the morgue at St. Mungo's, please?"

A phalanx of House-Elves, bearing pillowcases adorned with the Ministry of Magic sigil popped into existence and flinched away from the circle. "We cannot cross blood magic, Sir. It must be taken down first."

Kingsley nodded, and Narcissa broke the circle by reaching out and touching the barrier with a
bloody hand. Hermione buried her face into the blonde's neck, not wanting to see the dead. Cissy couldn't really blame her, either. The runes on the ground faded away as well, proving the circle had been utterly removed. *At least this is going right...*

Fleur's eyes opened wide as she dug through the pile of dead and plucked out a Goblin that was stuck in the tangle of corpses in the tunnel they had made. Her fiery hand snapped and burned the wand into uselessness as she collared the Goblin and shoved him towards the Minister.

Kingsley sneered at the Goblin and had him bound with magical rope. "You will be executed for this crime, Goblin."

The goblin, covered in blood and pus of others, sneered defiantly. "You see what we can do with wands. We have shut down the bank and your economy will fail. It is time for you to surrender and allow us the free use of wands."

The Minister frowned at the goblin. "You think I'm going to negotiate with you now? The offer I had before was that the Goblins must agree to learn our ways and our ethics when it comes to using magic! Raising the dead like this is specifically forbidden!"

"We Goblins will not go to your little Hogwarts, be sorted under the Thief Gryffindor, and subjugate ourselves like common children! We demand recognition!"

"Where I stand, there are over a dozen people dead from your attack. I will not kowtow to terrorists!"

"Hundreds of Goblins died, and we lost our dragon in our bank! That YOUR KIND occupied!"

"That was under the old regime that I fought against, you can't hold that against the Ministry now!"

"We Goblins do not take sides in matters between Wizards."

"Yet you blame my administration for the injustices that Voldemort perpetrated on your people?"

"Wizards wronged the Goblins, and you now lead the Wizards. You refuse to give us the witch's head as our traditions dictate, therefore we made this counter-offer."

Neville's wand was at the goblin's throat, eyes blazing with fury.

"You call this a negotiation tactic, you bloody munter?"

"We will strike back, with more of us, stronger than before." The Goblin spat, rage in his eyes.

"Azkaban." Kingsley ground out, and the Goblin was bound by magical rope and taken into custody by Neville.

"That's a Wizard Prison! You can't do that to me!" The goblin's protests fell on deaf ears as the young Auror disapparated with him.

Kingsley sighed, glad that the latest crisis was over. The news agencies that had been there to report on the awards banquet were still there, and were taking photos and interviewing witches and wizards for first-hand accounts. He know that Percy would panic and suggest kicking the press out, but the Minister had overheard how people were talking. *This can only be good.*

Harry approached the Minister. "Okay, Kingsley, I modified the Taboo so we won't get trapped in like that again. Here's the new jinxed phrase." He handed over a slip of paper.
"I love Severus' bright, smiling face."

"Well, that's easy to remember and nobody will accidentally say that. How powerful is the Taboo?" Kingsley asked, putting his wand to the paper and burning it to ash.

"It is powerful enough to break everything but the Fidelius Charm here in the UK, but only serve as a kind of magical beacon outside of our jurisdiction." Kingsley nodded at that, his face frowning as he heard an owl hooting overhead.

"That's all I need, to get laden with mail now..." The Minister mused as he looked up to see how many owls were going to swoop in.

"All owl post addressed to the Minister goes directly to the Ministry's Secretaries, not direct to you. And we had owl-repelling charms up as well." Percy replied, nonplussed.

The tawny barn owl was visible as was the bright red envelope clutched in its claws... as well as some substance that turned Harry Potter white as a ghost.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, pointing up at the owl coming in through the wall, "Is that what I think it is?" Ronald saw it as well and instantly disapparated with Lavender in his arms.

Narcissa's eyes saw the envelope heading towards them and realized what was happening, a second too late. "EVERYONE OUT NOW! IT'S ERUMPENT HORN! MOVE!" Most of the wizards and witches looked on in confusion, not knowing what the danger was. Severus' wand was out and trained on the envelope, and Kingsley wasn't certain the Potions Master could safely cleave the horn from the howler.

"IT'S GOING TO EXPLODE! GET OUT! NOW!" Fleur commanded, gathering up the nerve to take it on.

Fleur took to the air and reached to grab the owl, but the bird dodged easily and flew directly towards Hermione Granger. Narcissa and Hermione were frozen in fear, uncertain how they could escape the imminent explosion. The owl was trained to deliver the letter to its target, and the letter was designed to ignite and explode, and the Horn itself was simply overkill.

Witches and Wizards began to flee as everyone else began to disapparate as the letter and parcel was released, falling the few feet towards the intended victim. The owl turned away, and both Fleur and Severus took the the sky to follow it back in hopes to learn the identity of the sender.

Kingsley was disapparated to safety with Percy, a mere hundred meters away from the building.

"Merlin's Beard!" The Minister said before the night erupted in blinding white.

Neither of them could escape in time.

This would be it for them, and they both knew it.

Their hands joined as the Wand of Destiny was clasped between them.

There was love. There was conviction. And an unquenchable need to stay alive.

Lips met and magic spilled forth from between them, the light growing in intensity as the envelope fell open.
"I have located Wendell and Monica Wilkins! Give me the wand and I will spare them!"

I staggered, fingers threaded with my wife's, confused as to what just happened. *An erumpent horn exploded in my face, right? How am I alive?*

"Hermione! You're okay, thank Merlin." I blinked as my eyes re-adjusted to the light.

"How did we survive that? I don't even think those tactical robes should have been enough..." I replied, Narcissa's eyes were watery and she blinked, causing the tear to roll down her cheek.

"I think it was the wand, maybe also our Compulsion. Self-preservation can be a very powerful thing. Did you hear the howler?" I shuddered as the memory of Voldemort's voice went through my head. "I have located Wendell and Monica Wilkins! Give me the wand and I will spare them!" *It can't be... it just cannot be... him...*

"I heard, but it can't really be him. We killed him. He's dead, and dead is dead, right? No matter what necromancy your sister knows?"

"No, I agree. He can't be alive. It has to be Bella. She wants that wand for herself, and she's just trying to trick us. The Dark Lord would have used his connection with you." Narcissa said, pointing to the tattoo on my right wrist. A cold shudder went over me as I realized I was scratching at the mark. *Harry's scar always hurt when... No. Dead is Dead. And he's dead. For good.*

"Then how did she find my parents? I had them change their names, their faces, sent them to... Damn it! It was supposed to be fail-proof." I slumped, worry getting to me. "I was going to keep them safe."

Narcissa's hand cupped my cheek, her eyes beseeching to see my own. I could see her worry and fear there; she was as invested in saving my parents as I would be.

"I'll come with you to rescue them. Where are they? I should go back home and get some supplies, change out of this gown..." *No time! She could be there, torturing or killing them like she did to me!*

"Damn it, fuck getting supplies! I need to go now!" I pulled away from her, but her hand clasped my bicep like an iron claw.

"Hermione, you know this is a trap; you have to know that this is a trap!"

"I don't care. I'm going, she's going to die, my parents will be safe. That's it!" I snapped, yanking my arm out of her grip.

"...this is just a trap to get the wand..." Cissy said plaintively.

"I know. She won't get it."

"Hermione, let Severus and Fleur do this job. You don't know what she can do!"

"NO! My mother, my father, my responsibility." Narcissa looked stricken. Her lips were pressed thin as a hint of anger was in her eyes.

"Is the wand your responsibility too? The Deathstick is affecting you."
"She'll get this wand from my cold, dead hands!" I sneered, my voice going a bit more shrill than I expected. "I have to go rescue my parents, Cissy. She can't know where they are." I took a breath and calmed myself down somewhat. *Maybe she has a point, but for now... no, I have to save them. Alone.*

"I'll come with you."

"No... I... I don't know how I'll explain you to them." *Mum, dad, I killed a man and now I bang his dish of a wife... you know of them, I sucker-punched her son five years ago...*

"You don't have to. I will if you want. But I'm not letting you go alone while my sister is out there!" I shook my head, angry at her presumption. *She won't let me? She doesn't own me!*

"Won't 'let me'? I can order you to not follow me, Cissy!"

"Why are you being such a stubborn idiot!" Narcissa winced, her face twisted as if she sucked on a lemon. "I want to go and help protect you AND my in-laws! They are family to me, too!" I shrugged off the guilt she was trying to assign me, collected my resolve, and told her off.

"Ugh, I just want to leave my parents out of all this! Why is this so difficult?" *Destination: Australia. Wherever my parents are. Determination: I will kill Bellatrix with the Elder Wand. That enough? Deliberation: Sod it.*

*Narcissa knew I was going to apparate away as she verbally lashed out at me.*

"How can you be so fucking stupid and self-centered, Hermione!"

The last thing I saw was my wife, doubled over in pain as blood ran out of her nose.

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Narcissa didn't have much time, so she looked around and had to improvise a plan. Locking the doors with *colloportus*, she ripped a part of her dress off and tossed it over the partial remains of an Inferi that was hacked to pieces so unrecognizable that the House-Elves left it behind. Glancing around, she found other dead parts that appeared to be female and picked them up, and slightly concerned at how little it seemed to repulse her now, tossed the arm and head atop of it.

*She had brown curls as well, probably died from splinching.* The face wasn't entirely right, but the flames would take care of that. Arranging the head upon the other parts that she had covered with her torn dress, she set them aflame and watched what looked like a pair of witches huddled in death together.

*This is not our future, the arithmancy doesn't lie. I just need to figure out the missing variables...* Narcissa thought to herself, her mind clicking a new fact into place. Hermione's line became darker for some reason, and the reason was obvious to her now.

*I definitely need to save her, not just from Bella, but from herself.*

"Mum? Mother!" Draco stumbled through the gaping hole in the wall, relief flooding his face. "I thought... I was..." He looked down. "Hermione... what?" His eyes narrowed as his mind took it all in and couldn't comprehend what was going on.

"Where are Hermione's parents?" Narcissa asked. *I wish she had trusted me with this...*

"I don't know! She didn't say... don't think she even told Harry or Ron."
"Are you sure? Your Aunt Bella might have them prisoner." Her son stared at the burning bodies nearby. "Draco, we don't have much time!"

"She's still alive, isn't she? The wrist is missing that snake tattoo The Dark Lord gave her." Draco looked into his mother's eyes. "What's the angle here?"

"We need the element of surprise on our side, and I need to know where she's going. Now, was there anything you heard? Asked about any place, any country?" There were spells slamming into the locked doors, possibly Peasegood or some other Hit Wizards coming to the rescue. We don't have much time, Draco!

"Harry asked about Australia." Draco's eyes widened in horror at the realization. "Hermione must have sent them through muggle channels to circumvent their Magical Authority. Brilliant move, until she uses magic there..."

"Slytherin's Snake!" She cursed, realizing the trap that she was walking into. The bloody AMA makes our Hit Wizards look like the trolley witch on the Hogwarts Express. "Draco, where's the battle box?"

"Mother, you can't seriously be thinking-"

"-where is it? I can't just let her go on her own!" A bit of hysteria was in her voice, but she couldn't help it. Hermione may have had a few wands whizz past her head in Gringotts, but that's nothing compared to what she's facing out there! Narcissa's heart raced, and her vision was tunneling to the tasks ahead of her. She lived in panic of being left alone, fighting for her life as she's surrounded by complete strangers who would kill you as soon as order a drink at a bar.

"It's in the Catacombs, by the emergency wands, but you can't use them-" I know I can't use magic there; but at least I have Severus' skullduggery. And a few of my own tricks up my sleeve, like making these corpses believable enough to be us. The Slytherin put a glamour on the exposed wrist to mark it like her wife's, and quickly turned the wand upon her son.

"Mother, you woul-"

"Obliviate." Cissy backed away, disillusioning herself as Kingsley blasted his way through the locked door and saw a slumped and crying Draco, mourning the death of his mother and her wife.

I hope you can understand this in time, Draco.

Ginny ran past Shacklebolt and Harry, eyes streaming at the shock of blonde at the center of the blast. Sobbing could be heard from the young Slytherin, and it relieved her more than anything. Severus and Fleur had flown after the owl, hoping to trace it back to the sender, while Harry had directed the Hit Wizards and the D.A. to look for clues to identify those responsible for the initial attack.

His blood was on my wand, and we cast a powerful protective circle using what I was taught was Dark Magic. I was also told that loving another witch was Dark as well. As Ginny went to put her arms around Draco and console him, she didn't think being homosexual was wrong in the slightest. It's not for me, but if Hermione and Narcissa can make it work for each other, who am I to judge?

She squeezed the Slytherin in her arms, and a pang of guilt went through her. Not when I'm getting all mixed up about Draco and Harry... She had no idea what to do about this, so she tabled it. She liked two different guys before, and only one of them wanted her at the time so it was a simple
enough solution.

Draco’s head tilted and rested on her arms, grateful for the acceptance and the freedom to let his emotions out. Ginny could tell it had been a very long time since he had last been honest with his own heart.

"Shh, Draco. I've got you." His hands cradled her arm as she knelt to hold him to her. Other Order members caught up, and it was her mother who would break the silence.

"Ginny, I'm not sure you should be this close-" she said uncertainly.

"Piss off! Cissy and 'Mione are dead!" Ginny felt tears roll down her cheeks, her voice going hoarse. "Does this make you FUCKING HAPPY!?"

Draco stirred at the outburst. "Gin, don't. Not now." He said as he turned to put an arm around her as well.

"It doesn't make me happy, Ginevra! But two wrongs don't make a right!" Molly said, anger infusing her words with venom.

"Ladies, we don't need to do this. In fact, what we need is to re-convene the Order; now that Hogwarts is rebuilt, we need to get the Ministry Departments in line..."

Arthur stared the man down. "Who died and put you in charge? I answered to Albus, and then Alastor. Not your little pet boy, and not the bloke who wheeled and dealed his way in to power here!"

Harry turned, shocked at what the Weasley Patriarch had said. "I'm nobody's little pet, Arthur! I'm doing my part to end this conflict, what are you doing?"

"Yeah, you earned the position to run the Auror Guild on sheer talent and the whole team looks up to you. My son deserves it more than you!" Harry flinched at the man's breath, and recognized the sickly-sweet tang of alcohol there.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out the contact Galleon, charming a new message to appear on it. "This is why the Order is dead, you're too busy squabbling and disparaging my best friend and her wife to focus on what needs to happen! Coming, Draco?" Ginny helped Draco up as he nodded.

"Figure out what side you're on, mum. I'm going with them." Ginny said, shooting them a look of utter disgust.

Molly was affronted. "We only wanted to do the right thing!"

Draco’s eyes were red from tears, and he was angry for showing this much emotion to them, but didn't care. "Your definition of 'right' is the problem, Mrs. Weasley! My mother was a good woman, and she made the best of her situation with Hermione."

"Don't you dare talk to me about knowing right from wrong, Malfoy! I know you got branded with the Dark Mark, and I don't like the way you've been hanging around my daughter."

"She's allowed to make her own decisions, just like I did. And so you know, I didn't have much of a choice to not take the mark, but I did choose to kill The Dark Lord." Draco said, his hand in Ginny's.

Harry looked past the Weasley parents to a dejected Ronald. "Ron, we could use you. When it comes to tactics, you were always more clever than 'Mione."
The boy opened his mouth to say something, but closed it, shaking his head and turning away. Grief flooded his features, and walked away from them all.

Rita thought she'd get applause when her story got published. Or even subtle, angry glares. As she walked into the Daily Prophet building, it was chaos. She had fled at the first sight of the Goblin attack, and had assumed it would be yet another silly little rebellion that the Aurors and Hit Wizards would put down.

This was turning out to be much different. She'd have to ask what happened, and if her story would get bumped from the front page. *I even hate it when my headlines land below the fold..."

"SKEETER!" the Editor shouted as he saw her. "My office!"

She put on her usual smile and strode across the office, the clacking of her heels deafening everything around her. The Editor was a portly, balding man with a penchant for pinstripes that did nothing to slim down his appearance.

"Evening, Robert. What's all the hubbub about?" She asked coyly, running her tongue across her teeth.

"Tell me you have something from tonight! We can't get scooped by The Quibbler again!"

"Oh, how is Xenophilius? Bollocks deep in a ghoul, like always?" Her joke landed on deaf ears. *Tough crowd tonight.*

"The Ministry Awards Banquet. I made you staff so you'd have credentials to get in. Tell me you have the story!"

Rita shrugged. "Some goblins got uppity and will be executed, no big deal. The crime is that I didn't get awarded my Order or Merlin tonight."

"You... you stupid bint. Over a dozen wizards died from the Inferi attack! Severus Snape is being sent off to Merlin knows where in hopes to catch Bellatrix! You couldn't have disapparated out of there... where were you?"

Rita shrugged nonchalantly. "I... buzzed off. I'd have stuck around if I had known there were Inferi..." *I most certainly would not; I'm glad I got out of there alive when I did.*

Robert's fist slammed the table. "I wish I had pulled your article now! The very night she was supposed to be granted the highest honor in the wizarding world, she gets assassinated!"

Her face pinched as if she sipped dishwater. "Assassinated? That's a strong term for such a little girl..."

"Hermione and Narcissa Granger are dead, and all you can do is keep grinding your axe?! If you EVER want to write in an english-speaking nation again, I advise you pick up on where the winds are blowing! For now, consider your staff position terminated and you're back on getting paid by the article on an ad-hoc basis."

Rita sputtered at that. *My Cissy, dead?!* Her mind caught up and realized she just got fired. "But... you can't fire me! I have a loyal fanbase..."

"Actually, you had a Pureblood fan-base. And the fact that my paper called Hermione a *galleon-grubbing harlot* ON THE VERY NIGHT SHE DIED has absolutely **FUCKED ME**!"
I'm being told what to write? I always got to write what I wanted, even when You-Know-Who was in charge! Rita's mouth was clenched shut in surprise. It struck her that she had been verbally eviscerating enemies of the greatest evil the world had ever seen and had essentially done the evil regime favor after favor.

I made a lot of Galleons by attacking Harry and Albus, but in doing so, delayed the start of the war and made it claim more victims. The death toll didn't bother her as much as her loss of job security, though. Her income wouldn't be steady if she didn't have a regular column, and went about thinking of a way to reinvent herself to ensure her continued presence and publication in the Wizarding media.

I'd rather starve than go crawling back to Xenophilius and his little rag! She swore as she remembered the fluff-pieces she wrote early in her career about the Wizarding Wireless Network and the 'talkies', a station that didn't play music but instead had a witch and a wizard talking about the current events and summarize the ministerial activities as well as the latest quidditch scores. They had spoken about having her on there for live interviews and whatnot, and she had been unsure about this since there would be no editing process, and once it was said, it was out there for all to hear.

The Wireless channel was owned by an odd-seeming couple, but they had a loyal fan base who would send owls all the time. Perhaps it's time to expand to the Wireless after all...

"...are you even listening to me, Skeeter? Get out and don't come back until you have something decent to publish!"

Rita quirked up a corner of her mouth. Oh yes, you're definitely going to be listening to me soon.
The Australian Magical Authority

Narcissa flicked her wand and her gown was off of her. Another flick, and she was in her tactical robes.

_Battle Box, Aussie gear, grab Hermione's Tac Robes, wand... fuck, no wands... wait, grab some spare wands, just in case..._

The thoughts went through her head so fast that she was repeating the checklist like a mantra. She checked off the list, glad that she had tasked Herpy with filling the paintballs with the sleeping potion.

_The Rap 4 pistol only holds eight rounds per clip, while the other one can hold up to 50... but if I need that much, we're dead anyways. Okay, two... three clips. Go. Just... get this done. Quit hesitating. Breathe. Calm down... Calm. Down._

Narcissa went to her bathroom and took a calming potion, and grabbed a few more and stuffed them in her pockets.

_Her parents might need some protection as well, she thought, and summoned Lucius' tactical robes as well. It was the last one she had, but it was something, at least._

As the calming potion took affect, a single thought ran through her head: _Australia's a big country, how would I locate the muggle couple without using any magic? A House Elf could, if they knew the person, right? Could they get through the AMA's defensive perimeter?_

"Herpy!" she called out, feeling apprehensive when the elf didn't instantly appear before her. The home seemed secure, there was no sign of a struggle, so where was the elf?

"Herpy?" Narcissa heard a scuffle, and wondered if she woke the poor elf up. Something fell and crashed on the ground, and the Slytherin's senses were on full alert.

"Mistress!" the diminutive elf shouted in fear, and Narcissa bolted, the larger muggle weapon slung onto her back as she held the pistol before her. She didn't fully understand the concept of the eyesight, but knew that was how the muggles aimed.

Her elf was in distress as she took the corner, keeping the pistol ahead of her and her heart pounded a slow but steady rhythm. _Thank Merlin for calming potion._

She was in the family room, where the Malfoy family portraits had been, and found a huge orange cat standing upon the elf and pinning it to the ground. It was massive and bushy, perhaps a maine coon or a Kneazle. _Or both... "Herpy is sorry, Mistress, but the beast pinned me down when I tried_
to shut the floo connection..."

Narcissa's eyes slung over to the fireplace, whose flames flickered from green back to yellow. *You brilliant feline...* Narcissa realized that the cat must have broken into a Wizard's home and activated the floo network.

"Cat, is Hermione Granger your witch?" In reply, the cat bounded off of the elf and trotted over to Narcissa, arrogance in his stride. She looked to his collar. "Crookshanks. What an unusual name..."

"Mrow." His eyes and ears flattened, and Narcissa apologized.

"I suppose with names like Hermione and Nymphadora, you are positively normal." Crookshanks purred at that, and bounded his way up to the mantel and knocked over the jar of floo powder. It covered the floor as Herpy was about to have a fit, but Cissy ordered her elf to leave it be as the cat walked into the thickest part of the powder and started to kick his back paws through the soot, effectively getting the powder into the fireplace and turning the flames green again.

"MOW!" Crookshanks barked, squatting into a pouncing stance and wiggled his bum as his growl turned into a type of yowl. "MOW!" he barked again, ran through the fireplace, and meowed from the other side.

*I guess that means it's all clear... here goes.* Narcissa took a deep breath as she secured the strap of the P-90, put her trust in her wife's familiar, and ran after him.

I had gotten used to the sensation of metal bands tightening around my chest whenever I apparated, but the metal bands didn't seem to relent once I finished landing. If anything, they got tighter.

"Unauthorized magical transport detected. Agents from the Australian Magical Authority will convene on your location and arrest you immediately. Any use of magic will result in swift retaliation."

*The Australian Magical Authority? Good going, Granger. Wait, how was I even able to hear that?!*

I looked around, surprised to see myself in a wooded area. It didn't look like the forests back when I was on the run, but it definitely had the feel that humans barely touched this area. I decided to risk it.

Placing my wand upon my palm, I thought clearly on my parents. "Point me!"

"Unauthorized use of magic detected. Unknown spell used. Agents from the Australian Magical Authority will consider you armed and dangerous. Further use of magic will result in your summary execution."

As the wand pointed out the way to go, the magical bands tightened, forcing my wand-hand to my chest and immobilizing it. I wasn't able to identify the direction, effectively ruining my spell. *The force was almost enough to break my arm! What the fuck is going on here?! One spell and they are ready to kill me?*

I still had my legs, so I did the only thing I could do: run. I went in the direction that I thought the wand was pointing toward, hoping that the spell worked right... The sound of apparitions cracking in made me panic, and my free arm still held the other wand in a white-knuckle grip. *I might only get one more spell, so I had better make it a good one.* Feeling the constricting bands around my chest, I was fairly certain that I wouldn't be able to disapparate away from here.
I need to locate my parents, restore their memory... then what? Turn myself in? That won't work. My legs started to burn and I slowed down, hiding in a thicket of trees. My lungs burned as my hot breath caught in my throat, making me want to cough and get a deep breath in. Don't panic, don't... fuckfuck too late...

"Agents, be on the lookout: subject has the appearance of an 18 year old witch, brown hair, slender build. British and Romanian Ministries both confirm this is an imposter assuming the identity of war heroine Hermione Granger; quite possibly War Criminal Bellatrix Lestrange on the run. Control has confirmed, the Elder Wand is in play. Lethal force has been authorized. We're not to lose any sleep if we can't bring her in alive, understood?"

That's when it hit me. Bellatrix isn't here at all. She sent the howler to try and kill me, and if that failed, set me up to walk into a trap. I guess she thinks she can get the wand later, or wants to see me dead more than she wants the Elder Wand. Either way, I have only one spell left, and then I'm defenseless. I have one shot.

I crouched down, Elder Wand clutched in my remaining hand, and aligned my final spell for all that it was worth.

Arabella Figg enjoyed her quiet life. Between her business breeding kneazles and forming a network of fellow squibs before the war began, she was able to evacuate herself and others like her through the muggle channels. It wasn't too difficult, either, once she found an aging cobbler who had a weakness for oatmeal raisin cookies.

She may have been old, but her memory was as sharp as ever when her own kneazle hissed at the intruder.

"Mister Tibbles, what are you... oh. Part orange tabby, part kneazle, large fluffy tail... you're Hermione Granger's familiar. Stand down, boy, he's not here to cause trouble."

Mister Tibbles glared at the trespassing feline. "Rowr." He chirped, as if to say, "I disagree."

Mrs. Figg, of course, understood her own familiar's meaning. "If he's here, it means she's nearby. Merlin knows how useless I was back when Harry was attacked by Dementors, I'm not going to skive off if she needs me. Your name is Crookshanks, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Murr." Crookshanks replied, and Arabella couldn't read him as well but was almost certain he agreed with her. He hopped up onto the fireplace mantle, sniffing away at the jars only to scrunch his face in annoyance and sneeze.

"What are you... that's my floo powder. Do you... how did you know I am tied into the network?" Mrs. Figg asked.

"Mow." He replied, and Mrs. Figg couldn't be sure but was almost certain he rolled his eyes at her. He hopped down and paced in a tight circle before the fireplace, then pantomimed kicking his back leg back as if burying something under kitty litter. "RAWR?"

"You... want to use my floo? I'm not going with you, so I can't bring you back. Where are you going?"

Unfazed, Crookshanks paced the tight circle again, did the back leg kick as if burying something, and growled softly at the fireplace. Apparently this boy here knows how to use the Floo network.
"Fine, okay, but I'm not going to be a port-of-call for you..." Mrs. Figg said in resignation, pouring a small amount where the ginger cat had indicated.

As he went through the fireplace, Mrs. Figg's Wireless came to life. It was out of range for the usual British programming, but she had tinkered with the receiver in order to pick up Agent Chatter. She then understood why Crookshanks had shown up, and why the Kneazle knew there was an illegal floo connection here. Mister Tibbles must have said something to impress the other cat, and now the ginger Kneazle is off to get help. I guess I'm about to be a port-of-call after all. Arabella turned up the volume and began to tidy up for whomever was about to come back.

"Frank hold your position, keep your eyes open for the target."

"Hold back, all units hold your position, do not engage target. Repeat: do not engage."

"Attention Authority Agents, an unknown spell was cast in your vicinity. Preliminary wards indicate a wand of unknown origin. Usual sigils are not activating."

"Repeat, control."

"Confirmed, wand is not of normal origin."

"When is a wand not made out of wand-wood?"

"Cut the chatter, she's out there, banded, and still using magic. Consider her armed and dangerous."

"Control, check the wards against Elder."

"Confirmed, wand is Elder. Repeat: Wand is Elder."

Narcissa wasn't entirely sure what to expect. I put my trust into a cat that I tried talking to and ran into a floo-linked fire to Merlin-knows-where. Brilliant, Cissy.

So as she found herself face to face with Arabella Figg, the squib known for breeding prize-winning kneazles, she was at a loss for words. She was allied with Albus, right? Narcissa lowered the modified muggle weapon as Arabella's look of shock melted into one of understanding.

"Crookshanks went to get you, so I suppose you're on Hermione's side. Well, if my Wireless is correct, you're here in the nick of time. Her parents live just down the road, under the assumed name of Wilkins."

Narcissa blinked at that. "How did you know?"

"Mister Tibbles told me. Now get going, save her and bring her family back here. This floo is supposedly unlisted, so other than myself, or either Kneazle here who knows this exists, it's entirely secure. Brilliant woman! But it seems like she knew a war was coming and was prepared..."

"Mrs. Figg, you seem awfully well-informed and prepared for today." Cissy asked.

"It was obvious that a war was coming. And after that dreadful encounter Harry had with the Dementors, I knew I could no longer be of no use. You know I was born to a Pureblood family, so when Albus died, I banded together the rest of the squibs and we made a plan to get out of there. Speaking of the Dementors, where have they all gone?" Where have who all gone?

"What do you mean?"
"You must have seen all that mist, when You-Know-Who ran rampant over there. The Dementors were breeding! But now I hear they all have just disappeared."

At the best, a Patronus Charm repels them and makes them flee, but no spell can unmake them... so where did they all go?

"Mrow." A steely-grey cat announced, pouncing onto the radio. Must be Mister Tibbles.

"Agents, be on the lookout: subject has the appearance of an 18 year old witch, brown hair, slender build. British and Romanian Ministries both confirm this is an imposter assuming the identity of war heroine Hermione Granger; quite possibly War Criminal Bellatrix Lestrange on the run. Control has confirmed, the Elder Wand is in play. Lethal force has been authorized. We're not to lose any sleep if we can't bring her in alive, understood?"

"Go, save her!"

Narcissa nodded, then realized that Mrs. Figg was talking to the pair of cats that had bolted out of the house. I guess I'm just going to have to follow those darn cats...

Harry had thought that the magical skirmish he had in the muggle diner would be the most surreal place he'd ever have to fight for his life. It almost made sense as he flew away from his childhood home, as well as in the Ministry and at Hogwarts.

Diagon Alley, however, was never supposed to be a war zone. George and Ron had stayed back and defended their shop, leaving the Boy Who Lived in charge of the battle as Severus and Fleur had traced the Owl back to Romania. There had been reports of a witch matching Bellatrix's description severing puppies in Taiwan and exploding children in India, which his mentor had ruled as red herrings. It might be her work, but it is more likely a poor witch under a glamour and the Imperious Curse. Harry gaped at that, realizing that he couldn't just go over there and help stop it, since other Ministries would be hesitant for more foreigners getting involved. Bellatrix is in two places at once, and a fake Hermione in Romania as well? What's the plan here?

That's when news came in that the Goblins made good on their threat. The Wizarding populace panicked when it became apparent that the bank was closed to all non-goblins and they were cut off from their money. It wouldn't take long for an altercation to start and for a handful of wizards and goblins to lie dead on the steps of Gringotts.

"Krum! Magical Menagerie is on fire! Put it out before it spreads!" Harry called out, glad to have Viktor in charge of the west flank as he directed the battle on the east. Luna had turned Madam Malkin's into a makeshift first-aid site, and was doing a fine job of treating the bystanders who were injured when the spell fight began.

Little seemed to break down the defenses of the bank, and the Goblins had quite the defensive position as they had the second floor terrace and multiple windows to fire from. Having Ollivander's to his back made Harry feel secure that he wouldn't get surrounded like at the banquet, but he was surprised as a hand clasped his shoulder and tried to not yelp like a girl.

"Potter, it's just me. I got Ginny sorted; she's with the Harpies now." Draco said as relief flooded the Auror. She'll be out of the fighting over there and safe, at least.

"That was fast. I'd have expected her to argue and wind up here by your side."

"Told her to go and that you'd focus better here without worrying over her. Besides, she listens to me."
"Did she say anything?"

"She wanted me to say that you need to stay safe, and made me promise to protect you. And to um, give you a kiss goodbye." Harry's eyes shot to the Slytherin. He was blushing instead of acting smug about it. *He's absolutely adorable when he's... FOCUS!*

Neville's patronus, a blurry thestral, took form and spoke. "Everything is secure here at the Ministry, Harry. Unusually quiet, compared to the tactics in the last Rebellion." Harry was glad that Neville had the idea to interview the oldest portraits about how the last few Goblin Rebellions went, though apparently the 'unleash an army of Inferi' plan meant that they were not simply repeating history anymore. This was escalation, perhaps seeking annihilation.

"So we're just lobbing spells and dodging when they shoot back at us?" Draco asked, standing in clear view and boldly casting a protego charm as Harry and the others took cover behind waste bins and other impromptu barricades.

"Draco, get down! You don't know when the shield will fail and they hit you!" Harry replied in shock, his left hand grabbing for his friend and pulling him down to the ground. A hailstorm of yellow wand-fire rained down where Draco had been standing, melting the concrete upon impact.

"Damn it Harry, I can handle this!" Draco shouted, bravado putting an edge to his words. Viktor took advantage of the moment and flung an explosion curse through an open window, spattering the inside of the glass with red.

"Don't act like you have something to prove. Fight smart, you're a bloody Slytherin!"

"Bastards killed the last of my family! I'm not afraid of them!" Loud impacts could be heard as the goblins returned fire, causing the concrete street to buckle, crack, and split.

"If Hermione was part of your family, than so am I! And you've got Andi and Teddy too! Besides, how do you think Ginny would feel if she lost you, too?" That seemed to get through to him.

"Yeah, sorry." Draco crouched down next to Harry and peeked over the bin. "This seems like a stalemate. Think we can keep them under siege, maybe get them to break in time?"

Harry shook his head. "No idea what their resources are in there, but yeah, I think that's the plan."

"...Then why did they stop?"

The silence of the spell-fight finally registered in Harry's ears as he looked over the bin as well. Viktor stood, and took a few steps toward the bank and was stopped. "Goblin defense. I haff no clue how to break it." His eyebrows raised in wonder as he took it in.

"D.A.: I doubt they stopped fighting to go have tea. Keep your eyes open. Luna, can you help the injured get to St. Mungo's?" Harry called out, glad to see no casualties from the D.A. today.

Cormac crossed over from Viktor's side of the lane towards Harry. *More like strutting, really.* "Looks like we showed them who's boss, huh?"

A silver lynx patronus galloped up the street. The rich tones of the Minister spoke from it. "The goblins have tunneled their way into the Ministry and are destroying the lifts. Require assistance."

Another patronus, a pheasant, appeared as well. Percy's voice was weak and panicked. "Goblins in the Ministry! Main atrium!"
A third patronus, this time a boar, spoke up with Ernie's voice: "Ground broke in the Department of Mysteries, we think it's Goblins!"

A fourth patronus, a small yet quick cat, pounced up and stood on Cormac's head. The markings around the eyes made sense as McGongall's voice became audible: "Goblins are trying to attack the old court rooms, Harry. Don't come! This is a blitzkr..."

Viktor was by Harry's side, but he didn't recall seeing the wizard run over. "Vat did the vitch mean?"

Draco bent to touch the ground with his fingertips, and his eyes lit up in understanding as he magnified his voice. "Stay in your homes! Luna, secure and protect the patients! D.A., stand back-to-back with a partner!"

Harry stood with Draco at his back, and conjured his Stag Patronus to go to the Ministry. He was going to have to ask Kingsley to impose curfew and possibly invoke martial law. He realized he couldn't send any help, because the Goblins were underground, and everywhere, and would attack anywhere, all at once.

No more kid gloves, you bloody Goblins.

Narcissa checked the pockets to her tactical robes. Where's that gadget? That stupid, noisy... Her fingers trailed over it and she pulled out the decoy detonator. Here goes nothing.

Winding up the toy, she holds it, primed, in her hand until she sees the cats split up. Mister Tibbles hooks a sharp left and makes a lot of noise through the branches as Crookshanks veers to the right and slows down, making his way quietly into the wooded area.

The sound of wand-fire as well as loud cracks in the air let Cissy know that a diversion was in play. What the devil is that loud sound? More people apparating in? She tossed the decoy detonator towards the aurors and tightly gripped the P-90 in her hands as she realized that the Agents were using muggle firearms as well. It was louder and faster than her own, telling her that they were using conventional ammunition. The shooting stopped, and the former Malfoy had to strain in order to hear the conversation after that.

"Frank! Save your bullets, that's just a cat!" a voice called out, perturbed.

"She could have taken that form! Besides, it's just a cat." was the reply. So Frank is the kind to shoot innocent animals, huh? She filed that away in case she ever met the guy in person.

"Just cast Hominem Revelio first." Oh, no. No, no, no... Narcissa knew that if she could hear them, then she would be within range of the spell. She started to walk in the direction that Crookshanks had taken as quickly and as silently as possible.

She didn't hear Frank cast the spell, but that didn't mean anything if he could cast it silently. Maybe the tactical robe's shielding can deflect the spell?

That's when Narcissa heard chaos erupt. Horns, yelling, screaming, spell-fire, and the unmistakable sound of fireworks. The Weasley twins sure pulled out all the stops for such a small decoy...

The Agents started to target and destroy the decoys with their spells, only to realize that they would either multiply in number or grow larger and increase their volume. The spells died down only to have them replaced with the muggle weaponry. The Slytherin hoped that Mr. Tibbles would be okay
as she made her way through to a clearing of the forest and a small row of houses off of a single road. The orange cat was stalking something from upon a roof, hunched and ready to jump out... at what? Her blood ran cold at the sight of an owl, clutching a red howler along with an erumpent horn.

Narcissa didn't even flinch as she put the P-90 to her shoulder, looked down the sight, and began to shoot the bird down. It only took four shots before the potion covered the bird and it fell like a rock toward the ground. Aw fuck me...

"CROOKSHANKS! GET INSIDE!" Narcissa yelled as the front door opened to a confused-looking man as the erumpent horn crashed toward the ground. Cushioning charm! Her wand was out before she even thought of it, firing off the spell before the Prohibition took effect and bound her wrist to her shoulder, effectively rendering her unable to do magic. Her arm felt over-torqued, as if a bit more pressure would have broken her arm. But there wasn't much time so she focused on the scene around her.

"Monica! Phone the police! There's a mad woman with a... what is that?" The man said.

"Wendel? Oh, Crookshanks! He killed another owl, didn't he? What do you mean there's a mad woman?" Monica replied, eyes darting to follow the cat.

Narcissa turned to look at the horn; it fell and landed safely in a thick patch of grass. The envelope, however, started to smoke.

"I'm here to help you two! You're under attack! Please, let me in." The blond asked, using the state of her twisted arm to garner sympathy. "That's a very unstable... it's a bong, about to go off and it could level your house, we need to leave, preferably out the back."

"Bong...?"

"Explosive!" She turned to see it turning bright red, and barged through the door, closing it behind her as Crookshanks was frantically scratching at the back door. Monica had opened the door for him automatically, and Narcissa had to shove them both through as the explosion hit. It was loud, but the house muffled most of the force and sound in their direction. The heat, however, swept through them all as the front half of the house was leveled.

"Wendel? What was that? Who is this woman with a... is that a firearm?"

"Yes, it's one of your muggle weapons! But I only have sleep potions in it instead of lethal ammunition! Look, I'm here to help you!" Cissy said, looking out into the forest. "Crookshanks, can you get Hermione?" The cat darted off into the woods as Narcissa pulled out a modified taser from her backpack. This had better work.

"Wendel, she said 'Muggle'. How does she know that word? Who is Hermione?"

"I don't know, but... I think we can trust her."

Narcissa handed the man her taser. "I don't have enough time to explain, but let me brief you: There was a war in the magical world, and you two had a daughter that tried to hide you away. She hid you so effectively, you can't even remember her if you tried. Thing is, the war is over, but she hid you in the worst place possible." Gunfire echoed in the distance, and she winced. "She came to rescue you, ill-prepared. I'm here to rescue her... rescue attempt. Mister Wilkins, correct? I need my arm back; please use that device on my pinned wrist. The current should be enough to break the body-bind curse on me." Narcissa winced in preparation for the electrical pain that would follow, but saw the man's reluctance.
"Miss, I can't just assault you with this device! That's barbaric!"

"It's the only thing my ex-husband developed that could overcome the AMA's Prohibition Curse!" She said, anger infusing her words. Monica took the taser from her husband, and held the device over the woman's wrist.

"I'll do this for you if you answer my question, lady. What is a Voldemort?"

I was in pain from both arms being immobilized, but at least I was disillusioned. *I could run, I could hide, maybe Crookshanks would still be able to smell me...* It seemed pretty bleak to put my hopes on a cat I haven't seen for over a year, but that's what I was down to. There was a series of blasts of wand fire and gunshots in one direction, and a massive explosion went up in the opposite. It oddly reminded of the attack at Xenophilius Lovegood's house. I shook that thought out of my head, and kept my eyes peeled for my familiar. Even though it had been over a year, I recalled that he seemed okay with the plan to protect my parents as I shipped them here.

*Do cats forget their owners? What about familiars?*

A large yet fast cat ran out into the clearing before me, drawing the wand fire from the Agents as he ran up the tree, avoiding being hit as loud gunshots cracked through the air. I was furious at the thought that they were using muggle bullets on a cat out here, but knew I couldn't do anything about it unless I wanted to get shot for my trouble.

"Mew." I looked around, as that particular sound was ingrained to me. *Crookshanks!*

My orange tabby, perhaps a bit less rotund than I had left him, reared up on his hind legs and head-butted my legs. It was his lazy yet friendly way of scent-marking me. As I reached down to stroke him, he darted off, indicating to me that there was no time for a lengthy hello.

Running behind him, I stayed on my toes in order to stay as quiet as possible. The gunshots were not as loud now, and I could only assume that they hadn't spotted me.

"Crookshanks!" I whispered a loudly as I dared, and the motion of a flicked, orange tail alerted me which direction he was in. *Okay, going the right way, I suppose.*

As I kept going, I slowed down at the sound of voices talking. They sounded familiar, and my heart leapt as I recognized my father's voice.

"That explains why we got Crookshanks; he's seemed way too intelligent and kept chasing off owls if not outright killing them. I just can't believe anyone would go that far!" His tone was concerned, but it was comforting all the same... until I realized owls were still coming after him.

"Owls would still know you and come to you with your other name. But then the howler envelope with erumpet horn came to her, stating your current names... that's bothering me." The voice... *Narcissa?* My heart thumped in shock as I ran the remaining yards and got around a copse of trees to see my wife and father both in wizard robes. It was surreal, until I realized he was probably wearing Lucius' tactical robes for protection.

"Wendel! It's... you must be Hermione." *Oh Merlin, my mother's alive!* I then realized she didn't recognize me. My eyes went to my wife, who had both arms free and holding a wand, and confusion came over me. The house nearby was on fire... if the first erumpet horn howler didn't kill me, the second one would... Bellatrix was supposedly mad, but this plan of hers had at least three different ways to kill me within hours, and if it hadn't been for my wife and familiar, my parents still would have died. *She's definitely more dangerous, being this lucid...*
"Narcissa, I-" I wasn't sure what I could say or ask. *Do they have their memories? Do they know we're married? How did she get here so soon?*

"Oh, 'Mione, I came running to the rescue like a bloody Gryffindor! In the future-" Her words were rushed together and pointed by the adrenaline.

"Yes, make a plan! Usually I'm the one saying that when Harry runs off half cocked, playing it by ear. Can you free my arms? At least one of them?" I gestured to my hands with my eyes, hoping that she knew a spell that wouldn't bind her as well.

She nodded immediately, pulled out a taser and approaching me with a regretful look. "Yeah, I can free both. Then we need to get back to Mrs. Figg's home, she has an illicit Floo connection we can use." I had seen videos of those devices neutralize and drop large men before, and read up that it could stop your heart if one wasn't careful.

"What are you going to do with that?" I asked, eyes wide in terror.

"Muggle electricity doesn't work around us because magic works in a similar fashion to the EMP stuff. At least, that's what Lucius' research Galleons found out. This was designed to be a bit stronger than its muggle counterpart, just this side of lethal. It freed my arm, and in theory should do the same along with the trace you were hit with when you Apparated in." I shuddered a breath in understanding.

"This is going to hurt, isn't it?" I asked, knowing the answer. "I'm sorry I ran off without you, I didn't know..."

"Shh. It's okay my..." Narcissa bit her tongue, her eyes darting over towards my parents. "Just hold still, and I'll get them done."

It was static, sharp and painful, but different from the Cruciatus Curse. This hit all of the nerves, not just bone-deep, but everywhere. All of my nerves were alight in pain, and every muscle seized in every direction. It felt like it was going on forever, but a part of my mind told me it was less than a second before I slapped the device away from me.

"Merlin, stop!" I looked down at my now-free arms. *Holy crap, it worked! I'm free!" My arms wrapped around her in gratitude and my lips found hers by pure instinct.

"Excuse me? We need to get going, right?" My mother said. She looked ridiculous in a tee shirt, denims, and trainers from her usual business or dental attire, but I had set them up as retirees.

"I don't know what kind of agreement we may have made before, but I demand my true memories back." The look on my father's face was scary, and it hit me that their personalities would have changed as well from never having raised a child together.

"First we have to get out of here; any attempt at doing magic gets us banded and those Agents will chase us down." Narcissa said, matter-of-fact. I nodded, glad to have use of both my arms. "Oh, 'Mione, here you go." She pulled out my own tactical robes, and I was grateful for them and the protection they afforded.

"Okay, um, Monica... this is just a shield cloak. It's not as durable as the robes the rest of us have, but it should repel basic magic." *It won't stop a bullet like these would.* She nodded her thanks as I saw the exchange between my father and wife. "You should stay behind your husband, at any rate."
"Can you use a firearm?"

"We're retired dentists!" Sighing, Narcissa gave him the pistol and showed him how to fire it and change the magazine. I overheard that they were small pellets of sleeping potion rather than bullets, which relieved me greatly. **Assault instead of murder in this backwards country. I wonder what the punishment for that is...**

"Alright everyone, let's get out of here so I can sort you two out." I said, adjusting the fit of the robes on me. "Crookshanks, lead us to Mrs. Figg's. And don't run off too fast."

"Hermione, check your pockets for another decoy detonator. Sounds like they finally finished off the last one I dropped." Narcissa said, and I went ahead and primed and threw the next one to go off and cause chaos. My familiar made a kind of sharp meow, and I had the feeling it was a signal to the other cat I had seen in the forest.

"So, if you're my daughter, who is this blonde woman? Why is she risking life and limb for us?" My father...no, Wendell... asked. I could tell by the tone he was figuring it out, but was going to drag it out of me.

"It's, um, complicated." I said, not sure I wanted to try to explain how I won her in a duel and the Compulsion attached to it. Narcissa's eyes met mine and I couldn't mistake the look of pain in them.

"Hermione!" My mother's voice was reproachful. "She's risking her life for the three of us, our cat seems to know and like her, and all you can say is that it is complicated? I'd like to think if I had a daughter, she'd be honest about the woman I just saw her snogging. Who, despite her fabulous-looking hair, could by my age."

**Bugger. She would notice that.**

"What was that, Mon?" My father apparently missed that.

"Lines, just around the creases of the eyes. It's something a woman could notice." She replied.

"Oh my god, can we not do this right now!" I said pleadingly. **How is it that they can still act like my parents without the memories of being them?** "I swear, this is the row over visiting Viktor for the summer all over again!"

Narcissa chortled at that, and I flashed a frown at her.

"I'm certain I had ample reason to not let you trollop around as some boy's summer fling!" Wendell's voice held a note of threat to it.

"When they first met, she was fourteen and he was seventeen. I just think she likes them older." Narcissa's dig at me stung. **How could you say that to them now?!**

"WHAT?" My mother yelled, her raised voice making me cringe. **Damn, you, Cissy...**

The sounds of gun and spellfire ceased, and a loud voice boomed over the woods.

"Attention, impostor! You have been reported to the AMA and will be executed on sight! We will do all in our power to protect Hermione Granger's muggle parents, but your own life is forfeit!"
Narcissa gulped at this. They believed her wife to be an impostor. They think she's Bellatrix. They won't stop until they can take a body back with them. Her wife was still annoyed at her for the comment about Viktor's age, but was trying to focus on the situation at hand.

"We ought to tell them it's a big misunderstanding!" Monica said nervously.

"I don't think they are going to listen. Hey, I've got one of those decoys here." Wendell said, pulling out a small jar and opening it. As Narcissa's eyes fell on the familiar-looking jar, it was Hermione that figured it out one second too late.

"Father, no! That's Peruvian-"

The light was extinguished all around us. The absence of light would be seen by the Agents who were outside of the affected area and it would be a beacon for them to come right towards us.


"Oh God! I'm blind!" Monica said, flustered. Narcissa reached out with her hand and took the woman's hand and made her hold onto the P90 strap.

"You're not blind, all light has been removed from here." Cissy replied, attempting to pull them through the darkness towards their goal. "We keep walking the direction Crookshanks was taking us, and we'll be fine."

"How can powder blot out the sun?" Wendell asked. Hermione, of course, already had an answer.

"Its micro-crystalline structure keeps it floating like smoke and it absorbs all wavelengths of light rather than diffracting them into rainbows. Here, take my hand and we'll walk out of this 'cloud'. Cissy, get my mum." Narcissa smiled at her wife's explanation. I definitely love her intelligence.

"Why would someone need this?" He asked, genuinely surprised at it.

Narcissa winced and sighed. "That robe used to belong to Lucius. He was probably using it to sneak around at night. Or worse."

Hermione's mother spoke up from behind. "Who?"

"My deceased husband."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I'm not. Hermione did the world a favor by killing him." She must have let go in shock as I felt her scramble and hold onto me as we kept heading due west.

"Is... that why you two are so close?" Her question was one Cissy didn't want to answer, and therefore tried her best to avoid it.

"She acted in self-defense."

Hermione spoke up. "I'll explain it when we get back home."

In the distance, they heard the Agents tell each other to split up in the darkness and try to find and detain them all.

"They are going to find us at this rate." Wendell said.
"They will have to grope around in the darkness as well." As Narcissa said that, an idea came to her head and quickly unfolded. *I wish I could calculate the arithmantic probability, but there's no time!* The Slytherin's hands found him and helped Monica to latch onto him instead as Hermione lead the three of them out of the darkness.

"I think I might be able to stop them. You three go ahead, I can use this darkness to my advantage." Cissy responded, hands groping blindly into the battle box for the waxy relic.

"Oh god, don't tell me you have that on you..." Hermione replied, disgustedly.

"The Hand of Glory will work here, and I'll knock out the agents so we can get out. Now stay quiet so they can't find you." She found the waxy hand and lit it with a match, grimacing as the magic activated and the Prohibition forced the hand to be bound to her shoulder. *Ha! Good going Authority, now I have a hands-free lantern! Time to hunt you wankers.*

Severus and Fleur were figuratively tied up in red tape at the Romanian Ministry of Magic. As much as they were being told that they would cooperate in helping with the manhunt for the fugitive Death Eaters, they were still being kept under close supervision as details of the latest bloodshed came forth from Taiwan and India. Severus kept his eternal scowl sharp while Fleur frowned as she realized that men would no longer be tripping over themselves to be helpful for her sake, or just be kind and flirty in hopes to gain her favor. Instead, her beaky face inspired unadulterated fear and horror. She hoped that someday someone would look at her without disgust, fear, or pity. She reminded herself to stick to the job, and to seek vengeance for Bill, Hermione, and Narcissa. She was only Fury now.

That they were in Romania had been based off of a hunch by Severus; two high-profile mass murders being done at almost the same time by someone with Bellatrix' likeness, that the less-noticed sighting of Hermione Granger would be their actually quarry. The wizard in charge of fugitive retrieval seemed to hedge his words. *Dare I look into his eyes and attempt to glimpse into his mind?*

The man, a mumbling and distracted individual who never missed a moment to slouch in his life, met the Potion Master's eyes and looked at him in question.*He's... confused. Scared.* Severus could easily understand why, considering. As his eyes swept over to Fleurs', he was flooded with her jumbled thoughts and emotions that were constantly stewing at the surface.

*Hermione and Narcissa are dead, just like Bill. Everyone dear to me is gone. Circe, I can't ever sleep. I watch Bill die every time I close my eyes. How does Severus survive losing Lily? Did he ever find love again? Is that why he survived? Only working with this Death Eater double-agent do I keep the darkness at bay. I once was beautiful, adored; now I'm scared that I actually enjoy the fear and shock I derive from others.*

Severus pulled his eyes away from her, grateful to end the accidental mental connection. A scroll floated into the room to the ministry official; an eager glint was in his eyes. *Whatever it is, that can't be good.*

"Reports are coming in that your fugitive has been spotted in Australia. Your presence is no longer needed here."

"Bellatrix Lestrange wouldn't have gone there." Severus replied icily.

"Get out of my country, you freaks of nature. If you or the vulture here return, you'll be treated like the varmints you are."
Fleur's hands lit afire in her rage, and it was only Severus' hand giving moderate pressure to the back of her neck that stopped her from doing anything foolish. Turning his lips to her ear, he whispered so that only she could hear his words. "Fleur, we need to leave now. Hermione's undoubtedly still alive and just walked into a trap."

Her cerulean blue eyes widened in shock at that. "That means..." Severus nodded. Narcissa is still alive too.

"We need to go help her!" Fleur exclaimed.

"The AMA would consider it an act of war by our Ministry. We need to get permission to get past their wards and Prohibition." Severus' calm tone didn't have the desired effect on her. She's a spitfire, just like Lily and Nymphadora were. The correlation touched his heart and threatened the stirring of feelings. Instead, Severus shut down his emotions and let the cold, isolated, and quiet side of his mind take over. It was his mental refuge when he was tortured or had to slaughter people in order to achieve his goals, whether they be Death Eaters or innocents marked at a Dark Revel.

"Which they won't give, Sev! You know exactly how xenophobic they've become!"

"I know, Fleur. I need to think of something..."

"There's no time! Don't you care about them?!" Severus' features went eerily still. Even his words were devoid of any inflection. Fleur felt a shudder of revulsion at it.

"Of course I care. But first we have to be able to get there without setting off any detection spells. I believe we can apparate to-" A swift slap silenced him as the hand that struck him left a burn mark. His eyes were utterly empty, and she could swear they were dead. Her own eyes watered as the sorrow and loss came all over again, knowing that her friends weren't dead after all but would be soon.

"No wonder Lily never loved you! You're a soulless bastard!" Tears fell from her eyes.

"Go run off to your own demise for all I care, Misses Weasley." His use of her husband's family name had the desired effect. It was a rapier, lunged directly into her heart.

"You mentioned there was someone after Lily that made you give a damn again. She must have been a Dementor."

Severus took a step towards Fleur, his eyes now radiating with black fire. Fleur could see he wasn't void of emotion, but rather the opposite. He just had an iron will to suppress them silent.

"You could at least pretend to feel remorse, Severus."

His eyelids narrowed as his lips pressed together. Fleur's hands extinguished as an arctic chill came from him. This was him at the brink; an explosion of emotions frozen in time and behind a blast wall.

"Do NOT tell me how I. Should. Feel."

When I cleared the cloud of darkness, I looked down to see an expectant Crookshanks staring up at me. She didn't even have to meow for me to understand her "took you long enough" look. Turning tail to me, she lead us to the back gate of a nearby home.

"Isn't this Arabella's home?" My father asked. I opened the gate as Crookshanks jumped the fence in a single bound.
"Showoff." I muttered as the back door opened to reveal a harried Mrs. Figg shuffle out with an overpacked bag in her arms.

"Mister Tibbles! Change in plan!" She called out, earning a yowl from Crookshanks and a collective 'Hush!' from my parents. I put my finger over my lips as panic took over.

"Mrs. Figg! Agents are in the dark cloud!" I whispered hoarsely.

"They disconnected my floo!" She whispered back. *We're stuck here? No, there has to be another way out...*

"They are over here!" An agent called out, followed by a quiet click and a thud.

"Peters? Respond!" Another click and thud.

"Control! Two agents down, request backup! I repeat." This time there were four clicks, and a similar thud.

It was perfect darkness in there; Narcissa's Hand of Glory made it nothing more than target practice for her. The final agent, however, wasn't going down without a fight. A loud cracking sound boomed through the air, something that I could only assume was a shotgun being fired in the darkness.

*I can't leave Narcissa to that!* I thought in a panic, reaching for the pistol in my father's hands. More loud clicks pierced the air, which I now interpreted as her weapon. Another shotgun blast, and a ratchet-like sound that I guessed was the agent reloading. I felt woefully under-educated in this kind of Muggle studies.

"What are you doing?" He asked, keeping the firearm pointed oddly into the inky darkness. The clicking was faster now, Cissy must have had it on a three-round burst. *She's going to get shot!*

"I have to help her!" I exclaimed, wondering if I should stun him. The sounds of gunfire started to overlap, and I was wondering how much longer she could remain this lucky.

"No you don't! You won't be able to see her; besides, she came to help you!" My mother's logic was sound, but to hell with that.

"I'm not leaving my wife behind!" I exclaimed, wrenching the pistol from my father's hands and turned to face the Darkness. *Oh fuck me I just said that aloud...*

"There's only one left; Crookshanks, watch them and figure a way back home." The sounds of the weapons were drowned out by loud thud, and my heart stopped as I wondered who fell.

"Control! Suspect down. Area unable to secure, request assitance." *Shit, shit, shit!*

"Copy that. What's the condition of the other agents?" That was too easy to hear. Thinking fast, I dropped to the ground, face up, and pointed my pistol upward into the darkness. He'll stumble into me and I'll shoot him. I can do this.

"Unknown. Zero visibility. Control, suspect was able to counter the Prohibition."

"Impossible. Your suspect's arms were bound by the Prohibition." *Ha! They aren't now!*

"Control, double-check the log." I could hear gravel being stepped on nearby. *I have one shot at this. I can do it.*
"Confirmed, it happened... wait. It happened four times. Sending backup! Agent, you have multiple suspects! How the hell did a second person get through?!

The blast of a shotgun went off again, and the loud blast hurt my ears. Hot powder seemed to fill the air with an acrid scent and I realized that I'd have been shot point-blank if I had been standing. Facing towards the blast, I point the pistol a few degrees lower than I think I need to and pull the trigger. There's almost no recoil to this pistol as it clacks and drops the Agent before me.

"Narcissa! I got him! But more are coming! Are you okay?" I called out in the darkness, finally able to panic about saving her.

"Ugfff... 'Mione. I got hit." Her voice was strained as a hand grasped me in the darkness. "Knocked the wind out of me, but the interwoven shield charm held up. I'm fine." A short gasp of breath later, and I was wrapped around her.

"You're okay!" I said, thanking whatever deity I could think of.

"Yeah. Just sore as hell from that... let's get home." She lead us back to the house where my parents were.

"What took you so long?" I asked, glad to have her here.

"I took the time to strip the bodies. Thought it could come in handy. And, you know, trophy." You brilliant witch.

"Goodness! Are you alright?" My mother asked as she took in the sight of me helping Narcissa limp along.

"I'm fine, can you three grab hold onto my robes?" Cissy asked as Crookshanks and Mr. Tibbs both whined and were picked up by the parents. The button-activated portkey!

"Okay everyone, hold on tight." I said, grabbing a firm hold and ripping off the spare button from her robes, relieved at the jerking sensation behind my navel.

Once we were all assured we made it back to the Manor safely, Narcissa tossed the button into the fireplace.

"Herpy, please bring us drinks!" She called out, unfastening her tactical robes until she froze in panic. I took my own robe off and took the robe and cloak from my father and mother, respectively.

"I'll go put your robe away, too." I offered, my arm out for her garment. She shook her head, eyes wide in panic.

"No she won't! My house got blown up, my wife and I were shot at, and we were promised a full explanation when we got here! Mon and I have had horrible nightmares about a Voldemort, Muggles, and we both were convinced that something was missing from our lives! I demand answers, Hermione!" They must have been breaking the Taboo left and right. No wonder Bellatrix knew they were in Australia.

"Dad, I-" I didn't know what to say to that. I did it to protect you!

"I don't know about that. All I know is that Monica and I were very partial to Greek mythology and apparently witches exist and there was a war. Tell me... am I really married to this woman? Or was that another lie that's in my head? I know Wendell isn't my real name."
I glanced over at Narcissa, who was frantically re-fastening her robes. *Don't you fucking dare run off and leave me here, Cissy! "Narcissa, don't you dare leave right now!"* I said threateningly.

"Um, 'Mione, all I have are my knickers beneath this!" She whispered hoarsely, "I stripped myself out of the torn gown before I went to rescue you! I'm going to go change." The last part was said through clenched teeth. *She's not wearing a brassiere beneath that, is she?* I shook that off, though my fingers were itching to just undo those few clasps...

Herpy returned with a bottle and wine glasses. I directed my parents to each have a glass; the process of memory modification and retrieval would require a calm mind. Narcissa returned in a set of grey robes, something vaguely victorian-meets-elizabethan judging by the shape. It clashed with her modern hair style; we'd have to go shopping for something more contemporary.

"Do you need help with the charm?" She asked, pouring herself a glass as she sat down in the sitting room. Herpy brought two platters of duck confit for the cats and I just shook my head at that. *Well, they certainly did earn it.*

I took a long breath and exhaled, pulled out my wand and pointed it at each of their minds, and focused on the ancient word. *"Ephphatha."* It didn't take too long as their eyes went from clouded and curious to knowingly furious.

"Narcissa, meet my parents... William and Jean Granger. Father, mother: meet Narcissa Granger. My wife."

*Well Granger, you saved them. They were safe, they were oblivious, and now you've got hell to pay.* Her mother was the first to speak up.

"Hermione, how... how could you do this to us?! Your own parents! You changed my memories, planted the idea for us to run off, and leave everything we loved behind!"

I took a breath and pulled my eyes away from her glare of utter disappointment. *"It was just to keep you safe."*

"You didn't even ask us, or inform us about what was going on with the Wizarding world! You... you violated what makes me... me!" My eyes went from my mother to my father, who looked just as stricken.

"I'm sorry! I just wanted to keep you safe!" I exclaimed, albeit weakly. It was Narcissa who would speak up next.

"Hermione, you didn't inform them? You never said you just... Salazar's snake, woman..." Narcissa's look of shock was possibly the worst part of it all. Jean Granger, however, wanted a row and found her target.

"And YOU! Hermione told me about your son; the kind of people you Malfoys were! Now my daughter's calling you her WIFE?!" Narcissa looked cowed, and I didn't know what to do about it.

"I couldn't go against Lucius' wishes. He knew how to wield the Compulsion against me." She went into detail explaining how I came to arrive at the Malfoy Manor, brushed over the part where I killed Lucius and was conscripted to breed with Narcissa under pain of death by Voldemort, and the subsequent battle where they took down the biggest evil the world had yet to know.

My father, William Granger, broke the resulting silence. *"Hermione... you're just my little girl, what made you have to become a warrior? You should have run away with us."*
Narcissa replied. "But what is so headstrong as youth? What so blind as inexperience?" [1]

My mum looked at her curiously. "Was that from Jane Eyre?"

I nodded yes to her. "Dad, I had to, after the Triwizard tournament. I knew I'd have to fight, and even then, the skirmish at the department of mysteries told me I needed more than just how to fling spells. I picked up and read every SWAT manual I could in order to incorporate the muggle tactics in order to survive. It wasn't just me, it was my friends, it was about the subjugation of all muggles."

My father's eyes softened in understanding.

"So, out of self-defense, you killed Narcissa's husband in a duel and inherited her like she were property? How does a society survive with such archaic rules in place?" My mother had a good point. Narcissa shrugged as if it were completely understandable.

"Most people don't get bonded in the Old Tradition anymore. But it was expected of a Black." My father shook his head sadly.

"Can't you get a divorce or annulment? I mean, her own sister who tortured you is still out there!"

I sighed, knowing that this would come up.

"The Minister said he could do an annulment, but that it only changes the legality on paper. The Compulsion will still be in effect." I shrugged my resignation.

"But that has to be better than doing nothing! Don't you want to be able to choose whom you will love, who you'll marry, and have children with? I never thought you were into women..." I know my mother means well by this.

"Mum, I've gotten to know her, and her family. Yes, at first when I was forced into this arrangement, I stayed because of The Dark Lord... um, You-Know-Who's threats." I pointed to the tattoo on my right wrist, which had surprisingly gone quiet lately. "I didn't want to see them punished for Lucius' mistakes. But now, I'm going to make the best out of this situation."

"So what now? I mean, he's gone now, so you've done your job. There's no need to stick around, right?" Why am I here? I could, maybe should, just leave...

I took one look at Narcissa's eyes and knew I was home. I smiled at her, and took her hand into mine. "Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude, have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy. And with regard to the resentment of his family, or the indignation of the world, if the former were excited by his marrying me, it would not give me one moment's concern—and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn." [2] Narcissa's face was blank and surprised, slowly letting a smile grace her lips. I'd have kissed her if not for the parents being right here.

"So what now? I mean, he's gone now, so you've done your job. There's no need to stick around, right?" Why am I here? I could, maybe should, just leave...

My father seemed to understand, or at least was resigned to my decision. "Hermione's my only child. Will you be able to provide and protect her and make her happy?"

Cissy's knowing smile told me she had this answer prepared already. "My lawyers scuttled and redirected all of the funds from my husband's multinational company and rebuilt it under mine and Hermione's name. I believe we can scrape by. As for making her happy... I love her. And I'll strive to my dying day to do so."

My mother, however, wasn't fully convinced. "But you only love her because of the magic."

"She's a brilliant and beautiful witch; one who stands by her convictions and will force the world to
change with her. There's no Compulsion in my logical reasoning why I'd love her the way I do. I've always been attracted to women; my marriage to Lucius was arranged." I was blushing at this. Narcissa picked up a stack of papers, muttered something about legal solici tors and Draco, and stalked out of the room.

My mother took that as some sort of cue and spoke up.

"Well, I need to find a new house it seems. Mrs. Figg, do you know any good realtors here?" My mother's abrupt change in subject was possibly the closest thing to acceptance that I could get right now, and was relieved.

Narcissa felt really out of place, standing in judgment by her wife's parents who were her own age. Her father seemed a bit more logical and accepting of her while Hermione's mother seemed more concerned about her emotional state.

*Good thing I didn't doff my robes then and there and make things more awkward.* Cissy thought, stripping off her robes and dressing herself in a modest gray Victorian dress. It used to be one of her favorite articles of clothing, but now it seemed almost too matronly with her hair.

As she buttoned up, a silvery Wolf approached her and spoke in Severus' voice.

"We just heard. Do you require assistance?"

*Bugger he's about to mount a rescue...* Steady ing herself, Cissy thought of the moment she first held her son and conjured a Patronus, and imbued it with the message for Severus.

'We are home, all is well.'

Satisfied that Severus won't be willingly heading into a trap, she headed back out to see her wife's parents. Herpy seemed glad they were back with Master's parents to look after, though slightly intimidated by the pair of kneazles. She had thoughtfully left a stack of post for her to sort through in her absence.

There were a stack of notices for her concerning Granger Enterprises, the latest *Quibbler* detailing the awards banquet gone wrong (reporting herself and her wife as missing), and a report from her solicitor requesting advisement about the latest *Prophet* article, which was clipped on as an attachment.

Narcissa saw the headline on the *Daily Prophet*. Hermione would be Rita's new target, it seems. That she's taking the greedy girl routine means she doesn't have much against her...

*Oh. She's using quotes of her classmates against her. You can always depend on Pansy to use coarse language. And Marietta has had quite the axe to grind with her, but Padma?*

Her hands clenched in a White-knuckled rage as a quote from for years ago stood out at the bottom of the page. Her own words, twisted to fit this narrative against her wife.

*I will see this mudblood rot in Azkaban if it's the last thing I do.*

She looked on at the paper, seeing red. That was in reference to her punching Draco, and in retrospect, the little bugger needed it!

"If Draco hasn't sent lawyers upon her yet, I will." She knew it wouldn't get anywhere, though. "Oh, bugger that..." Narcissus muttered, grabbing her cloak, spare wand, and pistol with the spare clip of
sleeping Potions.

Narcissa was running on adrenaline and anger as she apparated to the witch's flat, silencing her approach to the front door.

Taking down Rita's wards was laughably simple, seeing as she had been the one who taught them to her. Sometimes it's like she only knows two spells total.

She went through the small place, aware of the noises she heard coming from the far end of the domicile.

The moaning was familiar to her, the sound working like a dagger to her heart. She had sincerely enjoyed her time with Rita, since she was the only other woman she knew who exclusively preferred the company of other witches. Pity she's a social piranha, looking for her next bite.

Narcissa almost felt awkward for interrupting the obvious lovemaking, but remembering the article, she pushed herself on. The scent of sex was strong, but there was a note of something else in the air. It was a sweet musk, and judging by the state of the room, along with the empty wine glasses, told her all she needed.

These potions ought to be illegal. She thought as the nude girl was kneeling between Rita's legs at the edge of the bed, her face and tongue immersed in the reporter's sex. The dark hair was thin and straight, she seemed familiar. And young. Draco young. Rita was laying on her back with legs hanging off of the bed, eyes closed and back arched in ecstasy.

Cissy couldn't find this arousing at all. It was just more betrayal, to see her former lover exploiting lust potion on an unsuspecting witch. You liked her for her satin-gloved brutality, never for her empathy nor integrity.

Using her muggle pistol, she shot the girl in her bum and put her to sleep. Rita sat up, confused at what happened until she saw Narcissa.

"Cissy, I might have known you'd come back. Mind continuing where she left off? She has no skill whatsoever down there, but she's kinda cute. Was hoping for stupid yet trainable."

"The world thinks I'm dead, Rita. I could leave this country with your entails splattered across the walls spelling out 'Narcissa did this' and nobody would suspect me. Give me a good reason why I shouldn't."

Rita reached for her wand that was resting on a nearby table, making Cissy shoot the pistol as a warning shot. Instead of making her hand flinch, the paintball hit the wand itself and knocked it away, clattering to the floor. Okay, that was cool. Act like that's what you meant to do all along.

"You wouldn't."

"I shot the witch lover so we could have a private talk. Tell me, why did you write that article?"

"You can't tell me you killed her."

"I didn't. I'm not cold blooded." Narcissa lowered the pistol, but raised her wand between the reporter's eyes. "She has never wronged me." The reporter's eyes dilated ever so slightly, the tell-tale that she had panicked beneath her calm facade.

"Since when have you been noble? You taught me all about getting what you want, no matter how many people have to get burned along the way."
She flinched at that. *Damn, that was a pretty spot-on assessment of our history together. "I'm no longer that woman."

"Aren't you? You were looking at a long stay at Azkaban alongside your husband, but now he's dead and you're all shacked up with the barely legal tart. It's as disgusting as it is convenient for you."

"How dare you, you bloody hypocrite! Who's the girl you have here? " Cissy levitated the body, shocked to see that it was Pansy. *Odette's daughter!?*

"Seems perversion runs in the family. Never could get Odette myself, seeing as you burned that bridge for both of us. I would have loved to taste that witch." Narcissa skin crawled at the insinuation.

"You thought this would hurt me?"

"Everyone thinks you're dead. No, this dear girl was interested in journalism. Doesn't have enough common sense to sniff out a lust potion though."

"You're taking advantage of girls for blackmail? You used to be better than this, back when you actually reported the news."

"And now I make the news. Got an Order of Merlin for my trouble to boot."

"Yeah, well enjoy that, and the Galleons that came with it. Leave my wife and I be."

"You're really going to keep up with that charade? Take advantage of being handed over like a prize to her? I doubt little miss goodie two shoes knows how you like to be used, fucked, and abused. She doesn't know the kind of depraved woman you truly are. I do."

"I've changed. I can be better than I was before, live openly as a lesbian."

"But I love who you are now, Cissy! You don't have to change a thing. Together we can take anyone we want down. Rather than take your cues from Lucius, you and I together can."

"Can what? Abandon Hermione and throw the Wizarding World into a new nightmare of backstabbing and favor currying? I know what she did to you, but what makes you think that I'm willing to take up with you after all this?"

"You made me this way. Taught me how to find the weakness and exploit it for pleasure and gain. You can't honestly tell me her lack of experience with women is a turn-on for you?" Her face puckered as her voice took a falsely consoling tone. "She doesn't even love you, I bet. Just sees you as a pity case, a pretty pet project for her sympathy."

Rita stood, using her nudity to her own advantage in order to approach and kiss the other woman. "I, however, know you at your worst and not only do I accept it, I Revel in it. " The nude woman's fingers threaded through Cissy's hair, and gave a sharp tug back. Narcissa gasped at the sudden pain, eyes rolling back in desire. The kiss was perfect in technique, and it would have made Narcissa melt if she hadn't experienced Hermione's lips. Rita was the embodiment of who Cissy used to be, seducing people's secrets away in order to destroy families. She was the Slytherin's finest, and only, pupil. Narcissa knew she'd have to lie her way of of this.

"Rita, you were an assignment by Lucius. That's all. And that's over. " Rita's eyes looked at her in disbelief.

"I'm sorry. " With a jab of her wand, Pansy was re-clothed and levitated, made for easy carrying as
Mrs. Granger left her scorned lover's abode. "Don't come at me through others again." As if an afterthought, the woman pulled the trigger and downed the reporter.

Harry was surprised at the lull in the fighting, and used the opportunity to clean up Diagon Alley. There were minimal casualties, but the Wizarding World was under siege, and wouldn't last forever. Kingsley handed him a piece of parchment. "Harry, the Unspeakables left this note for you."

"What?" Unspeakables? Leaving notes?

'It is Time."

"Harry Potter, come down to the Department of Mysteries, you may bring one person you trust implicitly." Harry turned his head rapidly, looking for the source of the voice. Nobody else seemed to flinch from hearing it.

"Did anyone else hear that?" Everyone else shook their head no.

Harry turned to Draco "Did you hear anything? At all? " The blonde shook his head.

You may bring one person whom you trust.

"What do you think they meant, 'It is Time'?" Draco looked over the note and couldn't find anything of note there.

"Let's go find out."

"Huh?"

"Trust me." Harry said. Draco's face opened in surprise. Merlin, he's so bloody attractive when he's not trying to hide his emotions.

"I do, Harry. I do." Draco was shocked that those words came it off his mouth.

Harry took Draco into his arms and apparated them into the Ministry of Magic.

As they landed, Harry noticed that Draco was leaning into him. His green eyes got lost in the blue as he leaned in to close the distance. Draco's hand covered his friends' face to stop the impending kiss.

"Harry, we shouldn't."

"Um, sorry." Harry apologized, then thought twice about it. "Well... Ginny said we could."

"It didn't mean that we should." A hint of regret was in the blonde's voice.

"But you want to."

"Slytherin's Snake, yes." Draco winced at the admission.

"Why do you say that?"

"You folk say Merlin's Pants, we say Slytherin's Snake. I think it's sexier."

Harry shrugged in agreement as his mind flashed a warning sign. Cool it, Ginny probably only said it as a joke.

The pair of them entered the Department of Mysteries, and a non-descript wizard in a dark suit
motioned them to follow him. The man had no distinguishing features that the Gryffindor could tell.

"Draco, what's that guy look like to you? Hair color, eye color, anything?"

"Like nothing. Plain. That's a concealing glamour. Makes them hide in plain sight."

The two of them followed him into a equally small, plain office filled with blurry notes pinned across the wall. Nothing stood out, nothing was legible.

There were two seats in front of the blank-looking desk that they took to as the blank-looking man sat on the other side.

"Mr. Potter, we're not in the business of divulging information, but these are perilous times. First I want to thank you for your part of getting the world rid of You-Know-Who."

"What do you do here? Where were you lot during the war?" Harry spat, righteous anger in his voice.

The man raised an eyebrow to Draco. "Now you see why we don't speak up much. We can't fix everything and be everywhere. Mister Granger, you must have a more logical question in your Slytherin mind."

"The Unspeakables either research new magical theory or suppress existing magic. Seeing as the glaring evidence of the Deathly Hallows' existence is still not on everyone's minds, I'm leaning towards the second. Someone in your department leaked specific magic to The Dark Lord, didn't they?"

"What makes you say that?"

"The Taboo. Harry modified it, but it didn't seem to exist two years ago. I mean, saying someone's name as a way to break all protective spells and put a beacon on you? Magic that can undo other magic, across a entire country? That's too powerful to let the public know it exists."

The man frowned at that. "The Unspeakables do not answer to the Minister for that very reason. Our job is to keep secrets secret. Hence, unspeakable. Or, in certain cases, we allow certain things to live on as myth, hidden but for those who can figure it out.

"Our department failed to recognize Riddle as a threat, and he learned about horcruxes and used it to kill his way to near immortality. We have recently had to break our rule of non-intervention, hoping that you would succeed at fulfilling the prophecy we had thought pointed to Neville Longbottom."

"He never seemed powerful enough." Draco remarked.

"His gran purposefully stunted his magic to protect him. He was using his father's wand for years rather than get his own." The agent replied, "The point is, there are forces loyal to the old regime embedded within both our ranks, sworn to destroy us."

"You mean the Unmarked." Draco responded automatically. "Always knew there was something there."

The man looked puzzled, and Harry thought it was a bad sign when an Unspeakable was left confused.

"Excuse me sir, but is it possible to put a type of tongue-tying hex on someone's mind? Just enough to make everything a bit of a... blur." Harry began to ask, realizing that one was in effect on them so
they couldn't read the notes on the wall.

Draco caught on. "Are there any notes on your wall that you can't read now? Something that you should be able to?"

The fog in the man's eyes lifted gradually. "Yes, such a spell does exist and I have it keyed to the department so visitors like yourself won't see anything."

"What about Proudfoot? What do you think of him?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Brilliant Auror, bit trigger-happy with certain spells, but his recent absence is suspicious." The man said, nearly conversationally.

Draco leaned forward and scrutinized him. "Think he's one of the Unmarked?"

The same look of confusion came over him, and he apologized as he came back. "Sorry, my mind must have wandered. Yeah, I'm worried about Proudfoot."

Harry asked to borrow the man's quill and parchment, and the man easily complied. He wrote out a short sentence, which went blurry as soon as it was finished.

"Well now, that's odd. Why did this note become blurry to me? This is my department."

"Because the Unmarked have infiltrated the Unspeakables. And made themselves even harder to trace."

Chapter End Notes

[1] - Jane Eyre, Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

[2] - Elizabeth Bennet, Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
Chapter Summary

This chapter is pure lemons. Read at your own risk.

Chapter Notes

Remember, this is taking place in the summer of 1997, and the songs used in the story will be contemporaneous.

Once tempers were settled and housing arrangements were made (my parents would stay in the east wing until they found a new home; they didn't seem to enjoy Australia after all) I set about making Granger Manor more habitable and wanted to do some redecorating.

Dinner was an interesting experience, as my parents knew of my SPEW exploits and witnessed a house elf first hand. It was only surpassed by Draco's arrival and his subsequent fright at seeing us alive after all. Narcissa had advised we keep up the charade of our untimely deaths in order to weed out whatever sleeper agents were created by Proudfoot. So I was disguised with blonde hair and a darker complexion, which only served to make me look like I could be Draco's older sister back from holiday. *I think she's was being overly paranoid, but went with it for now.*

The Goblin's Rebellion was still in full swing, keeping the Wizarding World effectively shut down, so I headed down to Soho Square in order to find something to my liking. After a few awkward questions and convincing a cabbie that I could handle myself, I was dropped off at 17A St Alban's Place.

"You sure you want to get out here? I'll wait if you want..." The taxi driver apparently didn't like the area, and I could understand why. It was a tiny alley; it didn't have the same flair nor the well-traveled feeling that Carlisle Street had. I told him I would be fine, gulped down my panic, and went into the shop whose threadbare sign simply stated "REGULATION".

There was a small sign on the door. "Must be 18 to enter." Yeap. Eighteen and a half. *Not sure the half will matter much to them.*

As I entered, the smell of leather hit me as I saw lots of harnesses hanging from the walls, along with corsets, masks, whips, floggers, canes, benches... it was almost too much for me to take in until I spotted a bookshelf and made a beeline for it. *There are books on this? Merlin, this is excellent!*

A few shelves were fiction, there were a few difference series: Deviations, Marketplace, Pack Discipline, another about a girl called Brie. There were a few stand-alone books as well, Story of O, Carrie's Story... *Mostly heterosexual or about gay men...*

The next shelf down seemed to be non-fiction, more of the "how-to" stuff. 'Screw the Roses, Send me the Thorns: The Romance and Sexual Sorcery of Sadomasochism'. *Obviously I'm getting that one.*
SM101 by Jay Wiseman seemed good, The Mistress Manual seemed a bit too preachy, Protocols seemed decent, but I didn't think of Narcissa as my slave. I just enjoy... doing things to her, and being in charge. Then I saw The Sexually Dominant Woman: A Workbook for Nervous Beginners by Lady Green. Yeah, that's definitely me. I pulled the book off of the shelf and liked what I saw in the table of contents.

The very first part was a quiz, a checklist to see if I could be a sexually dominant woman. Alright, let's see if these apply to me...

'I enjoy acting, costume parties and/or role-playing games...' Who doesn't? I thought, thinking of how I'd want to put my wife in some of the skimpy outfits on display here.

'I am sexually imaginative and enjoy adventures like buying sexy clothes or toys, or having sex in unusual circumstances or environments.' I don't know about environments, but I was already thinking that way.

'I sometimes enjoy sex in which one partner remains passive while the other one 'directs the action.' Yeah, I do. Maybe we could swap, and I'd have her 'in charge' and I be the passive one?

'I am drawn to "risky" activities like bungee jumping, white-water...' I've faced a troll, a basilisk, Buckbeak, Dementors, was sent to sleep under the lake, invaded the Department of Mysteries, dueled Death Eaters, lived in a tent on the run... sod it, I'm a Gryffindor.

'I am a good communicator, with the ability to decide what I want...'

"Excuse me, miss? Are you old enough to be in here?" The man's voice pulled me out of the book. Definitely getting this one too.

"Yes, I'm eighteen." Don't say it. Don't... "...and a half." He had a short buzz cut, wore a leather collar around his neck, and filled out his tight black tee and leather pants that could have been painted on him. He had just enough stubble on his face that I wanted to call it 'scruff'. Once I realized I was checking out a gay guy, I blushed slightly. I wonder if they have some of that latex stuff just for that purpose...

His eyes lit up mischievously. "And a half? Well then, I guess you're in the right place, aren't you? I'm Hunter." Was that his real name, or some sort of stage thing?

"Um, Hermione."

"Daughter of Menelaus and Helen of Greek Mythology, oooh." His eyes shone playfully. "I like it. So, what are you looking for? Something to surprise your boyfriend with? Or are you new to the scene and looking to meet a Dominant?"

"Oh I um..." He can tell I'm new, can't he? "Yes, I'm new, but I've got a woman at home already." I flashed him the cover of The Sexually Dominant Woman. "Not even nineteen and you're reading up to be a Top? She's got to be a lucky girl."

I looked around the store. It was pretty large, but it seemed empty. "Does this place do a lot of business?"

He shrugged. "Catalog order, mostly. There's been talk of using the internet for e-commerce. But as you can see, we've got everything you could want in a play space. And my Sir makes furniture and leather himself if you want a custom order."
"Well, I'm looking to convert one of the unused bedrooms into a fully-stocked dungeon." His eyes lit up. *Either he works on commission, or the idea of designing a building a full play space from the ground up excites him.* I was betting on the latter.

"So... what's your budget you're looking at? And exactly how many unused rooms do you have at your place?"

"It's a small... Manor." His eyes bugged out at that. I winced. "I did grow up in a flat, I just... married well. Married a... wealthy widow." *I sound like a gold-digger.*

"Hey, if you two are happy, I won't judge. My Sir's old enough to be my father. He has a Daddy/boy thing on the side, not my cuppa." *Did he just admit to his man being involved with someone else? I was flummoxed at that, but he seemed to not mind the arrangement.*

"As for the budget, I don't really have one." I tried to convert Galleons to Pounds, but gave up as my eyes focused on a glass cabinet that contained medical clamps and speculums. *Now that is kinky.* "Um, five thousand pounds at the most." Judging from his reaction, I just made his year.

He walked up to me, took the books out of my hand and laid them on the sales counter and flashed a wicked smile. "Ma chere Mademoiselle, it is with deepest pride and greatest pleasure that I welcome you today.

"And now I invite you to relax, please, follow me around as REGULATION proudly presents - your dungeon!

*Merlin, he's made a jingle for this. From a Disney movie.*

"Be our guest! Be our guest! Put my knowledge to the test You've got ideas for your girl, chérie And we'll provide the rest Leather cuffs Make her frig? Warming lube's great for that gig What do you think?"

*Huh?*

"It's delightful." I interjected as the song was being perverted around me.

"Just as I thought, you're insightful! Whether she's butch or she is femme We all love BDSM No matter if you don't have a leather vest! Take it in, Any questions? We do private lessons! Be our guest! Oui, our guest Be our guest!"

Excitedly, he hands me a small basket and starts grabbing merchandise to hand to me.

"Nipple Clamps Whips and Chains
We've got rope, and gags, and canes
Fetish wear will make her stare-
Girl, you need not be ashamed!

"You are new
And I felt
You'd like this chastity belt
Don't feel bad if it's consensual
You're just sexually intellectual
Bondage tape! Latex paint!
Furniture built for restraint!

"We've got everything to please a masochist!
Hankies to help you flag
You know you'll want to brag
So be our guest!

"Pain is your quest?
Violet Wand, then, I suggest."

I couldn't help but chortle and sing the chorus along with him.
"Be our guest! Be our guest! Be our guest!"

"Waiting is a nuisance
A submissive who feels useless
I've been waiting for someone to come inside
Back then our lines would wrap around the block
Suddenly our numbers shrank in stride
For years we've been stagnant
With a profit as a fragment
Of our glory days and ancient times of yore!
So I clean this place so seriously
bored and furiously. Then you came in curiously!

"A harness, for her chest!
Do suspensions like the rest,
I've got hunches you'll love munches
And be impeccably dressed
Zentai suits! Strap-on cock!
Be the Kirk against her Spock!
We have roleplay costumes galore!
Need a gas mask? We've got more!
Anal Plugs! Ball-shaped Gags!
We have ALL the Leather Flags!
We've got everything a sadist would adore!

"You can fill every drawer
Dress her a maid or whore
For you, our guest!
Be our guest!
She's our guest!
She's our guest!"
Hunter took a deep breath as I put the basket on the shop counter, glad for his assistance.

"Be our guest! Be our guest!
I hope you have been impressed
It's been months since I've furnished a play room, if
You haven't guessed
If you buy what you see
You get free delivery
Thanks for the opportunity
See you in the community!
Also may I mention
See you at the convention!
And I'll sing about this amazing purchase
Later when you will whip her
You could add a zipper
Be our guest!
Be our guest!
Be our guest!
Please, be our guest!"

"HUNTER WHAT THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU DOING OUT THERE!" A man yelled from the back office. He exchanged a glance with me as we both stifled our laughter.

Narcissa had avoided the bedroom that she shared with her husband, save for vanishing nearly everything of his, including the furniture. It was a sucking wound, holding too many horrible memories for her to want to face.

So when her wife had taken advantage of this fact and had redecorated the room, she was understandably relieved yet concerned. What could she have done? Earlier in the week, she saw her putting up wards on the outside walls. Hermione had been saying that she'd like it, but that it would be a surprise.

Then, the day had come. Hermione's parents were off to see houses in the muggle district while Draco assisted with the D.A.. They spent a romantic lunch together as Cissy idly wondered about building horse stables. Hermione instead wanted to spend the day inside, and to show her the redecorated room.

"I wanted to do something for you, well, for us. I... wanted to show you with as little magic as possible, how much you mean to me. How much I..." Hermione sighed, "...how much I have come to love you." Narcissa's jaw dropped at that, and the Gryffindor shrugged nervously at her, bottom lip firmly held between her teeth.

Hermione put her wand down on the table just outside the door. "You said you wanted to purge this room of the past. Fill it with something new, and positive... I went ahead and did just that for you."

"Oh, Hermione, you didn't have to... can I see it?" The Slytherin asked nervously.

"Leave your wand out here, close your eyes, and I'll walk you in. I want this to remain a magic-free room."

"Why?"

"I want no magic involved; if the wards I put up work properly, there's a null field in there. Spell
casting should be severely dampened, and passive magic should be neutralized."

"A fully operational null field? As in, no Compulsion?"

"Just you, just me. Trust me?"

Narcissa nodded her agreement. She put her wand down, held her hand out, and closed her eyes.

As I lead my wife into our new playroom, I really hoped that the Compulsion wasn't in effect here, because I felt a thrill as my fingers trailed her jawline. Her face tilted into the contact like a plant would bend towards the sun, and I kissed her as gently as possible, pouring my feelings of reverence and love into it.

It only lasted for a minute, but it was a long minute for when we stepped away, I felt somewhat punch drunk. We held onto each other for stability, even as neither of us could immediately speak after. Her half-lidded eyes did nothing to hide the look of wanting and need as her lips claimed mine needfully. I could swear, she purred her pleasure into me as her tongue darted in and found mine.

"Sweet Merlin, I've wanted you!" I said as I held her close. Our eyes were glued to each other as she tried to figure it out.

"You built this room into a null field, but that kiss..."

"Call me a stupid mudblood."

"I don't think you're..." She trailed off as she understood, smiling at the implications. "You stupid mudblood." Nothing happened, and her eyes widened at that. "You shrew, ungrateful bitch, you ignorant slag!" Her hands clasped mine in excitement as she found the gift of free speech without blinding pain.

"I knew you wanted this room purged of all the negativity that Lucius had created in this room, so with the wards I put into place, the Compulsion has no effect here. And I am still here, still wanting you, going breathless at the taste of your lips."

"Hermione... that kiss..." Narcissa said, panting as if out of breath.

I nodded that I was left breathless as well. It said something that we both had the same reaction without any magical aid.

"The wards are horribly complex and fail after a certain size, so this is the best I can do for you. But the real present is the rest of the room."

"What?" *Her eyes were totally captivated upon me.*

"Look around. There's more."

Narcissa's eyes finally took in the rest of the room. A dark mahogany spanking bench and stocks were in one corner, and the wall had a series of hooks that hung various floggers, canes, whips, and a series of bundled rope. The ceiling had a suspension ring for the rope, as well as hanging candle chandeliers as well.

Turning clockwise, she then saw a medieval rack with added tie points and a latching winch system. By that was a small cabinet filled with candles, matches, and an assortment of insertables, some that could also vibrate as well as be strapped onto others. I had plans with those.
Her eyes rested on the final wall, with the Saint Andrews Cross there, along with an old looking Oak chest with a stack of books that I had also purchased earlier that day.

"Hermione, you're a brunette again. And you've um, redecorated."

"My disguise charm failed past the wards. And yeah, I had this room designed with only muggle technology and toys." I saw her eyes shine in trepidation, and I reveled in it. She has no idea what kind of muggle technology I have here to get her off...

"This is a dungeon." Her eyes lowered in guilt. "Like the one I left you in when we were first married."

I kissed her silent. "Don't blame yourself, Cissy. You did what you had to then. No, this is our personal, private play room. Nobody else can enter nor hear us in here without our permission."

"So, why are you doing this?"

"Because, dear wife, I want to. I want to own you and possess you wholly. To give you discipline, pain, and pleasure. To fuck you and make you come at my command by my doing. No Compulsion. No magic. Because you are MINE."

I smiled a knowing smirk at her as she melted at my touch. See? You can show her that you want her without magic.

"Now, Narcissa, will you trust me? If you are grievously injured, I can pull you out of this room and our wands are out there just in case." She nodded her consent, and I tied a blindfold over her eyes.

I closed the door to our playroom, enjoying the quick turn of her head towards the sound. "Don't worry, dear, I'm still here. Now, take off your clothes."

"Yes, um... ma'am." She took off her robes and began to untie her dress as I opened the chest and prepared the violet wand and rope for her. As she shrugged the dress off of her shoulders and it hit the floor, my hand playfully swatted her ass and I heard a delightful yelp of surprise from her.

"This good?" she asked, crossing her arms nervously. I unclasped her bra, sliding the straps over her shoulders while letting my fingertips trace over her skin just enough to make her shudder. I could tease her all day like this, couldn't I? She lowered her arms and let the garment hit the floor as she covered her stomach with her hands. I hooked my fingers around her panties at the hips and jerked them down roughly, chuckling as she staggered and had to step out of them, standing completely naked before me. She had amazing, pale skin that I could just rub my face against and lick... but I've got plans here.

"That's better, Cissy." I whispered into her ear, nibbling on the edge and hearing her moan appreciatively. Stepping around her, I take her wrists together and begin to bind them in a two-column tie with the rope I had. The sensation of binding her, slowly, and her acceptance of this was arousing as it was maddening. What would usually be a simple spell was now complex, and I had control over how intricate the rope and knot-work would be. This felt more real, more involved. The intimate contact was what made the crescendo work here, and I vowed to always use muggle restraints instead of a spell when it comes to tying my wife up for sex.

Once her wrists were bound, I walked her over to stand beneath the suspension ring and tied a rope from her wrists to the suspension ring, forcing her hands to be face-high as I pulled the rope tight. "You're tied to the ceiling now, dear, so you can't escape."

"Muggles do this?" She asked, body trembling in anticipation.
I knew she wouldn't be able to resist asking questions, and I had this already planned out in the ride home from the shop. I kissed her gently, then put two fingers at her lips and probed for entry. Obediently she opened her mouth as my fingers delved in and got slick from her saliva.

"Yes they do, and you're being quite the sport so far. Now, I'm going to reward you for opening your mouth for me, but no more questions, okay?" I asked sweetly, removing my fingers and using them to circle her clitoris with firm pressure. She gasped in surprise and tried to buck her hips to get my fingers inside her already.

"Not yet my gorgeous slut. I want you begging like a common whore before I delve inside you." Her whimpering was right on cue as I got the ball-gag up against her lips. This time, she opened without hesitation and flinched as I buckled it in place and she realized she had been gagged. Now she could only pant, whimper, and make noises from how she was breathing. The control I had of her was arousing me, and I could feel myself getting wet at the sight of her.

I started the mix tape I had made for this room. The first song, *Stripped* by Rammstein, was relatively new, yet I knew I could use as I took a cane and placed gentle swats upon her arse as if it were an over-sized wand. I was told to start small, because the impacts can be too much too fast and ruin the entire scene.

So I took the cane to the softest parts of her bum, and kept the light tapping as I struck the upper portions of her thighs, the intensity of the strikes being increased from the reduced amount of fleshy padding. Her responses let me know I could strike a bit harder, so I did.

*Metropolis*

*Has nothing on this*  
*You're breathing in fumes*  
*I taste when we kiss*

*Take my hand*  
*Come back to the land*  
*Where everything's ours*  
*For a few hours*

*Let me see you*  
*Stripped*  
*Let me see you*  
*Stripped*

I enjoyed using the cane, but wanted something a bit more personal. I put down the cane and used my bare hand upon her, it was warm, red, and proof that she was mine to do with as I pleased. I could swing harder into my strikes with my hands, and it was marvelous. *Merlin, I hope she's bruised tomorrow and it hurts when she sits as proof to the fucking I plan to give her after this...*

*Let me hear you*  
*Make decisions*  
*Without your television*  
*Let me hear you speaking*  
*Just for me*

*Let me see you*  
*Stripped*

Getting the sybian out of the trunk, I placed it on the spanking bench and moved it to where Narcissa
was. "Okay, I want you to find and sit on the bench before you. Straddle it like you would a broom."
She did as she was told, getting her moist cunt situated over the sybian as she protested via grunting and she rocked her hips into place. The slack her arms had were now gone as she sat, her arms hanging straight above her head.

"Now, my darling wife, you are straddling a sybian. I'm going to turn it on and let you get a taste for what it can do." I cooed into her hear, turning on the machine for a minimal vibration. She shuddered pleasantly at that, unable to do anything but enjoy the sensation.

She sat there and rocked into the device, as the beginning of Nine Inch Nails' *Sanctified* began to play as I stripped out of my own clothing and got out the violet wand, affixing the spiral head attachment. Flicking it on, I was pleased at the static sound it made and I ramped down the voltage and tested it on my own fingertip. It was electricity play, and far more pleasurable than the taser we had to use in Australia. It crackled as it eagerly made a violet tendril of electricity strike me through the device, and I heard Narcissa's gasp over the music that was now playing.

*Heaven's just a rumor she'll dispel.*
*As she walks me through the nicest parts of hell (bitch).*
*I still dream of lips I never should have kissed.*
*Well she knows exactly what I can't resist...*

*And if she says come inside I'll come inside for her.*
*If she says give it all I'll give everything to her.*
*I am justified. I am purified. I am sanctified. Inside you...*

Taking the violet wand, I trailed it over her arm, letting the static and shock zap her into surprise, pleasure, and gasping for the next strike. I thoughtfully increased the vibration of the sybian and she whimpered as her body was forced to be in even more pleasure than before.

*I'm still caught up in another of her spells.*
*Well she's turning me into someone else.*
*Everyday I hope and pray this will end.*
*But when I can I do it all again..*

I cranked up the violet wand and traced her breasts, letting the contact kiss her skin as I slowly brought it to the peak of her nipple. *Zap.* Then I licked and sucked on her nipple to hear her whimper in pleasure, before putting the violet wand back on her and slowly increasing the vibrations of the sybian some more. I went on, zapping and licking and biting her as she trembled upon the sybian’s vibrations.

*And if she says come inside I'll come inside for her.*
*If she says give it all I'll give everything to her.*
*I am justified. I am purified. I am sanctified. Inside you...*

I turned off the violet wand, seeing how wet and needy for me she was, and I wanted to please her myself. I found the feeldoe and put it in place, It was slightly chilly, but it fit inside me snugly and I was able to press the button to make it vibrate, sending a satisfying hum through me. The song wound down, and I turned off the sybian and released her wrists from the ring on the ceiling. The new song began with a heavy guitar riff suggestive of a rhythm that I would want to apply to her. It was *Ribbons* by The Sisters of Mercy, and I would be showing her none tonight.

"Narcissa, my little slut, would you like to come?" Her guttural groan was pleading, begging, and the line of drool coming out from the corner of her mouth told me all I needed to know. I pulled her up from the spanking bench and lead her by her bound wrists and bent her over the table. Using the
second rope that was attached to the ring overhead, I pulled her wrists back over her head as she was lying face-down onto the table, her left cheek pressed against the cold wood as I positioned the tip of my strap-on at her entrance.

"Remember when I took that potion and fucked you? I've been wanting to do that again, to hear you groan against me as I slide in, deep inside your cunt." My smile was bright and sadistic, and I reveled in her shudders and quivers as I slid home inside her. *That's right, you need this. You need ME, Cissy...*

I found my rhythm as I fucked her. This wasn't making love, or seeking any kind of higher spiritual fulfillment through the joining of our bodies. This isn't something that would be seen as romance, or that could be paired with anything by Enya. This was raw, brutal, and magnificent. She was mine to do with as I pleased, not because of magic, but because of desire. She wanted to be used this way by me, and I wanted to use her.

*We are few... and far between*
*I was thinking about her skin*
*Love is a many splintered thing*
*Don't be afraid now just walk on in*

*Flowers on the razor wire*
*Walk on in*

*Her eyes were cobalt red*
*Her voice was cobalt blue*
*I see no purple light*
*Crashing out of you so just walk on in*

*Flowers on the razor wire*
*Walk on in*

I released the rope that kept her hands over her head, pulled out of her, and unfastened the ball gag so she could talk again.

"I want to hear you come as I fuck you, is that understood?" I asked, pulling her head up sharply by her hair.

"YES, MISTRESS!" She gasped. "Please fuck me, please let me come, please I beg..." I position myself and slide back in with ease. "Thank you, thank you..." She mumbled as she rocked back into me, and I had a moment of inspiration as I took the rope and looped it around her neck for a makeshift collar, and I used it as leverage as her bound hands got fingers around the rope to ensure I didn't strangle her and she begged one simple word.

"Harder..." Naturally, I complied.

*But she looked good in ribbons*
*So just walk on in*
*She looked good in ribbons*
*So just walk on in*

*Tie a red, red, red, red, red, red ribbon*
*Love is a many splintered thing*
*Tie a red, red, red, red ribbon*
*Don't be afraid just walk on in*
My wife crested and screamed her orgasm, her voice would probably be hoarse after this. *Good for her. Now it's my turn.*

Releasing the rope, I pulled out of her and pulled her around to face me and dropped her to her knees. Her hands were trailing my body as reverently as she could, and I pulled out the feeldoe and directed her lips to my wet and throbbing mound for her to attend.

"Get me off, Narcissa. Use your mouth and your fingers like I know you can." My breath shuddered as she took me on eagerly, and my fingers threaded through her hair and fisted in a passionate embrace.

*Just walk on in*
*Love is a many splintered thing*
*Just walk on in*
*Flowers on the razor wire*

*Just walk on in, just walk on in*
*Flowers on the razor wire*
*Just walk on in*
*Flowers on the razor wire*

*I was nearly there, my hips rocking into her sucking lips and enjoying the three fingers curling inside me as we found our rhythm together. Her wrists were still bound together, and she was still wearing the blindfold as I relented, spasming into an orgasm and I pulled the cloth off from her eyes to see her as I came. Her own eyes looked into mine, completely gone in lust and passion.*

"Thank you... thank you Mistress." She sputtered as I laid her back flat on the ground and curled up with her, kissing her deeply and enjoying my own taste upon her lips.

*Just walk on in*
*Flowers on the razor wire*
*Just walk on in*
*Flowers on the razor wire*

*Just walk on in*
*Love is a many splintered thing*
*Just walk on in*
*Flowers on the razor wire*
Muggle life and Harry's Birthday

Narcissa found herself limping slightly after the prolonged lovemaking yesterday as she went to get her coffee. She realized that her usual coffee in bed was no longer an option since Herpy was now merrily cooking for Hermione's parents as well. I wouldn't be surprised if this were her way to force us to be around each other more.

She found the kitchen island covered in various papers and photographs, with a contemplative Jean Granger perusing the stack as she sipped her own coffee. Okay, hide that limp now Cissy...

"Good Morning, Mrs. Granger. How goes your hunt for a new home?"

"Mrs... oh. You've taken my daughter's last name, haven't you. Well, call me Jean." Thank Merlin she didn't want me to call her 'mother'...

Narcissa made a simple bow. "Thank you. I'm Narcissa." Jean was looking over the documents of different properties.

"I think we may have a new place next month, actually. We'll be out of your hair soon enough."

"It's no problem at all. Actually, this home feels pretty empty otherwise."

"But there's no muggle amenities, such as electricity or phone service." Jean replied. "Besides, Hermione has her own life here and I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Oh, it's no intrusion at all. But you are right about the lack of electricity and..." Narcissa's voice trailed off as she realized she really didn't want her in-laws living with them. What would I say if they saw the dungeon?

An awkward silence began to form between them. Cissy put on a polite smile as her mind raced for any conversational segue.

"Oh, who was that girl that was here?"

Jean Granger wanted to ask before, but the girl seemed very distraught and she and her husband were busy all day yesterday with house-hunting that this was the first moment they were around each other again.

"That was Pansy. Draco's ex-girlfriend. They had intended to marry after Hogwarts, despite the arranged marriage we had with the Greengrasses. Since then, Draco actually called it off. I thought he was at first just rebelling against the arrangement, but then realized Pansy and him were a horrible match. As for the Greengrass family, I think they were glad to get out of the arrangement as well because of the wizarding war."

"So why was she here?"

Draco walks in, handing his coat off to Herpy. "Why was who here? Hello, Mother."

"Where have you been all this time?! It's time for breakfast and I was worried sick, what with the Goblins and all..."

"You and 'Mione gallivanted off and left me to think you two were dead, so I went with Harry and sat in a meeting with the Unspeakables. Now why was who here? You're supposed to be
maintaining your cover. Which, by the way, you could have sent word to me too!"

Jean nodded a greeting to him. "Who are the Unspeakables? And it was your ex, Pansy, I believe."

"Harry said they seemed like... MI Six. Keeping the really dangerous information and weapons secret and safe. And why in Slytherin's Name was that..." Draco looked at Hermione's mother and bit his tongue, "...girl... here?"

"Her manners were impeccable when she finally woke up." Jean said, feeling a bit more caught up.

"That would be her upbringing. Her parents were more into etiquette and proper Pureblood behavior than I ever was." Cissy replied nonchalantly.

"But she was still a bloody coward and willing to sell out Harry at the last moment as if it would spare her own neck. Daft girl. I'd prefer someone with conviction, a bit of spine, and intelligence."

Narcissa smiled at him. "As did I, and now I have her." She embraced her son tightly, "Now you're going to owl me when you'll be out late, is that clear? You're my only child, and if you're going to be joined at the hip with Harry getting into who-knows-what..."

Jean Granger smiled at the exchange. "You two are so amazing. I ought to have my daughter write me more like that."

Draco pulled away. "Sure, but she's trying to change the subject. Mother, why was Pansy here?"

"Um, she was recovering from a bad night."

"You said she was dosed with a potion." Jean offered, unsure as to why Narcissa was being tight-lipped with the details.

"Yeah, it was nothing too poisonous, she just had to sleep it off..." Cissy's down-playing was getting her nowhere. Her son would be like a dog with a bone on this.

"Mother! Whom are you protecting? Someone was trying to harm her, weren't they?"

"It was that blasted reporter, Rita. She dosed the girl with a lust potion in order to get some lurid photographs. I got there, saw what was going on, and um..." Cissy shrugged, "had to help."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Legal? Ha. I was transferred like property to Hermione. Trust me, the laws are misogynistic relics from ages past and the rallying cry of 'Traditional Pureblood Values' keeps progress from happening. The use of lust potions to coerce someone into having sex might be frowned upon, but it's completely legal."

"That's utterly barbaric!" Jean exclaimed, her fist hitting the table subconsciously.

"Agreed. When the Weasley Twins opened up their shop, Hermione and I were Prefects and we all agreed on a blanket ban on their so-called 'love potions'. I had to sell my support for the ban by pretending to hate the twins for being blood-traitors, but I agreed with Hermione on this." Draco said sheepishly.

"I had no idea, Draco..." Cissy said softly.

"That was the point. I wasn't a sympathizer for the muggleborn yet, but I did believe people have the freedom to choose their own actions. I just had no idea Rita would go so far."
"So, you were betrothed and dated this girl as an act of rebellion." Hermione's mother asked quietly as Herpy handed coffee over to her Mistress and young master.

"You make it sound noble that way. I was looking for a quick snog, to be free from expectations for awhile."

"And now? What are you going to do with your life?" Hermione's mother had similar features, and she could tell even in the way she held her coffee cup and gently flipped over the pages on the table. If Hermione grows up to look like her, I'm going to be one lucky witch.

"Help run Granger Enterprises while Hermione finishes up her last year at Hogwarts. She wants to earn her full marks, not just have them awarded as credit for participating in the war. I actually enjoy all the traveling and hand-shaking and business dinners that come with business dealings. And I promised to keep an eye out for Harry's girl, Ginny."

Jean made a contented note of approval while Narcissa's 'hmm' was noticeably different. Draco, of course, caught it.

"What was that about, mother?"

"Oh. it's... it's nothing, really. Just... her parents are a real piece of work. I'd hate to see her turn out like they did." Cissy shut herself up by sipping her coffee and basking in the flavor.

"I thought they were eccentric yet delightful! Arthur got me from the Leaky Cauldron place and to the stationary shop right by Flourish and Blott's."

"And he talked to you the whole time, right, Mrs. Granger?" Draco asked, and winced slightly as she nodded. "He's got a bit of a fascination with muggle stuff, and that has since changed to muggle liquors. They look like a great couple because they never fight and never settle the little stuff, so at the awards banquet, they were both pissed and unloading years of frustration and annoyances at each other. I did all I could to avoid them, and even Ginny was hitting the bar heavy then."

"Oh, dear." Jean said, sipping her drink as her husband and Hermione dragged themselves to sit at the table as well.

Draco grinned at the sight of Hermione. "Well good morning, sunshine! What do you want for breakfast today?"

Hermione's eyes were barely open, but they narrowed in frustration. "Shut up, Draco. It's early for some of us."

"Aww, did someone have a bit much of the drink last night?" He was hamming it up, thinking that she had a hangover and wanted to be extra annoying just to take the piss out of her. "I just got in a few minutes ago and I feel fine!"

"Yeah, what were you guys talking about before?" Hermione asked as coffee was delivered to her and her father.

"Oh, the Weasleys, dear." Her mom supplied helpfully.

"Merlin, those wankers have hated Cissy ever since they caught her with Pansy's mom. What did they do now?" Hermione said vindictively as Draco's mug of coffee crashed to the floor.

"...Mother?"
Severus called an Order meeting (or as much of one that was left), and was glad that Narcissa understood the need for discretion concerning Hermione. Neville couldn't attend due to guarding Azkaban while the Hit Wizards protected the Ministry and guarded Azkaban. He wasn't sure why Ronald was here, however.

Fleur, Harry, Ronald, Draco, Luna, and Minerva all fit in his Headmaster's Office. It was agreed that Severus would stay as Headmaster with Minerva as Deputy and the Transfiguration Professor. Slughorn was goaded into staying for another year as the Potions Professor, and there was a near consensus on who would teach DADA. Of course it'll either look horrible or brilliant, and I guess this is how Albus always did it.

Ron looked sheepish sitting by himself as Harry and Draco seemed thick as thieves over something. I'm glad Draco's made friends with someone who thinks for himself, but the last thing I want is for him being blamed for ruining the Golden Boy's friendship with Ronald.

Severus' face nearly frowned as there were distinct conversations going on around the room. Narcissa and Albus Dumbledore's portrait seemed to be hashing something out from the sullen looks between them. Merlin knows the old man tried his best to protect as many innocent people as possible, often sacrificing those he thought could not be saved. At least Minerva's looking in on ways to transfigure Fleur back to looking a bit more human.

"Everyone, please be seated. There have been a few vital things that have happened which we all need to be informed about. This information is to be kept confidential to Order Members and anyone in the D.A. that Harry exclusively trusts."

Severus saw the look on the ginger's face and wasn't surprised at his outburst.

"Yeah, like Narcissa being alive after all? Oi, Harry, if you're done being all 'ooh ducky' and cuddling with Malfoy over there, you might want to come sit with your best friend."

"Ron, that's not fair. I had to ask-"

"-Misses Hermione Granger is also alive and well. That is one of the subjects of discussion today. Harry." Severus' hand gestured for him to take the floor.

Harry stood up and explained to them the real job of the Unspeakables, and how they worked hard to keep the Deathly Hallows as secret as possible.

Albus' portrait spoke up. "I had wondered why I was affected by a tongue-tying curse. Even with the Elder Wand, all I could do was drop hints in my will to you. I knew you would figure it out."

"So why can we say it now?" Minerva asked astutely.

Harry nodded solemnly. "They're breaking tradition and siding with us; apparently they were betrayed from within and that's how Voldemort made his name into that Taboo. I couldn't even end the spell with all the power at the Ministry, I've just changed the jinxed name to a phrase for us all to use in case of emergency. In case we get captured. " Draco passed a scrap of parchment for everyone to read, avoiding eye contact as it got to Severus.

That little bastard... it's ingenious. "Very well." Severus said, passing the note along. "When you pass that phrase around, write it down, do... not... speak it accidentally. This is only to be uttered in the most extreme of emergencies. Next up: The Resurrection Stone."

"I decided I shouldn't go looking for it." Harry said, "because of how it never works in your favor."
Draco's eyes widened in horror. "And if that gets into the wrong hands?! The brother wanted his
dead lover back, but what if someone wanted the stone for a more nefarious purpose?"

Narcissa understood the impact, throwing up her Arithmancy equation. The different colored lines
were all still pointing to an upcoming cataclysm and indeterminate results for herself and Hermione.
She muttered as she modified the equation.

"Bellatrix is the enemy... The Dark Lord's remains are with her... and the Resurrection Stone is still
out there." She invoked the equation with a Solvio and the lines stayed the same color as before, but
crashed downward signaling death.

"And the fate of the Wizarding World? Solvio?" The lines went haywire and were unsolvable.

Severus' hand was cupping hers in a comforting gesture. "Cissy, you can't predict everything."

"She'll die, Sev! She's under the influence of that Damned Deathstick and it's going to kill her!"

Minerva's eyes showed horror. "Miss Granger has the Wand of Destiny?"

Ron scoffed at that. "Is that what this is all about? It's still our 'Mione. Much better that she have the
wand than Bellatrix."

"It's been affecting my wife. Trying to preserve itself and twist her to become more Dark. She was
performing memory spells on herself, wiping away things that scared her." Narcissa's lips pressed
thin as she blinked away tears. "Erasing herself, bit by bit. We have to destroy the Deathstick."

The room was as silent as a graveyard. Luna's voice cut through it like it were light shining through
midnight. "What about the lore of Elder's Bane?"

Even Severus' eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Go on, Luna." It was Albus' portrait. Bloody man still tried to run things from the great beyond...

"My father was too busy focusing on finding and proving that the Deathly Hallows existed, but there
was a legend about the Bane of Elder." Luna is talking about an old poem?

Ron scoffed again. "That's a nursery rhyme about some old bloke."

"...or the destruction of the wand." Nobody looked like they believed the Ravenclaw. Severus
couldn't blame them.

Fleur shrugged off her answer. "Yeah, well, any luck on locating Bellatrix? The sighting in Taiwan
was a red herring she left for us, just like with India."

Headmaster Black's portrait spoke up. "No, I'm sorry she's in disguise. I'd recognize my descendant."

Harry started to piece something together. "Wait, Shacklebolt said there was an impostor... Using
Hermione's likeness..."

Severus understood the significance. That's how Bellatrix was getting around. "Where?"

"Lat... No, Romania." Harry's mind wandered. "That's where he was back when he had no body,
before Quirrell came along."

Severus staggered, his hands on the Headmaster's desk as the floor seemed to fall out from under
him. "Salazar's Serpent, she's doing it."
"She's doing what, Severus?" Minerva wasn't used to seeing him lose his composure, and it sounded like Voldemort might still be around somehow.

The door to the Headmaster's office opened for Kingsley to enter, muttering a quiet apology for his tardiness. "Wizengamot is trying to undermine me. Sorry."

"The Dark Lord wanted an alliance with the Vampires, at least to get his hands on their blood." Severus answered as Kingsley was caught up.

The Minister knew this couldn't be good. "What was he going to do with vampire blood? Some sort of potion?"

Severus sighed as if he were being asked daft questions in class again. "There are no known potions that use vampire blood, because no Potioneer has ever been able to obtain enough to test its properties."

"She has that bastard's remains and is seeking out the Vampires? Severus, what is my sister up to?"

I finally found the stack of newspapers that Herpy had been keeping from me, and now I knew why. I had to order her to not harm herself for hiding them, but I could sympathize with why she would attempt to hide it from me.

My father had found me soon after I first screamed at the headline by Rita Skeeter. Livid, I handed the paper over to him to read as well as I tried to find the words necessary to convey my rage properly. How dare she! And how dare my wife help her!

"Herm, you know this is just tabloid trash."

"I'm not some gold-digging trollop!"

"She's just out to try and sell papers. You know, I bet nobody believes her arrogant sensationalism."

"And what about my wife wanting to see me in Azkaban!? How could she do this to me! I trusted her! I gave her... me... my first time..."

"Well maybe that was taken out of context, you know, when you punched him?" Oh. Back then, I guess she might have said that...

"Fair enough, I just... I ought to talk to her and make her stop publishing lies!" My mum came in with a cup of tea and I accepted it graciously. Herpy was hiding behind her, looking sheepish. I ought to be careful around my house-elf.

My dad's logical mindset was oddly comforting. "She seems to be an attention junkie; you'd only be furthering her by doing just that."

"Besides, Narcissa went already." My mom added helpfully. Really...

"She did, did she? Where is she?" I asked as they looked at me with concern in their eyes.

"Said she and Draco had business to attend to. She should be back soon enough."

"Herm, might I have a word with you? In private?" His glance had my mother nodding and leaving the room with Herpy. Oddly they seem to be getting along. He took the chair by the fireplace, and it dawned on me why this room felt so odd. There were obvious blank spaces on the walls where portraits would have been scowling, if not outright shouting, at us.
"Sure, daddy." Oh Merlin, what is it? I hated when I called him 'daddy', but his 'we need to talk' tone always made me feel like I was nine years old and in trouble for mysterious things happening around me. We knew now what was going on then, but at the time, I was wanting to apologize for things happening that I didn't even think was my own fault.

"I think it's time you and I had the talk." Wait, as in, the talk? Oh Merlin, this is going to be so bloody awkward. I blurted out the first thing that came to my head.

"If you mention the phrase 'birds and the bees'... um, I already know how that all works." I hoped he would drop it. I really, really, hoped he would drop the subject. Or maybe it wasn't that subject? I felt a blush of embarrassment cross my cheeks.

"No, nothing like that. Jean and I did our best to raise you well, and I think we did an exceptional job, considering. I guess I always imagined my little girl coming home with a guy and when he'd ask for your hand in marriage I'd threaten him if he ever broke your heart."

I smiled wistfully at that. It was horribly protective and sweet, though also uncomfortably like he was policing my body. It's my body, and it belongs to me. Besides, we've always been a bit of a matriarchal family. "You think if I had come with a boyfriend intent on marrying me, he'd be asking you 'for my hand'? If anything, it's mum's approval he'd need."

He chuckled at that. "Fair enough. This is just such an unusual situation, but you seem committed to seeing this through. And I know you're going to be well cared for, and even get along with your new son-in-law." He teased.

"The age difference doesn't really bother me too much. With the longer lifespans, she and I still have decades before our child bearing years are over."

"I... Right. You could still have children. I guess I still think it requires a bloke. Do you both want them? Where will you find a donor?"

His words stopped me cold. I had only used the child-bearing years as an abstract idea... "We really haven't talked about it yet. I mean, I'd like to have a solid career first, and I'm not um, actually certain what she wants to do now that the war is over. And there are potion-based ways for us to conceive with each other, if she wanted."

Would Narcissa even want children? Or did she do her duty with Lucius and never wants to go through that again?

"Master Granger?" Herpy said, eyes lowered in shame. I turned to her, wondering why she seemed so dejected. The talk with Narcissa over the article in The Prophet had gone over as well as it have; apparently she had threatened Rita's career only to find out that she had been effectively canned for it. Apparently the Editor-in-Chief was going to write a personal retraction and apology for having run it. Good riddance to bad rubbish and all that.

"What is it, Herpy?" My mother raised an eyebrow at the honorific, but I waved her budding question away. I'll explain it later.

"We have no food for tonight's dinner; the grocer Herpy goes to is closed and Herpy won't go to the muggle ones like the squib-lady does." Her head was bowed in apparent failure.

"Herpy, is that why you asked her to get some produce earlier this week?" Jean asked kindly. Mrs.
Figg had left soon after that, mentioning that she may have to ring up her network again for an issue.

She nodded, as she used the pillowcase to dab the tears away from her eyes.

"I wondered how that worked. Cissy, want to go to Tesco?"

"I, um, sure. This is in the muggle world, right? I think I have clothes for that." She walked brusquely to our bedroom, her robin-egg-blue robes barely fluttering in her wake. I was almost worried about what I might see wear in an attempt to look muggle.

I looked over to my mother, who had narrowed down the listing of homes she wanted to get. "... want to join us, mum?" She lifted her eyes from the papers, giving me the 'I would love to be doing anything but this' look. *Oh yeah, she would.* "By the way, how did you go house hunting without a vehicle or anything?"

"Oh, the Knight Bus. Arabella had a token for us to use so they would recognize us. It's... good in a pinch." She crinkled her nose in obvious discomfort.

"Yeah, they tried to copy the double-decker bus... But I'll just apparate us."

Narcissa walked back in, a pleasant smile on her face as she asked me if what she had on was appropriate. I only had on my denims, trainers, and a boatneck striped top under a grey pea coat. Though it was unusually cool for July, the sight of my wife made everything feel a few degrees warmer.

She had on a sapphire blue sleeveless cowlneck blouse that made her skin look just a shade more alive than alabaster, red-as-ruby lips that made my eyes linger and lips quiver slightly. The basic black pencil skirt went down to just above the knee, giving her shapely hips and drawing my eyes down her amazing thighs, calves, and to a pair of black leather heels.

"Hermione? This is okay?" She shrugged on a vintage-looking frock coat that I could have sworn was Victorian to complete the look as I nodded, dumbfounded into silence. *She does the understated posh look really well.*

"You look absolutely normal, Narcissa." My mother commented, her eyes lingering on the drool that must have been hanging out of my mouth. Cissy took the moment to wink at me, which caused a bit of stirring within me that I knew focusing on a grocery list would be quite helpful. *Yes, grocery list. Apparently we will need a lot of staples, I'm certain Herpy has a list for me...*

"Herpy! Do you have a list?" The house elf saved me at that moment. *Rice, curry sauce, flour, milk, eggs, chicken, lamb, floo powder, salt, paprika, baking powder, sugar, powdered sugar, coffee beans, earl grey satchels, all purpose cleaner...*

Narcissa looked over the list. "This list seems a bit off... what are you making?"

Herpy squirmed under her gaze. "Herpy was sent an owl by Mistress' sister."

"WHAT?!" I asked, shocked. *Bellatrix is doing what? The scars on my left forearm seemed to ache as I wondered if I could trust Herpy if she were taking letters from her. The house-elf shook her head in fear. "Not the Dark one. The lost one with grandchild." The lost one?"

"My disowned sister, Andromeda." Narcissa seemed to answer for us. *Right, her. Other sister.*
The house elf nodded. "Herpy was asked to make a surprise cake for Harry Potter's birthday. Since Master Granger is his friend, Herpy thought it would be okay. She cannot bake a cake in secret around Harry Potter, you see."

"Oh, it's Harry Potter's birthday?" My mother asked in surprise. "Then we'll definitely have to get him something! We'll bring back candles and frosting." She went to get her coat while Narcissa looked at me in confusion.

"Why would you put a flame near cake? You'd get wax upon it." Merlin, there are times when she's from a completely different world...

Narcissa wasn't used to having to be the rider in a side-along apparition, but seeing as she didn't know the destination, she had to trust her wife to deliver them safely to the muggle location.

They landed behind the store where nobody was watching, and made their way around, Hermione veering off to grab a trolley for their purchases.

"Narcissa, I recall being told that care must be used so magic isn't seen. Are you certain that the security cameras wouldn't pick that up?" Her mother-in-law asked.

"Not at all; Hermione cast a notice-me-not spell before we left and the magical signature we have would have caused a... blip? I think that's the term. Magic disrupts muggle technology." It was surreal for her; it had been barely three months since Hermione defeated Lucius in a duel, and here she was, contentedly married to that young witch, going to the muggle grocer with her mother. Of course, she had also helped rescue her in-laws from Australia and the British Wizarding World was on the verge of collapse due to the Goblin rebellion. Still, I wouldn't change anything at all.

And the sex. My goodness, can she make me come on command... Her eyes darted to see Jean, and quickly decided to think of something less prurient. Hermione has been influenced by the Dark, but at least she quit wiping her memories away with the Deathstick when she finally started accepting herself and her desires. Arithmancy doesn't lie, it seems. Cissy only hoped that a bit of kinky sex was the only outlet she would need for the corruption she's faced so far, because she actually enjoyed a bit of bondage and pain with her sex.

Hermione returned with a trolley as they entered the store, as a heavenly scent made the Slytherin turn her head as if hearing siren song. Her eyes widened at the green-and-white logo of the siren herself, which intrigued Cissy to go and sample their coffee creations.

"It's a Melusine, isn't it?" Hermione grinned at the reference.

"The muggles just know it as the symbol for Starbucks." she replied, pulling out a small plastic card from a pocket.

"Go ahead and order a drink, you can pay with this. It's... like a key to our bank accounts that they can get the money from through... um, muggle witchcraft." Hermione had trouble putting the concept into words as Narcissa smiled at her flustering.

"Like an electronic form of a cheque? Promissory notes went out of vogue in my mother's generation." Cissy replied off-handedly, missing the look of incredulity that came from Hermione's mother.

"What may I serve you?" came from the barista, an older-teen-if-not-20 who had spiked hair, eyeliner, and a tasteful assortment of piercings on their nose and ear that left the blonde uncertain of their gender. And the nametag says 'Chris'. Of course.
Eyes raking over the selection board, Narcissa stood a little straighter and her eyes shone.

"Parli italiano?" She was proud that there was hardly any accent betraying her English roots.

"um? no?" The voice was feminine... maybe... but it wasn't Narcissa's business to ask that. Hermione came to the rescue.

"They don't speak Italian here. That's just their sizes."

"Why would they. .. Never mind. I'll try the Venti mocha frappa...?" Narcissa asked, unsure how to pronounce it.

"Venti Mocha Frap. With Whip?" The barista replied pleasantly, as all eyes went to Hermione for a translation. The only whip I can think of is hanging in a special room back home...

"Whipped cream topping." Hermione provided, then decided to just take over. "She'll want whip and a shot of raspberry in there as well."

Narcissa slid the card through the machine for payment just as she had seen it happen at the bar where she did karaoke with Severus (I will have to get him and Fleur back for setting us up that time) and signed the receipt as she had seen Severus do.

The Frappuccino was absolute bliss. It was cold, and slightly bitter, offset by the palate-cleansing sweetness of raspberry. The whipped cream seemed an odd addition, but it slowly merged into the drink over time and was absolutely refreshing.

"Hermione, they should have these everywhere."

"They do, love." Hermione replied, catching an odd look from the barista. As they left, Jean decided to ask the question that was eating at her.

"So you've never shopped for your own groceries? Picked up and knew what was ripe and what wasn't? Didn't have to come home from a long day at work only to pay the sitter and prepare dinner for the family?"

Hermione frowned at the line of questioning. "Mum, please don't."

Narcissa gestured to her wife that it was okay. "No, I didn't. I was raised in the lap of luxury, taught how to pick out servants and the art of political espionage and ruthless backstabbing. I was expected to marry well, and never want a day in my life."

"She came from a different background is all. Kind of like royalty, but I won't keep her like that. I can teach her to cook the duck at Yule, um, Christmas..." Hermione said as she cross-referenced the list and directed her wife to get the celery and romaine lettuce. Narcissa felt awkward yet honored that she would be automatically included for the family's Yule celebration.

"But she's so much older than you, she should have known this for ages!" Jean said, sighing in resignation. "It's just so strange to think a woman doesn't know how to do this."

"Dad can't cook and wasn't expected to. You taught him all the same." Hermione replied softly as she picked out the onions. "Cissy, your greenhouse, can we expand that and grow our own vegetables?"

Narcissa nodded as she put the celery and the lettuce into the trolley. "You made a perfect null-field. You want to grow our own food, I completely support you in this." She turned to her mother-in-law.
"I, like most purebloods, lived in the magical world all our lives and were never exposed to... frappuccinos or using plastic cards in place of Galleons. Hermione here though was able to pull off advanced theoretical magic on the post-graduate level, proving that you don't have to be born and raised in it to understand it. It just takes a bit of adjustment."

Hermione smiled and kissed her wife on the cheek. "And I'm fine with that; I had to explain a lot to the Weasleys when they first met me. Besides, I think you'll look cute in an apron."

Narcissa smiled at that, her face fell only when a realization hit. "You're going to have me helping you and getting all covered in dirt in the greenhouse like Sprout does, aren't you?" And I said I'd fully support her in this...

Hermione let out a quiet cackle of laughter. "Of course! Your battles are my battles, and my battles are yours... some just don't involve firearms and international terrorism."

A few more items and they were out of the produce section and Narcissa confidently strode up to the butcher block with the list to order the poultry and lamb. Cissy was proud that she did it by herself as she strode back with the two chickens and lamb shanks for the carriage.

"Herpy's preservation charms will keep these for quite some time. Though you muggles use ice boxes." Narcissa's off-handed comment was not taken well by Jean, who had a strong 'not amused' look on her face.

"You think we're inferior?"

"Not at all. Just... interesting." There seemed to be a bit of rift between the two mothers, but Hermione shrugged it off and continued to push the cart as a child nearby was screaming. Hermione tried to ignore it as she looked for the right type of rice, but Narcissa rolled her eyes as her comment came out.

"Slytherin's Serpent, is somebody torturing that child?" Jean looked at her in horror. Cissy made the barest of winks and Hermione understood, and played along.

"Oh, I hope so." Hermione's mother was shocked to hear her daughter say that.

"Hermone, how can you say that?" Hermione gave a shrug that meant everything and nothing.

"The only reason a child should make that noise is torture, mum. I mean, in the Black household, they would behead their house-elves because torture was just a bit too noisy." The dry sarcasm was understood by the married couple, but not by Jean.

"It was the humane thing to do." Cissy said in agreement, "when they got to be too old to be of use..."

Hermione nodded, gesturing with her finger going across her throat, cocking her head to the side almost comically. "Thbbbt."

They both looked at Jean to see if she got the joke. Judging from the series of emotions that went over her face of incredulity, horror, confusion, and neutral disappointment... she did.

"I swear you two are both horrible people!" Jean said, succumbing to a quiet chuckle to the dark humor.

Narcissa saw the pre-made rice dinners and was reading the directions carefully, amazed. "So you just boil water, stir this into the pot, and it's cooked? Why would muggles pay more for this?"
Hermione shrugged. "Simplicity? Convenience?"

Cissy shook her head at that. "Just get the raw materials and spices yourself. It's cheaper in the long run."

Jean frowned at the exchange. "Said from the woman who has a house slave." Rather than let the situation get worse, Hermione tried for a change in subject.

"Oh! Mac and cheese! It's been ages since I had it and I can prove the point..." Hermione turned the trolley around to go down the next aisle. Jean put her hand on the push-handle and told Hermione to just grab it while they went to the cleaning aisle. There was an exchanged glance between the married women and the thoughts were linked together.

'You're on your own here, it seems. Be careful.'

Narcissa heard her wife's voice in her head and nodded slightly. Come back in a bit. Promise to not embarrass you.

"What on earth is 'mac'?' Cissy asked. Jean's eyes narrowed as she took in her daughter's wife.

"You two communicated with just a look, didn't you? I've been with William nearly 20 years and I still don't know what goes through his mind at times."

"Sounds like Lucius. Though more times than not, he was hatching a scheme for profit or to get into another witch's robes."

"I just can't understand how you're so okay with all of this. Three months ago, my daughter kills your husband and you're fine with tying her down to a lifelong commitment?"

Narcissa sighed as she pushed the carriage to the cleaning supplies. Thank goodness I can look at the signs rather than the look on her face. "There was little choice in any of it; I was pressured to marry a man I couldn't love who was taught to subdue me and my preference of the fairer sex. So no, I wasn't raised in the same culture as you. I wasn't taught the same values, and have, through knowing Hermione, come to agree more with her outlook of the world while my own experiences have tempered her as well. I don't hold that she killed a cruel man in self-defense against her, and can only make the best of this situation with her now."

"She ought to have her childhood, though."

"Three years ago she was fighting a war everyone else thought was long over; I didn't take it from her. She wants to finish her education at Hogwarts, and get a career? I'll not hold her back." Jean's lips were pressed in frustration as she looked for another point to bring up.

"What about falling in love? Being young?"

Narcissa found an all-purpose cleaner that said it would work on floors and windows and dropped it into the trolley. "Maybe she does love me, have you thought of that? She built a room that has no magic in it; blocking everything magical. In there, the Bond we share, the Compulsion that has forced us together, is nullified. There is still love there, beneath it all, despite the unusual circumstances."

Jean sighed, resignedly. "This just seems so... unusual. I can't condone this."

"Then don't; I don't care. You won't be the first person who thinks it's wrong to see two women together." Cissy replied, a cold sharpness in her voice that drew a line in the proverbial sand.
Hermione took that moment to come around the corner with a blue box in her hand.

"Macaroni and cheese." Hermione said helpfully, forcing both women to meet her cheery expression.

"Narcissa, it's not that you both are women. It's that it occurred through a duel and that she killed someone."

Hermione scowled at the exchange and her look was clear.

'Go get us a bottle of wine. '

"Yes ma'am." Narcissa muttered as she strode away.

Okay Granger, you can do this. "Mum, I know you are still having to adjust to Narcissa in my life, so I'm going to be polite about this. This situation isn't her fault any more than mine, and she's not a bad woman. Yes, I did some horrible things over the past year while you were away; nicked food, broke into a bank, and killed people. I couldn't even do any Dark Magic because I've always tried to be a good person. It nearly killed me and my friends when we needed a quick getaway.

"Narcissa was able to do it, because I was weak then. She's fought alongside me, defended me, and we're good together. We really are. And she and I are going to have many, many people revile us for being on opposite sides of the war, and for being openly homosexual. But I'm throwing my lot in with her, because she's willing to help change the world for the better and she has the contacts and enough dirt on people in order to effect change."

My mother's eyes conveyed a lot of sorrow and regret that I should have expected. "Your father said he had 'the talk' with you. Said you took him to the cleaners when he mentioned the whole 'asking for your hand' thing. I guess I expected to see you and Ronald together, happily married with a few kids."

I choked at that. I had too, provided we both had our tubes tied. "Few meaning two, right? I know their family's penchant for breeding by the dozen."

My mum smiled at me with sad eyes. "No more than two, of course." Her eyes looked me over, trying to burn the memory into her mind. "You've changed, years ago, and I didn't get to see it happen over time because of that damned boarding school."

"I'll be a full adult this new year there, and I'll come visit every weekend. I took down Voldemort; they won't stop me." Her lips pressed a kiss on my forehead as she accepted it.

"My little girl, grown up. I'm sorry, Hermione. I don't want to lose any more time with you. The world isn't fully safe yet, and I worry."

I smiled consolingly. "Why do you think I'm sticking with her?"

Cissy returned, carrying two bottles of wine. "I just had the most fabulous conversation about wine with a foppish couple and were absolutely delighted to hear I had a wife!" Oh god, she didn't call them that, did she? "I think I really like the muggles!"

"Let's finish this list so we can get baking." I said pragmatically. Cissy nodded her head merrily and took an overly-enthusiastic gulp of her drink. Not even a second went by before her face winced from the brain-freeze effect.
I lowered my head and bit my lip from laughing as I pushed the trolley, pretending all was normal. She heard my snickering and got a playful tap on my shoulder for it.

We got to Grimmauld Place, Herpy in tow, and I had my trusty checklist to guide me through it.

"Andi, is Teddi upstairs and napping?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, behind the strongest one-way silencing charm I could muster. I'll hear him cry, but he won't hear the din from here." I nodded appreciatively. "Cake! Great. Um, take the cake to the kitchen table. Thanks again, Herpy." Andi said as she was clearing the long dining room. Herpy nodded happily, carrying the cake with a levitation charm as I looked around and cross-referenced my list. *Lists are good.*

"So, Harry's at work, Severus and Fleur are on their way with beverages, the Weasleys are coming as well, same for as many Order and D.A. members as we were able to contact."

Luna came in through the back door. "Hello, Hermione. I'm glad you invited me. Do you need help with the decorations?"

I nodded, relieved of another task crossed off the list. *Though should I worry about what she would think was appropriate decor?" Yeah, have at it. I've got to make room for the presents." Luna nodded, waved her wand across the long wall, and sat down to meditate. I wanted to ask what she was doing, or if she could not block the walkway, but then thought better of it. *She's obviously doing something and it's not really getting in my way.*

Andromeda asked over her shoulder as she wiped down the table and set the dishes to clean themselves in the sink. "So is my sister coming?"

"Yeah," I replied as I wrapped Harry's gift. "she's bringing my parents. Apparently she is needed to co-sign the mortgage because my parents' just got back from overseas. Something about a bank not trusting them to skive off. Bloody ridiculous if you ask me." *So they fled the country with magically forged documents. I never thought muggle banks would be so leery.*

Severus' voice filtered in from the hallway. "Actually, the entire financial sector is in chaos. The muggles may not know of the wizarding economy, but the volatility is beginning to spread. With the massive emigration of muggle-borns from Britain, the housing market started to crash. Property values plummeted, and those who borrowed against the equity are now out thousands."

"Good thing we moved our money to France, non?" Fleur replied, her wand casting a sticking charm to the wrapping paper I had. *I can do arithmancy and theoretical magic, but need a third hand in order to wrap a bloody book.*

"Thanks. Do you have a present to add to the collection?" I asked as Fleur pulled a long, skinny box from her purse.

Severus went to the kitchen and began to clean a cauldron. *Have Severus make the punch. Check.*

"Master Granger, will Kreacher be okay with me helping here?" Herpy asked cautiously. I nodded, but wasn't sure.

"His task is to keep Harry occupied until precisely 6 o'clock. That gives us about twenty more minutes for guests to arrive." I replied, wondering where everyone else was at.
A small cacophony of pops in the back yard told me that more people were here, and the collection of ginger hair told me exactly who had arrived.

"Don't worry, Misses Granger, I've taken the liberty of locking and concealing the liquor." I turned to thank Severus as my eyes widened at the furious bubbling.

"Severus, I said punch, not scalding oil! We're not defending battlements!" I exclaimed. He had asked me to resume calling him Professor Snape since I'd be returning to Hogwarts in just over a month. Oops.

"I assure you, it is quite cold." He summoned a dram of it at wand-point, a cup forming around the floating liquid. He took a sip, closing his eyes to savor it. "Perfect."

Fleur found a ladle in and brought it over with a stack of cups. "It is?" She asked, filling a cup for herself and taking a sip. "Exemplaire!" Her lips quirked as she took another sip.

Minerva came in through the front door, amicably chatting with my mum as my wife and father were scouring over some paperwork between themselves. Her head lifted as she took another whiff of the air. "Severus, did you brew polysapor?" She turned to my parents. "You two are in for a real treat..."

What on earth is she talking about? I wondered as Molly's eyes lingered on me for a second too long before flicking away purposefully. If she's going to be passive-aggressive around me and the wife, so be it.

Narcissa must have seen the exchange, because she slipped an arm around me and my head naturally rested on her shoulder. "Let it be, love. She's determined to hold onto her hate. You don't need to."

Her hand stroked my back in a calming circle, and I thanked her with a quick kiss on her lips. So what if they stare?

"Come on, everyone get settled into a place. It's not like we haven't seen a bit of snogging before." Draco's voice had cut through the room, silencing everyone. I turned to see him and Ginny carrying in a large box between the two of them. Ron, of course, was the one gawking with an annoyed Lavender on his arm.

"I wondered where he went..." Narcissa muttered. Kreacher popped into existence and gestured for everyone to get quiet. I looked at my watch, and saw it was almost time.

"Oh, lights out everyone!" I said, dimming the light overhead. We were so quiet, I could hear Neville's voice as Harry approached and opened the front door.

"...glad we have the Hit-Wizards to fall back on, Harry. Think the goblins are going to cave? I mean, they aren't getting any business or food either with everything shut down."

Harry's wand lit up in the hallway, and Severus immediately cast the counter-charm, keeping the room we were in totally devoid of light.

"Hey, Neville... my lumos charm isn't working." Harry said in a small panic. Neville strode past him, lighting up his own wand.

"Don't be so paranoid, Harry. Come on, I want to see Teddi." Neville replied, walking past Severus' charm and his own lumos spell extinguished as he stopped and stifled a laugh.

"Neville?! Andi?" Harry asked, taking another step closer. Severus canceled his spell and I raised the lights to the room, as everyone exclaimed, "SURPRISE!"
Harry's wand turned up to the ceiling as his eyes took in everyone. Shock was on his face as William and Jean lit the candles with matches. "You... bastards!" A grin cracked his face. "You bloody, magnificent, bastards..."

Ginny instantly pounced on him, wrapping herself around him in a tight embrace. "I've missed you loads, Harry. Been surrounded by witches and riding my broom has been my only outlet and that doesn't really take the edge off..." Draco was tapping her shoulder. "Right. Later." Harry put her down and extended his hand towards the former Malfoy.

Draco playfully sneered at the proffered hand and they instead hugged each other. "Happy birthday, man." As they pulled away from each other, the room fell into singing him the birthday song. Harry's eyes shone at the cake and the eighteen candles, blowing out the candles as Molly took to cutting and serving the cake for everyone.

I turned to see Luna was still sitting on the floor, meditating with her left index finger up in the air as if saying 'one minute'. I was about to ask what on earth she was doing until her hand balled up into a fist and she opened her eyes, the wall transforming into a moving mural that covered Harry's life since he first entered Hogwarts.

Luna stood up, looked slightly woozy, and wished Harry a Happy Birthday.

"I'm going to need some cake after this." Her voice had the airy tone as always, but seemed slightly tired. "Did I hear there was polysapor?" My eyes were stuck on the mural she made; Harry was catching Neville's Remembrall on the far left, and was rescuing her from Malfoy Manor and facing off Voldemort to the far right. Near the middle was an image of Harry soaking his hand in Essence of Murtlap from his "I Must Not Tell Lies" detentions with Umbridge, and quite a few of us couldn't keep from tearing up at the magnificence of Luna's charmwork.

"Herm, what's this punch I'm hearing of?" My father asked. I shook my head, flummoxed at it. It had no tangible smell, nothing I could put my finger on, yet...

Narcissa brought him a cup, smiling. "It has every flavor you can imagine. Provided you can imagine it." She sipped her own drink. "Liquid creme brulee."

William looked at her in disbelief. "That's not possible, if I were to imagine... I don't know, a... non-fat, double-bacon, five-cheese mocha..." He took a tentative sip and his eyes exploded with surprise. "Oh goodness, can I change it?" Cissy nodded.

"Imagine water to cleanse your palate. I learned that one the hard way." Narcissa handed her cup to me. "Imagine any flavor you can. Stay away from things with a texture, like a meat sauce. That never seems the same when it's completely smooth."

I took a sip without thinking, and the potion was something of a mix between my father's bacon blasphemy and creme brulee. "I think I mixed them, minus the cheese." I looked at the clear liquid. "Bacon latte." And sure enough, my next sip was bacon latte.

I looked over to Harry, who was excitedly drinking the potion beside George and Severus. It's so unusual to see Severus enjoying himself at a party.

Molly was having plates of the cake passed around, and when one reached my wife she was looking it over for traces of candlewax. I just shook my head as I took a bite of the cake, and found the chocolate raspberry ganache perfect. Harry nodded his thanks to me, letting me know he loved the cake as well.
George took the moment to stand on the table and made a sharp whistle for attention.

"Oi! Time for presents!" George handed Harry a thin flat box. Harry tore the wrapping off and opened it, pulling a cloak out.

"Top of the line tactical robe, complete with the strongest shields I can make and pre-charged buttons for disillusionment, home-designated portkeys, and a slew of healing and offensive potions on inner pockets for easy use. Healing's on your right, offensive potions on your left side, so you can throw right-handed. Oh, and Draco recommended a silencing charm, but I'll have to add that later." George beamed at his creation.

"Blimey, that's amazing! I didn't realize you expanded so much from the shield-hats!"

Severus had his present out next. "I assure you, Harry, that you'll be as equally impressed with mine." It looked like a wand-box, but instead Harry pulled out a brown leather gauntlet with white stitching. "It's a bracer for your left arm, keeps your wand nearby and not in your rear trouser pocket. It will also keep anyone from snatching your wand from you; once it is put on, it will only release the wand to you."

Harry nodded his thanks as Fleur stood before him, chipper yet empty-handed.

"Um, hi Fleur." Harry said nervously.

Fleur nodded. "Put it on. I added my own little touch to it." Harry shrugged and did so, noticing a cold twinge go through his arm.

"Fleur, it's cold!"

"Only for a second. Make your left hand into a fist and point it at me." Harry was a bit nervous, but complied.

"This stitching... it's your hair, isn't it?" He asked. Fleur nodded, putting her hand in front of his fist.

"Now, nod your wrist down slightly. It'll be okay." As Harry did so, a short burst of Veela flame came out of the bracer, and Fleur caught the flame and extinguished it.

"I... I did that, didn't I?"

Fleur smiled sadly. "If I am to be stuck in my full Veela form, I might as well do some good with it. Happy Birthday."

I came around with Narcissa and handed him my present. "Happy Birthday, Harry."

He looked at it, and judged by the weight and size. "This isn't Hogwarts, A History is it?" I smiled and shook my head.

"I thought you could use some help in how to fight. This is The Book of Five Rings, by Miyamoto Musashi. It will give you strategies from a philosophical point of view, like the Strike of Non-Thought. This could help save your life someday."

Narcissa handed hers over as well, and Harry tore the wrapping apart to find a companion book. "Harry, this is The Art of War by Sun Tzu. Hermione's book will help you win a duel or a skirmish, but this one shows you how to win the war. How to destroy your opponent's supply lines, break their morale, how to best use intelligence."
Harry took both books into his hands and nodded his heartfelt thanks. "Guess I have to start reading for myself now, right?" He turned towards Ginny like a plant seeks sunlight as she kissed him quickly on the lips.

"Draco and I worked on this one together, hope you like it." Harry's eyes took in the large box, surprised.

"Is this what you two have been off doing?" He said, his eyes sparkling at them. It seemed odd to me, but I was distracted as another redhead cut between them.

Ron had a large present for him to open, though it was smaller than what Ginny had, and had an inscrutable look on his face.

"Here ya go Harry. Thought you could use something to lighten the mood up."

Harry looked at his friend oddly. "Um, I'll get to you after my girlfriend, mate."

Ron winced at it. "Yeah, but..." Everyone looked at him, and he realized he was making a scene. "I'm your best friend." He muttered.

I looked away, the awkward moment getting more uncomfortable. Molly was obviously avoiding eye contact with Narcissa and myself (I didn't even realize my arm was around her, huh) as Arthur was drinking out of a flask he had slipped out of his robes.

Harry moved around a petulant-looking Ron to open the box before him. Inside was a cuckoo clock, with multiple arms on the middle spindle. The arms were blank, and it took him a while to figure out what it was. It's just like Molly's clock.

"You could prime this with your own blood to track your children someday, or designate different arms to others now but possibly run out of hands to track your offspring."

"Well I don't want half a dozen children." Harry said, not noticing the looks of shock from Molly and Arthur. It was as if they didn't really know him, and now looked at him leerily.

Arthur seemed slightly drunk as he tried to point to the birthday boy. Molly responded, however. "There's nothing wrong with having a large family."

Harry shook his head, trying to agree with him. "Never said it was a bad thing, I just want to stop at two so I can provide enough time and resources. I don't think I could do that for more than two kids." He looked to Ginny. "That okay?"

Ginny nod of agreement seemed to set off Arthur. "What, you can't stand the idea of shagging a witch? That why you're with Draco all the time now? That boy's always been as queer as his mother. "

Narcissa was in front of him in a flash. "I'll put up with a lot of your drunk antics, Arthur. If you want to self immolate your reputation this way, go right ahead. I'll even let you keep insulting me with the same insinuations. But this is Harry's birthday and you're taking it too far." His eyes finally met hers, and it took in the repressed fury she had. "And you will keep my son out of it." The energy in the room climbed a few degrees, with emotions running rampant, accidental magic could go off at any moment.

"Don't you threaten my husband! " Molly snapped.

"My wife isn't making a threat!" I interjected back at her, my fingers itching for my wand. I know
better than this. I know to not escalate this situation.

"Harry, I think you should open my present." Ron said, pushing his present into Harry's hands. I could tell that Molly wanted to have the last word here, just like she was used to getting when at home.

"I don't know why you lot aren't in Azkaban right now. Oh right, you whored yourself to Hermione!"

The sound of a loud slap echoed in the now-silent room. Molly was cupping her cheek, shocked.

"Listen and listen good. We are not evil. Draco's not getting charged with anything and is no longer going to have Harry as his warden. I'm no whore, and I will not permit you to speak ill of my wife. Is that clear?"

Arthur's wand was out and about to point at her, but I was faster, disarming him and knocking him back a foot to land on his arse. By the time Molly recognized what happened, Fleur stood between her and the Cissy, her flaming hand parrying Molly's wand.

"I think you should check on your husband now." Fleur's french accent was noticeable again.

Molly's eyes narrowed coldly. "So you're standing with the perverts. I always knew you weren't good enough for Bill. Veelas aren't supposed to survive their mate's death." What was that supposed to mean?

"Open my present, Harry." Ron said bitterly, "Now that 'Mione and Draco ruined your birthday."

Harry looked like he was repressing the urge to scowl at his friend's attitude. I wouldn't blame him if he did. As Harry opened the box, he pulled out a hat. Once it was on his head, a pair of hands came out of the top and starting clapping. Everyone looked at Ron awkwardly, even Luna.

Ron laughed out loud, and for the first time I found it actually disturbing, as if something broke in his mind. It had a tinny feel to it, like it was rehearsed and played back on a low-quality gramophone. He looked around as everyone was looking at him awkwardly and he shrugged it off. "You know, you have to remember to laugh sometimes."

Remember to laugh sometimes? Is he FUCKING kidding me?

Harry turned his face away as he was deliberating something. When he looked back, there was a grim smile. "Because of the bank closure, there's no money. No money, no grocers. No grocers, no food. We'd have a full scale riot by now if people weren't worried the goblins would come out and kill them! Right now, Godric's Hollow is being patrolled by vigilantes, because they think the Ministry is no longer in charge anymore and that there are no qualified Aurors to enforce the law while Snatchers roam free. Neville and I? We just got back from watching a group of muggle-borns burn a Pureblood witch at the stake because we didn't get there in time. 'She was a snatcher' was their reasoning to burn her to death. I don't want to laugh. I want the Goblin rebellion over, and I want order restored." Witch-burning? Has it really gotten that bad?

Ron shook his head, almost like a convulsive shudder. "I can't. It's not my fault. I'm done playing sidekick."

Harry flicked his wand, slamming the front door open. "Get out of my house, Ron." Ron stomped is way out, followed by his parents. George, Charlie, and Ginny stood there, conflicted at the row.

"I don't want to take sides." Ginny said, attempting to sound diplomatic, "but I didn't know it got this
bad. Mum's got her own garden, you know." The front door slammed shut, and the sound of a baby crying came down from upstairs. Andromeda closed her eyes and counted to five, summoning her inner calm.

"Well, I guess the party's over. Feel free to help clean up; I have a grandson to check on." Andi's voice sounded tired.

Harry put a consoling hand on her shoulder. "I got it." Harry went upstairs to deal with his godson as the rest of us gathered our belongings and made to leave.

"Um, 'Mione?" Narcissa asked timidly. *I didn't like her voice like that.* When I eyed her, I realized how much I didn't like her looking like this. *I'm starting to really hate the Weasleys...*

"Don't listen to them, my love." I said automatically. She nodded, her eyes unfocused on the reality around us.

"Can you get your parents home? I think I need some time here, with my sister." She went and took her sister upstairs, leaving me to apparate my parents home.
Draco woke up blearily, confused at the taste in his mouth. *I hate every flavour jelly beans, so why am I tasting grass?* He ransacked his memory, which was usually a bit slow the first thing in the morning, only to realize the delicate arm that was draped over him. *Slytherin's Mudblood, don't tell me...*

He turned his head and tried cracking an eye open. It was blindingly bright, but all he needed was the color. *Don't let it be... damn it.* It was coppery-red; the one color he didn't want to wake up next to. He wasn't much of a morning person, maybe he could just sleep in and wait for her to leave on her own. All he could remember was taking the last of the polysapor potion and mixing it with vodka. He was pretty certain he thought it was a brilliant idea last night.

As Draco recollected his memories of last night, one thing was becoming quite clear: he was fully dressed in bed. He had a full bladder that needed to be emptied, but he also had a delicate hand between his shirt and his chest that made the slightest skin-to-skin contact mean all the more. *Bloody hell, I had better get out of this before she wakes up and flips out.*

He got out of bed and used the lavatory, trying to figure out what happened to make Ginny wind up in bed with him. There was a row between Harry and Ron, the ginger left with his parents in tow, and Harry went upstairs to take care of his godson. *Ginny didn't want to go back to The Burrow, and she didn't feel right staying there.* So they decided to steal the last of the polysapor potion and cut it with vodka.

Once he was done and cleaned up, he had to figure out what to do with the girl in his bed. *Wake her or go back to bed and resume cuddling?* He looked to his pocket watch and thought it was too early to wake her up. If he was feeling this bad, she could only be worse. *But if I crawl back into bed with her now, it would be inappropriate. And she's close friends with my mother-in-law. Better wake her.*

"Ginny, wake up." Draco said, his eyes looking for any sign of feigned sleep. Her eyes clenched tighter before they opened.

"Harry, let me sleep... oh, boy." Ginny's eyes wider, but they were still bleary. "We didn't... no. We didn't." She breathed a sigh of relief.

Draco put on his knowing smirk. "Or did we?"

A moment of panic went through the Gryffindor girl. Her hands raked over herself while under the covers, and she shook her head. "We didn't. Just like you and Harry back in France." She finished by sticking her tongue out at him. She winced as well at the taste in her mouth. *I wonder if she also tastes grass...*

Draco felt slightly affronted at that dig at his womanizing skills. He used his best seductive voice. "I
could have persuaded you."

Ginny rolled over in the bed, her green eyes shining up at him, and replied in kind. "You had your chance, Malfoy." Her dress from last night was rumpled and slid off of her shoulder, exposing her just enough to have his eyes linger on her bare skin. There was something in how she said it, challenging him, pushing him just a little... it was enough. Draco's conviction hardened into something solid, a weapon he knew how to hold in his very being. She's doing this for attention, and I will not play into it. I will not be so easily manipulated like Harry is.

Draco looked her in the eyes and got close to her. He didn't need to touch her, nor threaten her, just... tell her. Firmly. "I'm not going to be your little secret from Potter. Nor any kind of well-trained pet to gratify your whims upon command." She shook as the room seemed to plunge into ice and looked downward from him.

"um, okay..." Ginny's body language screamed of guilt and shame. They both knew the game they were playing, and he stopped her.

"Do I make myself clear, Ginny?" Draco drawled out, "none of this passive shit anymore. You want something, you ask. You tell Harry what you want, because I'm not going to be snogging you behind his back. He deserves at least that."

Ginny turned away from him as she got out of bed, pausing at the doorway of the bathroom. The Weasley girl knew he let a bit of truth slip out. He wanted to snog her, but wasn't willing to hurt Harry by doing so. She turned her head to look at him, angry at the unusual situation, but couldn't raise her eyes to meet his.

"Take your own damn advice, Draco."

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Harry thought it was going to be a relatively slow day. Sure, Hogsmeade was still contested territory as the Anarchist Wizards there refused to recognize any government, preferring their own self-policing ways while the Goblin Rebellion made the Wizarding Community worse by the day... but it was a 'new normal' he could get acclimated to.

The lack of goblins springing out of the ground to cut you in half with stolen wands was part of it, so he was supposed to help guard the prisoners and courtroom with a few D.A. members as the Wizengamot dispensed justice on the captured Death Eaters and the Snatchers who were caught fighting at the Final Battle.

Antonin Dolohov was on trial, and no Solicitor was willing to defend him. Not like he has much of a defense, his yelling about killing all the blood-traitors and how mudbloods are causing more squibs to be born. Harry found it a relief that Dolohov wanted to represent himself, but even so, he and Cormac were having to re-cast silencing charms on the galley in order to keep the trial from being disrupted.

For some reason, Dolohov's defense was 'the Goblins made him do it'. Hoping to get him sent to Azkaban for life in prison now included disproving his assertion, else it risked him being released as part of a mistrial. When the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot asked for a representative of the Goblins to step forward, Harry saw the flaw in the plan. Was this a setup? He didn't think that an imprisoned Death Eater could orchestrate any kind of break-out with Goblin help, but every assumption he had made before about the Goblins had cost the war effort dearly.

Griphook came forward, brandishing the Sword of Gryffindor. "I am Griphook, and demand justice in the form of Harry Potter's head for the lives lost and the property destroyed at Gringott's."
"Harry Potter is not on trial, and the Wizengamot will not hand over our Head Auror to a bunch of blood-thirsty long-fingers!" Harry was glad to know that the Chief Mugwump, Tiberius Ogden, was loyal to him, but wondered if opinions like his instigated the latest Goblin Rebellion. Though I'm not about to just sacrifice myself to the Goblins because they were dumb enough to blind and enslave a dragon in the depths of their bank.

"Let the boy speak for himself! He had me forced at wand-point to betray my own kind in order to sneak him in; let him admit the crimes he perpetrated." What? We had a bargain!

Harry grew frustrated at this. "I only did that in order to find and destroy the-" Harry's mouth shut quickly and against his will. His mind was racing, looking for something, anything else to ponder about. He fought the urge and thought about what he was trying to not think about. I cannot say 'Horcruxes'? Harry mused, realizing that the Unspeakables were essentially attempting to restrict access to such knowledge. It's like a 'Notice-me-not' charm, but about magic, about thinking about it... Harry didn't like the implications of that.

Cormac didn't seem to understand what was going on, but cast relashio on the Goblin and had him restrained. "No weapons allowed." Nobody is curious about what I was about to say? That's... interesting.

Harry saw what was about to happen, and blurted out a warning. "The blade is poisoned." Cormac nodded his thanks and, once forcing the goblin to drop the weapon, carefully picked it up by the pommel and avoided the blade itself.

"That is property of the Goblins!" Griphook exclaimed, "It does not belong to Wizard-kind!"

"How did you get it, then?" Harry asked, knowing he could trap the goblin in a lie. "Care to answer that with Veritaserum?"

Griphook flashed his teeth defiantly. They were pointed and bestial; smiling for them would only be a way to threaten another. "So you refuse to surrender yourself to Goblin justice?"

"I did nothing wrong, Griphook." Harry replied evenly. The goblin dropped to one knee, sneering.

"Then all of the dead, is upon your head." The ground seemed to ripple and melt beneath him as he sank and disappeared. This isn't good. Harry cast a Patronus and sent it to the Minister and to Neville, warning them of an imminent attack.

"It's not your fault, Harry. Whatever those Goblins are up to, it's not your fault."

All of the dead is upon your head... all of the dead... Harry's mind raced for what that meant. Luna and Neville had suggested tracking any tremors in order to track the movement of the goblins, but if his hunch was right... Harry focused and produced his stag Patronus and ordered Krum to St. Mungo's to double-check the vibrations that had been felt before.

Kingsley came down from his observation seat of the Wizengamot and looked at the Head Auror cautiously. "Harry, what is it?"

"The bodies from the Awards Banquet. Are they still there?"

"A lot of them, yes. We've been backed up and nobody has come to claim them. They are in the morgue and preserved."

A lot of bodies. "About how many?"
"No idea, most of them were chopped up so they would stop attacking us. They are just parts."
Kingsley said, confused at Harry's dawning horror.

"We don't have time to debate this." He wanted to send off another Patronus, but he needed to know who was there so he could ask. "Can you contact them, now?!"

Kingsley answered simply. "I... I can send an owl."

"There's no time!"

"Harry, stop!" Kingsley said, trying to make the boy see reason. "They are dead and dismembered! They pose no risk." The Minister sent word to Severus about the threat on the hospital, just in case.

"Merlin's beard I hope you're right. Cormac, get the prisoners secured. Minister, we're about to get targeted again. Let's get our defenses up in time. What kind of security does Saint Mungo's have?"

I can defend the Ministry, but Saint Mungo's...

"It's a hospital, so... there's the welcome witch on the ground floor?" Cormac replied, his voice wavering. He realized exactly how vulnerable it would be. "Goblins wouldn't attack a hospital full of sick people, would they?"

Ginny found herself in the kitchenette as a house elf put a plate of breakfast burritos in front of them as Draco was using the Wizarding Wireless.

"Didn't take you for a fan of Celestina Warbeck..."

Draco waved her off. "Wanted to hear the foreign markets report as well as Quidditch licencing deals." His wand was focused on changing the station as it landed on a programme's return from commercial that identified itself as 'Voice of the Resistance'.

"Why do these wankers even have a show? Not even two months ago they were toadying the Pureblood rubbish. They are willing to say anything for attention." Draco scoffed, but the next line got his attention.

"...now we turn to our new host, Rita Skeeter."

"Mother's going to love this."

"Good Morning, dear listeners. As you may know, the Pure-blooded Kingsley Shacklebolt as the new Minister of Magic is attempting to have his little regime change as smoothly as possible, and conspired to have me fired from the Daily Prophet. Rest assured, I will be reporting the unvarnished truth for you read-I mean, listeners- to know what's really going on.

"As we have found out, after the social upheaval that transpired in the last year over allegations of You-Know-Who returning and the Ministry's ill-timed attempt to reach out to the muggle-born community, we cannot allow Purebloods to remain in power and dictate how we must live our lives now."

A man's voice tried to sound interested and curious, but only came off as rehearsed.

"Are you saying that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named never returned?"

Rita continued, saccharinely sweet.

"I'm saying that a series of quite unfortunate events occurred, all taking place due to a petty
squabble between factions of Pureblooded Wizards. In my book, Albus Dumbledore's faction is no better than Lucius Malfoy's."

There was another woman there, saying the obvious in order to set up this 'dialogue'.

"But they are both deceased now."

Ginny rolled her eyes at the exchange. This was ham-handed and scripted. Rita's response was pitch-perfect.

"And isn't it interesting that Muggleborn Hermione Granger was being groomed right beside Harry Potter by the Headmaster and Minerva McGonagall to fight the boogeyman we call 'You-Know-Who'? This isn't some fanciful tale of Good versus Evil, this is about two secretive factions who manipulated everyone to their own ends. The Knights of Walpurgis, better remembered as The Death Eaters, and the Order of the Phoenix. The self-righteousness of the Order's own name is cloying. It makes me wonder if Severus realized he was being manipulated all this time by both sides and killed Albus in an understandable attempt to be free from all of the cloak-and-dagger machinations of the Purebloods."

"So what does it all matter now?"

"The Death Eaters took over the Ministry, we can tell by how Lucius worked hard to crack down on Order members and put a bounty on the heads of Harry and Hermione. But the final battle at Hogwarts shows us that the Order is now in control. It's a regime change, pure and simple. Purebloods are still in charge, and muggleborns are still in hiding. The muggleborns that were detained before are still at Azkaban."

"You mean the Muggleborn Registration Act?"

"Yes, the Ministry's outreach program was twisted into something quite horrible. Even now, muggleborns are being held prisoner. Pureblood Kingsley says that he got rid of the Dementors there, but what of the people? 'It's a delicate thing' he says... I think he wants to leave them there to rot."

"Draco, can you turn this rubbish off?" Ginny asked. Draco agreed, flicking it off.

"So that's her new ploy. Discredit everyone and stoke the anti-pureblood sentiment that's already there. Harry mentioned something about vigilantes burning Purebloods and snatchers at the stake." Draco said as he wondered if society would ever really come back together again.

The sound of fire roaring and the subsequent whoosh informed them that something came through the floo. Seconds later, Herpy handed flyer to Draco. "Young Master, the Ministry has put out an alert!"

Alarmed, Ginny turned the Wireless back on and the device flipped over to the emergency station.

"-TO REMAIN INDOORS... THIS IS AN EMERGENCY BROADCAST FROM THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC. EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, CURFEW IS IN EFFECT. ALL CITIZENS ARE TO REMAIN IN THEIR HOMES UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. ST. MUNGO'S HAS BEEN PUT UNDER PRIORITY ONE QUARANTINE. WE ASK YOU TO REMAIN CALM, AND TO REMAIN INDOORS... THIS IS AN EMERGENCY BROADCAST FROM THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC. EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, CURFEW IS IN EFFECT. ALL CITIZENS ARE TO REMAIN IN THEIR HOMES UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. ST. MUNGO'S HAS BEEN PUT UNDER PRIORITY ONE"
Ginny turned off the Wireless and brandished her wand as she began to leave the room.

"Ginny, where do you think you're going?!" Draco shouts, and forcing her to turn and face him. *We don't have time for this, Draco...*

"I have to go help! Harry's gonna need me!" His jaw was clenched in defiance. Hers was set as well.

"He will be too busy worrying over you."

"I DON'T NEED HIM TO!" she screamed fearfully. She remembered treating the injured and the dead back at Hogwarts, and couldn't see him lying prone like that as well. "I just want to keep him safe."

Draco nodded in understanding. "I'll do that. Besides, he and I both have tactical robes now." The very fabric was designed to deflect and repel hostile spellwork, and she knew Harry would be wearing his. Rationally, she knew he could make it out of there alive, but the panic had set in.

"I can't just do nothing, Draco! I love him, and he's wading back into danger again..." Ginny said, fighting tears from coming up.

Draco held her as she let herself fall apart in his arms. *It's okay, it's just for a few moments.* "I know, Gin. I feel the same way too." Ginny sniffed loudly as Draco's lips pressed upon her forehead with tender devotion.

Her arms squeezed him a bit more, and the moment between them went from comforting to something more. "I know you do, Draco. You know if things were different..."

Draco knew, and didn't care. "Don't say it. Don't jinx it." He summoned his tactical robes and handed them to her. *He was giving up his own defensive gear to me?*

"I can't take this from you-"

"-Yes you can. I'll make due for now; George and I were talking about making improvements anyways."

Ginny looked at the blonde, and the unspoken words hung between them. *He wanted to keep me safe, not just for Harry's sake. Even at the risk of his own.*

Cissy and Hermione were in their tactical robes already, hurrying out to the appariation spot in the atrium. Hermione was dual-wielding wands as Narcissa had her wand and a muggle weapon slung onto her back. "We got word by Patronus, Draco. The Goblins are inside the hospital. If you're coming, try to apparate directly into the Janus Thickney Ward." The pops let us know that they had left.

"Draco, I just wanted to say-" Ginny started, but was hushed by the pleading look in his eyes.

"Don't say it, Ginny. Save it for a better moment, after all this is done." As Ginny looked at him, there was something in his face, a look of hard-earned restraint crumbling at the closeness they had together.

*I was never the kind of witch to practice restraint,* she thought, as she clasped his face in both of her hands and kissed him.

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*QUARANTINE...."*
Severus and Fleur were the first to arrive at the St. Mungo's, getting the Patronus from Kingsley about the potential threat. It was something that the Goblins would do, attacking the injured and sick for maximum casualties. Severus knew the Ministry had kept stronger defenses around the Longbottoms as a professional courtesy, and knew he could use that to his advantage. As they appared directly into the protected Ward, he saw Healer Strout with his former colleague Gilderoy Lockhart practicing his alphabet in cursive. Perhaps since we're not on the ground floor nor underground, we have a better chance at fighting off the Goblins.

Chaotic wandfire echoed in the hallways, and the hospital was already crawling with hostile goblins. Fleur's hands were fighting the urge to blaze with Veela fire as she twitched with the wand in her hand, eyes sweeping the room repeatedly as she was on the lookout for enemies. The public address system fought to be heard over the blasts and screams.

"This is Healer Pye in the Dai Llewellyn Ward! We're under attack! Smethwyck was hit by some Goblin spell and I don't know how to treat him! Please, send assistance!"

"This is Hit Wizard Peasegood. Gumboil and I are at the ground floor lobby; the whole hospital is under attack. We'll work our way up there when we can. Try to find a safe location, barricade yourself if you need to, and attempt whatever diagnostic or healing charm you can think of on your friend."

"Please! I can't do this alone! I just barely made full Healer!"

"Severus, he's scared. We should try to get down there and help him." Fleur pleaded as Severus was magically reinforcing the walls.

"Viktor, do you have your broom on you?" Severus asked, relieved to see him extract it instantly.

"Good. This building is about to get sealed so that nothing can escape. I need you to quickly scout around the building; get a measure of the enemy and see where they are in St. Mungo's." Viktor hopped on his broom and vanished a window as he flew outside.

"We need to have a secure area first, and I sent a Patronus to Narcissa and Hermione to back us up."

Severus replied, weighing the decision to call in everyone here. The Ministry could also be a target, and Harry is with the Wizengamot overseeing Dolohov's trial... You're going to have to, Healer! Check him for vitals, is his magical signature still there?"

"Okay, he... no... he's dead. Merlin, he's dead..."

"Okay, well, there's nothing you can do for him then. Get yourself in a secure location and help will arrive when we can get there. Put up any protection charms you know. Do you understand me?"

Severus' spell-work punched a hole in the anti-apparition wards for this room, just enough so Narcissa and Hermione could get in this way. Peasegood's closer to the Healer, it makes better tactical sense to have them work their way up one level than it is for us to go down two.

"Yeah, I think I can do that. Secure the area, lock the doors, and ward them, right? Hey, Smethwyck, you're alright?"

The voice trailed off into a short scream of surprise and faded into a thick, wet gurgle. Severus knew that sound intimately from his days as a Death Eater. Crushed windpipe.

"Pye?! HEALER PYE?! Come on, Pye, answer me!"
In the background, Severus could almost make out Gumboil saying something. The hospital seemed to become a few degrees colder as the bright cheerful lighting dropped to half-strength, and a pulsating red light going off as a silent alarm. Just as I expected...

"ATTENTION: SAINT MUNGO'S IS BEING QUARANTINED, PRIORITY ONE. UNKNOWN THREAT HAS BEEN DETECTED. PLEASE REMAIN CALM."

I held onto Narcissa's arm as we popped into existence at the Janus Thickey Ward, and we instantly turned back-to-back as we took in the room around us. I had both wands out; I wasn't about to pull my punches anymore with these bastards. The first thing I noticed was that the lighting was subdued, and the pulses of red light alerted me that something was definitely wrong.

Severus did a type of fencing salute with his wand and I returned a respectful nod. Lockhart had stopped signing his name on whatever scrap paper he had and was looking around in fear of the red-pulsed light. To his credit, he went over and sat with the Longbottoms and did his best to comfort them.

"Glad you came. The hospital is going on lockdown; nothing can get out until the threat can be isolated and neutralized." Severus said gravely. "Protocol One was designed back when there were fears that muggleborns might bring back the bubonic plague or the Black Death by mixing our races."

"I knew that the hospital had a rudimentary sentience, but can it actually detect and fight an epidemic?" Narcissa asked, the nearby wandfire echoing as vibrations under our feet.

"Not really. It just knows to not let the disease get out." Severus replied, "and I doubt that the hospital is recognizing hostile goblins as an unknown disease."

Fleur sneered at that, an unnatural sound coming out of her beaky face. "They are using Inferi again, then."

"So we were let in because it thinks we are the cure." I replied, pacing my way over to the doors that lead out of the ward, and peeking out the door and down the hallway. "Just one goblin there." I backed away, closing and warding the door, as a hailstorm of spells ricocheted around the hallway and a series of bright-orange spells slammed in a series against the door. There was an eerie thrum as each one hit, slowly tearing down the defensive wards Severus had laid into it. Putting both wands in my right hand, I cracked open the door and cast the strongest Confringo I could manage. The explosion was nearly deafening, and there was no return of wand-fire.

Poking my head out, I saw a smear of red and I pulled back instantly. My mind wouldn't make sense of it beyond that the threat was neutralized. There should have been some remains, a scrap of cloth or bone or hair, but all I saw was red. Don't try to make sense of the carnage, just survive this now.

Krum appeared behind me, along with Draco and Ginny. My wife didn't seem happy about it.

"What are you doing here?! Where's your... oh." She nodded to Ginny, "you have his... very well. Draco, try to stay back." There was a weight in the looked they exchanged, and I wasn't sure what had happened.

"Herm-own-knee, there are no goblins upstairs on the top floor yet. It appears they tunneled in from below. It didn't look like anyone was alive on the ground floor." Viktor said, "we could send Draco up there to secure it and to bring us supplies." Fifth floor is tea room, cafeteria... and HOSPITAL SHOP! It will be vacant and a place we can fortify from, along with any supplies we could think of.
"Brilliant! Okay, well first we need..." I blasted a hole in the ceiling, and began to transfigure a tightly-spiraling staircase to connect the floors. "Draco, you and Ginny get up there, find us supplies to make weapons, destroy the lifts, whatever else you can think of. Just because there are no Goblins up there now doesn't mean it's going to remain safe. Isolate and barricade so that this staircase is the only way they have access. I'll do the same on this floor for the same reason. It'll be a pinch-point, so if we get overrun, you can mow them down easily." Draco nodded his understanding.

If it gets that bad, we'll already be dead down here. That went without saying. I turned to the Potions Master.

"Severus, could you-"

"-not take orders from you?" He said, cutting me off. I was being bossy again, wasn't I? I thought, and Narcissa was nodding her agreement.

"You should know that there are Hit Wizards at the ground level, and there were two healers in Llewellyn Ward."

"Um, were?"

"One died, the other quit communicating via the public address system." Severus replied dryly. "There are patients, Healers, and nurses on every floor, and if I'm correct, the Goblins are doing a basic sweep-and-clear."

Sweep and clear. Such generic words to mean 'kill everything in your path'. It explained why there were only two goblins up here yet why there was a virtual bloodbath below.

"Actually, Severus, the last words Healer Pye said made it sound like the other one wasn't still dead." Narcissa said, wincing at the implication.

"So, definitely Inferi. I can chop them up just fine." I answered, steeling my resolve. Inferi are nothing but slow-moving, animated corpses. I handled these before.

Narcissa found the microphone at the Welcome Witch station and turned on the PA system. "To any survivors, the the top two floors are relatively safe. Saint Mungo's will not let anyone out until this emergency is resolved. We have supplies and can offer medical assistance if needed. And to the Goblins, we are going to hunt you down and mop the floors with your blood."

Narcissa put down the bulky mic, the middle piece suspended in the large iron ring by a series of small springs. She knew that the muggles' had invented this technology over 80 years ago, but that the Wizarding world didn't seem to want or need to advance their own technology if what they had worked.

"Misses Mal-um, Granger?"

She recognized the voice. Poor Arnie, he's here of all days...

"You're alive! Really wish this were better circumstances. You should know that the morgue in the basement here was overrun by goblins as the entry point, so I sealed that entrance by flooding it. Desperate times and measures, you know."

His voice sounded pained. Narcissa's finger rested on the button and clicked as she began to broadcast through the hospital.

"Arnie, try to get up here. Save your strength." Narcissa remembered the times she would talk him out of pressing charges against Lucius for the bruises he left on her, and how he told her that he'd
serve as her witness should she ever want to have him sent to Azkaban for how he treated her. Lucius used to accuse her of sleeping with him, which she found preposterous, considering her sexual orientation.

"Sorry, mum. Got a job to do, people to save. The building thinks the Inferi are a contagion; so the only way to get out is to kill the disease, or the building. Good news, though: a lot of them seem to be bound to their beds as if St Mungo's is trying to restrain the illness from spreading. However, the magical matrix is pretty damaged here, the building wasn't designed to withstand this much magic being thrown around recklessly. If you gave to, kill the building to escape."

He coughed, the sound was something thick and painful to hear over the intercom. He's telling me like he doesn't think he'll make it.

"Where are you? I'll come down and get you, if I must!" Narcissa said, her mind reeling as she heard spell-fire overhead; her son was already disabling the lifts as her wife had planned. That's okay, we still have the stairways, and those can be defended against with some sort of caltrop...

"Second floor, Healer Pye is dead. Had to behead him myself. That's the contagion. There were no goblins casting a spell on the dead to rise; once you die, you turn into one of them."

Everything that dies... becomes an animated corpse, trying to kill?

"I... understand." We're going to be easily outnumbered and have to show zero mercy to anyone around us who falls in battle.

"Got winged pretty bad by a spell. Started bleeding, but I had some dittany and made a bandage to cover the wound so as to not attract more of the dead. You have to promise me something."

Narcissa knew what it was going to be, but hoped against all hope and would make the wizard say it.

"Okay. But call me Cissy." All of my friends call me Cissy, and you've been a great friend. Don't ask it, please...

"Cissy, if I die here, I'll become one of them. I don't want to hurt others; I don't want to... exist... like that. You burn me to ash, okay?"

He coughed again, and there was a sound of regret.

"Bugger. Internal bleeding."

"You're not dead yet, so don't give in. Do whatever it takes to survive and get up here. If you don't make it."

"I'll be coming up to kill you, Cissy. Don't let me."

"I won't. I'll stop you." Narcissa's eyes teared up, but there was no time to mourn. Just fight. Just kill. Just survive.

Hermione's hand was on her shoulder. It was reassuring, a signal of life among the madness. "Narcissa, ask him about the survivors." The Slytherin nodded.

"Arnie, you said you were on the second floor. Were there any survivors on the first?" Did you kill everything in sight to survive? Even then, how many Inferi are in the flooded morgue?

Arnie's voice was shaky with the burdensome truth.
"They all got killed, so now they are um, Un-dead. I ran and blocked the door and stairwell. There were... there were still screams, but I couldn't get to them in time."

Hermione had sketched out the floorplans to each level of the hospital, and pointed out which staircases would have to be destroyed in order to impede what she called the 'zombie apocalypse'. "The goblins have raised an army without having to raise each Inferi one at at time... how are they doing this?"

"There's only one way to turn the dead into Inferi without a line of sight to the corpse." He cast the Patronus Charm, and ordered Harry and Neville to avoid St. Mungo's at all costs. "The goblins have the Resurrection Stone." A chill went up my spine as Severus' words made horrific sense.

Harry was surprised at how little chaos was going on at the Ministry. Do enough 'duck and cover' drills and they begin to efficiently run and hide from danger. He checked over the wards as the D.A. members patrolled the hallways. Ernie and Katie were throwing up the wards in one hallway as Terry Boot and Susan Bones were doing the same for the lower levels. Harry nodded at the efficient redundancy of his 'buddy system'. Cormac, his buddy, was still putting away the prisoners so Harry needed a different pair to secure Level Nine. You'd think that the Department of Mysteries would furnish their own security...

Luna came from around a corner, and Harry's instincts already knew this would be bad news. She's alone, that means that... "Neville abandoned his post. I'd usually not worry and could cover for him, but I think he's about to do something quite reckless."

"He heard about the quarantine, didn't he?" Luna nodded sadly. He's going to go and try to save his parents...

"He has to know that trying to go in there now is suicide, right?" Harry asked as he wondered how he could find the wizard and talk him out of it.

"It's his parents, Harry. He's not going to get talked out of trying to save them." Luna was right, and Harry had to concede that.

"Well how is he going to get in there? The front door has got to be overrun, and it would be suicide to apparate in on the bottom floor."

"You could just ask the white doe behind you." Harry looked at Luna in an odd way. What on earth is she talking about? Harry turned to see Severus' patronus come to a stop before him.

"Harry, Neville, do not attempt to enter St. Mungo's. This is a trap; the Goblins have set St. Mungo's to lure in and kill as many wizards as possible. We're taking refuge in the Janus Thickey Ward, and will do our best to break the siege we're in."

The silvery doe turned and began to run down the next hallway as Terry shrieked in a girlish manner. Harry and Luna figured it out at the same time and ran after it. As the doe silently galloped down the hallway and turned around a tight corner, Harry slowed himself down to make the hair-pin turn, nearly knocking himself into Neville Longbottom. The doe had finished repeating the message and dissipated into nothingness, and a furious Neville took off towards the disapparation station with Harry on his heels.

"Luna, go secure your level and buddy up with Cormac!" Harry called out as he used his seeker reflexes and caught Neville by the crook of his wand-arm.

"No, Harry! I'm going!" Neville said, shoving off the Boy-Who-Can't-Stay-Dead.
"I know you are! I'm going with you!" At that, Neville stopped and sulked.

"I thought you were going to stop me."

"What? When have I ever stopped you from running into trouble? I broke you of that habit back in first year." They exchanged a quiet laugh at that.

"So who is going to warn us about the danger, that it's obviously a trap that we can't escape, and that we can do more good by not rushing in?" Neville asked.

"Severus said 'we'. He's not alone, and since he didn't mention anyone by name I can guess who's there that would make me go anyways." Harry knew that his best friend Hermione would be there, and he wasn't about to leave her to deal with the Goblins.

"Oh, 'Mione..." Neville said, casting his own Patronus and informing Ronald about the situation. Harry just shook his head sadly.

"He's not coming. He's done fighting." Harry said, bitterness burning at the back of his throat. "Sounds like we can apparate directly into the Janus Thickey ward. You've been there more than me, can you take me side-along?"

"Um, side-along apparition?" Neville said nervously. "I've not really done that before." He hesitated for a moment, then awkwardly wrapped his arms around this friend. Harry's eyebrow raised in confusion.

"Neville? All you have to do is hold my hand." Neville nodded and took Harry's hand in his own. "Just apparate like normal, and remember to make the bubble include me..." Harry wasn't reassured by the look in his friend's eyes. "You know what? I'll take us. I can Deliberate, Determine, and Destinate us there. Ready?"

The look of sheer relief on Neville's face steeled Harry's nerves as he turned on the spot and they popped out of the Ministry.

Fleur had expected to see horrors in war, particularly after the skirmishes in Diagon Alley that killed a dozen wizards and injured over a hundred. Some of them were still here, trying to recover as the Healers were still overrun and burned out from the Battle of Hogwarts. But that the Goblins have the Resurrection Stone?! Even with her hands on fire, there was an icy feeling in her gut she couldn't banish.

A popping sound hit her ears as Harry and Neville appeared in front of her. They had a sheepish grin on their face, even as Severus wanted to chastise them for coming even after being told not to.

"Severus," Narcissa cut in, attempting to stop the Potion Master's barbed tongue before it started, "You know telling Gryffindors to not do something would ensure that they do just that. Besides, Longbottom's parents are here."

"GINNY!" Harry shouted, torn between glee and horror. "What are you doing here?" Within a second, the two of them ran to each other and wrapped themselves in each other's arms as if there would be no tomorrow.

"I knew you'd come, so I came to protect you..." She said, lowering her voice as her lips were grazing his ear, "besides, we need to talk."
"If we are all done mollycoddling each other, I advise we face our foes with extreme prejudice."
Severus' voice was full of business as he directed everyone back to the table. Even Neville's parents shuffled forward, their eyes shining with an eerie innocence that only children were supposed to have.

Alice Longbottom took out a candy wrapper and put it on the diagram of the floor plan of the underground morgue, tapping it smartly.

Neville, having expected this, simply nodded his thanks and took the wrapper into his pocket. "Um, thanks mum." He turned away from her to patiently explain what happened. "She does this a lot when I visit."

An exchange of meaningful glances went between Hermione and Narcissa, and the solemn nod they both did afterwards told the Veela exactly what they had agreed to. Fleur turned her lips to Severus' ear and whispered to him to make the same agreement.

"Severus, if I'm ever that far gone-" Severus' hand went up instinctively.
"-of course. I expect you do the same for me." Fleur nodded as she saw Hermione and her wife in a tight embrace.

Frank Longbottom's eyes held a slip of what, at one time, was the spark in his eyes that said he was aware as he looked on as the lesbian couple said their "I love you's" and he handed them a gum wrapper from his pocket. Narcissa's eyes laid upon him and held pity as she took the offered wrapper.

Hermione snatched it out of her hand as the words caught her attention.

"'Mione, it's just a used gum wrapper." Neville spoke sheepishly, embarassed at people knowing the state of his parents.

"Cissy, what's is supposed to say?" The Gryffindor's eyes were wide and full of panic.

"It's 'Drooble's Best Blowing Gum'. It's just trash." Narcissa's reply sounded a bit uncertain.

Hermione passed the wrapper off to Viktor. "Read it."

Viktor cleared his throat once in a thick cough. "It says, 'Gold Bribe Below St Mungo's'. What gold bribe do they speak of?"

Narcissa shook her head. "I wouldn't be surprised if it were something of my former husband's doing. But 'bribe' can also mean 'stolen goods', if you go by the middle english use of the word."

"Vat does that mean?" Voktor asked as everyone looked down as if they could see through the building.

"This entire attack is a diversion. The Goblins are stealing all of the Galleons from Gringott's." Severus sent a Patronus off to the Minister in warning, "but even as a diversion, we can wind up just as dead. There are three floors beneath us that need to be cleared of any hostile enemies as well as bystanders that need to be rescued. I'll take the second floor with the Grangers; Fleur, you and Krum clear the first floor. There shouldn't be many innocent to save, so cast first, think later. Harry, I'd like you and Neville to-"

A loud whistle pierced the air. "Snape, you're honestly going to leave me and Draco to sit up on the top floor and do what? Guard the trolley of crisps?" Ginny's eyes looked fierce. She wanted to fight,
and be given her chance to prove herself.

Severus frowned, but relented. "Very well, I'll team up with you and Harry for the third floor. Draco, go with your mothers."

Harry winced at the phrasing of that. "That is so awkward to hear."

Draco bit his lip and tilted his head towards Ginny as his eyes were locked on Harry. Harry nodded his agreement while Ginny simply rolled her eyes. "I'll be fine, boys, I can take care of myself!"

Harry and Draco both frowned at that, as if they wanted to argue that point. Severus decided to ignore it and move on. "My team will sweep and clear the third floor, bringing survivors up here to go to the fifth. We will destroy all but one stairwell that leads down; I suggest that a different stairwell be used between the floor below and the one beneath that."

Fleur nodded her understanding. "Neville can join us for the first floor then. 'Mione, my team will send sparks up to alert you when we're coming up the stairwell. The last thing I want is 'friendly fire' like what happened at Hogwarts."

Hermione shuddered at that. "The first floor is going to be a blood bath; you three be careful, because there won't be many survivors for you to rescue." She thought about it for a second, and hit the button for the lift. "You three go down to the first floor through the lift system, then once you're on the first floor I'll barricade it and you make your way back up the north-east stairwell. My team will be clearing out the second floor while you're on the first."

Severus nodded to the plan. "My team will do the same for the third floor, and try to keep the southwest stairwell open. If we strike together, the enemy will be too overwhelmed to escape up here."

The Veela stowed her wand, preferring to have her hands ablaze: "Divide and conquer, I like it. I'll put up a fire-wall to keep the dead at bay if needed. We kill everything that is not a living wizard, even if it looks human. You in, Krum?"

He nodded. "These Goblins deserve death for this. Neville?"

Neville shuddered as he watched his parents get lead up the stairs by Gilderoy and the medwitch. "My parents might be killed if I show the goblins any mercy. I won't make that mistake again."

Once the lift returned from the first floor, I found myself inside it with my wife and son-in-law, really wishing for any music to distract us for the moment. Not even four months since the Final Battle, and I'm facing down yet another attempt at genocide. Narcissa was busy reinforcing Draco's robes with defensive charms.

"You gave Ginny your robes." I turned to look at the exchange, feeling awkward to be involved in this. Why did he do that? Loyalty to Harry? Strengthening an alliance to stay out of Azkaban? It would be the Slytherin thing to do.

"Yes mother, she needs it more than I do. I'm not shabby with defensive magic, you know." Her eyes pierced his, and he purposefully refused eye contact.

"Anything you want to tell me?"

"Promised Harry I'd protect her. Promised her I'd protect Harry." In that case, I'd have done the same, I guess...
"You care for her." Narcissa didn't pose it as a question, and the look on his face was unreadable.

"I care for them both, mother. Despite whatever insinuations you wish to make, they are loads better as friends and allies than Crabbe and Goyle ever were." I winced at that; realizing that Crabbe killed himself while using Fiendfyre in the Room of Requirement, and Draco had been there to witness it. **Draco definitely has a point there, then.** But something about this bothered me, and I couldn't put my finger on it.

"Is there something going on between you and my best friends?" I looked at him, and his eyes met mine for the briefest of moments. *It's not a mark of guilt, just practice in avoiding Legilimancy.*

"Nothing at all." As he said that, the lift stopped and the doors began to open to a soft dinging sound. Girding my courage, I held both wands out and stalked the second level. It reminded me of the Hospital Wing in Hogwarts, if I were having a nightmare, that is.

I walked between the beds with the Inferi moaning, their bodies writhing against the restraints as a few shambled out of their beds. As surreal as the moment was, I was moved at how all the eyes looked the same. It was as if there was only one consciousness looking out of every pair of eyes. Their master, whichever goblin raised them all with the Stone, could be watching me walk between the beds, re-binding the corpses whenever I could.

Looking back at Draco's lack of caution, I realized he didn't understand the full threat of what would happen when they all freed themselves. Not if, but when. "Any survivors, come towards the sound of my voice! We're here to rescue you!" As one, all the Inferi turned their heads toward me and tilted their heads slightly. It was fucking creepy. We had to be out of this room before they could get free.

Severus watched his life-long friend, Narcissa, go down the lift with her wife and son. Once he was certain that they were out of the lift, he forced the lift doors open and sent a hailstorm of hexes designed to warp and distort the walls of the lift shaft, rendering it useless. *Godspeed, Cissy.*

There was an uncomfortable tension between Harry and Ginny, and Severus realized that it could affect their ability to be his backup as they were about to go downstairs to the third floor. Looking down the hallway, he vanished the remains of Hermione's kill. It was horrific, yet brutally effective. *No way was that going to rise and become an Inferi.*

"So Ginny, what did you need to talk to me about?" Harry asked, face pensive. Ginny's eyes shifted between him and Severus.

"Um, now?" The former Death Eater sighed at that. If he had to play relationship counselor, he'd do it as quickly as possible.

"Don't let me stand in the way of... young love. I will just stand by as an army of the undead attempt to kill us all." Ginny frowned at the bait whereas Harry saw through it. *The boy is learning.* "Whatever it is, I suggest you two hash it out as quickly as possible so that you don't have it distracting your focus during combat... For all our sakes."

"So you're wearing Draco's robes." Harry seemed nervous, and Severus recognized the look of jealousy that James had back when he had been involved with Lily. *The similarities are not lost upon me, either.*

"Yeah, he wanted me to stay safe. Said he could get another set of tactical robes."

"This was after spending the night with him." Severus arched an eyebrow at that. *Harry also a night*
"I uh, yeah. I did. But, you know, nothing happened." The Potions' Master's eyes took in Ginny and didn't need to use Legilimancy to realize she wasn't telling the truth. Neither did Harry. _Well, now this is getting interesting, what did my Godson do?_

"Nothing happened at all? This is Draco we're talking about." Harry's voice carried enough sarcasm to almost make Snape smile.

"Well, I fell asleep next to him, woke up fully dressed, and..."

"So you two didn't...?"

"No! He uh, likes you." Severus nearly choked on nothing at that revelation. _How in blazes did I miss that?!_

"Ginny, I know you. I can tell you're hiding something." Ginny looked like she was going to be sick.

"This morning, he flirted, I flirted, and we kind of got into a row." Harry shrugged at that, he knew the kind of guy Draco could be.

"Wait, you fought over what?"

"He uh... told me to come clean to you. There's definitely something between us, but he said he didn't want to sneak behind your back. Then he gave me his robes, and I uh... I kissed him." Severus realized he could be setting up jinxes to repel goblins and inferi. _Yeah, I should do that. Do anything but keep listening in..._ As he turned away, he noticed the look of muted surprise on Harry's face. He wasn't too surprised, nor did he seem too jealous. It made the Slytherin pause.

"Oh. Well, you pretty much told me and him to snog a bit. I, uh, just haven't because... I didn't want to make you jealous." Ginny was on the verge of tears, and Harry was about to embrace her. _I wonder what Narcissa would make of this..._

"I'm sorry, Harry. You deserve a more loyal girlfriend. The last thing I want to do is hurt you, or make you jealous~"

"-was he any good?" _WHAT?!_ Ginny seemed to be channeling Severus...

"What?"

"Draco. I'm... curious." Ginny bit her lip in a way that unnerved Severus. _It was too reminiscent of Lily._

"Well, I um, initiated it and he was... taken by surprise. Soft lips, didn't try to eat my face like Michael Co... that doesn't matter."

"I don't want to lose you, though." Harry said, seemingly scared at the prospect. It was obvious that he wouldn't.

"Nor do I, Harry. Can we just... not choose?" Severus rolled his eyes at that. _Hurry it up, we have people who need saving..._ He was tempted to interrupt them as he finished putting up tripping jinxes.

"As in, we both 'date' him?" Harry asked, and Severus had enough.

"Merlin's crooked wand, you both fancy my Godson, and you both fancy each other. He apparently wants to snog both of you, and for the sake of my sanity, just agree to a menage a trois for now so
we can focus on the fact that we are under attack by goblins and Inferi alike."

Both Harry and Ginny turned to face Severus, horror etched on their faces. "I thought I cast Muffliato!" Harry said in shock.

"That was a spell of my creation, Potter. Now, tell me you two are done speaking about my godson. My ears were bleeding." Severus said flatly. "Now, shall we go make the Goblins meet their fate?"

Fleur's nose scented stagnant water and blood as they went down the lift. Viktor had his wand out, and Neville rolled his head, letting his neck crack to diffuse the tension.

"There's flooding in the morgue. I can smell it." Fleur said dryly.

Neville nodded, a bit too much. "That should seal off any Goblin reinforcements, and keep the entire morgue from rising, right?" He glanced to the former triwizard champions, and his face fell at that.

"No, I don't think the Inferi would mind a little bit of water..." Fleur said, shuddering at the horrors they were about to delve into.

The lift they were in had been a quiet corner of hell. Now it was just as silent, but this new corner of hell was the center of an oncoming storm. The lift doors dinged and opened, alerting Goblins and Inferi alike that some fresh meat had just become available. A skinless hand snatched at Fleur. Viktor slashed at it with his wand using a cutting curse. The hand bled and jerked back. They could feel pain. They bled. Good.

Fleur had hands raised to lob a fireball as the corpse came at her again. Neville blocked the Veela's shot. "They're people!"

Fleur looked at him, then back at that raw thing that was held back by one magical wrist restraint. Viktor was doing his best at using Relashio, but the Inferi was willing to break its own arms in order to attack. It launched at the trio again, slashing the air with one bloody hand, screaming wordlessly, as the other arm flopped uselessly as it was torn at the elbow and white bone was protruding through the torn ruin of skin.

"Just stay out of reach," the new Auror said as he pulled the blonde past it.

Fleur had time to say, "They're corpses, Neville, just corpses."

He poked the body with a metal pipe, perhaps broken from the plumbing overhead to keep it at arms' length. "Don't kill them. They used to be people not even an hour ago." He moved into the fight, though it wasn't a fight yet. Most of the corpses were still in their beds. The dead-turned-undead patients struggled, jerking their ruined flesh to tear into bloodier ruin in an attempt to remember how to get up; bucking as they thrashed to right themselves.

A medi-witch was beating at the head of one patient with a copper bed pan. It had sunk teeth into her arm so deeply that she couldn't free himself. Narcissa was instantly on the attacker, casting a banishing charm with her wand like you'd pitch a softball. There was the sound of a soft, melon-like thunk of the bed pan's impact as the body flew away that could be heard even over the witch's screaming.

Neville and Krum were at the last bed near the windows. The black medi-wizard was embraced by an inferi that had one hand and one ankle magically bound to her bed. I shouldn't think of it as a her anymore; that dead thing is an 'it'. Its mouth was buried deep into the man's chest. Blood covered the pair like someone had spilled a can of red paint over them. Where the thing was gnawing shouldn't
have killed the man, but there was too much blood. It had reached some sort of pulse-point.

Neville was casting knockback jinxes at the thing's head so hard that his arm was getting tired as if he were a beater in Quidditch. The corpse's head was bleeding, cracking, but it wasn't letting go. Its head was buried into his chest like a monstrous child, feeding. *Inferi aren't supposed to want to eat, only shamble around and sometimes take a swing at you. The Goblins raised them as bloodthirty and hungry as they were.*

"They are only supposed to be animated corpses…" He mumbled in shock to Viktor.

Krum's face was grim with determination, his wand-tip glowing bright yellow as he used it like a dagger stabbing the corpse in the back over and over. The wand came out free in a spray of blood, but it didn't matter. The inferi by the door had reacted to pain, but once they started killing or… feeding, they were just reanimated corpses following orders. You couldn't hurt the dead, and you sure as hell couldn't kill it.

"Fleur! We're going to need to try harder to kill these!"

Harry was dragging a barely-living Healer by his wrists, leaving a thick red trail behind him. Ginny's body was wedged in the doorway, blasting back the Inferi to make a path for the survivors. Severus' wand-work had chopped two of the corpses into enough pieces that they were down. Two other Inferi were still held to the bed with one last Relashio charm, which was proving to be ineffective each time it was re-cast.

Harry was experimenting with blasting charms, which would have never worked on a living body. Once the targeted Inferi realized her arm had been ripped off, it ran at them full-tilt. Severus noticed that the severed arm was also coming after them, and he immolated it without a second thought.

Ginny heard the scrambling behind her before Harry yelled, "Behind-

Ginny was off-kilter, seeing the floor rise to meet her face as a corpse rode her to the ground, before hearing her boyfriend finish, "-you."

Ginny tucked her head in an attempt to protect her neck. Teeth bit into the robes, bruising the flesh beneath, but had trouble gnawing through the spell-enhanced cloth. It reared back and tried again, this time its teeth found purchase into the neck, and blood flowed as teeth pierced the skin, chomping at random. Harry carefully aimed and used a blasting hex to remove an arm and kept devouring the ginger, so he hexed the skull, reeling at the sight of bone and brain spattered across the floor. It didn't seem to care.

Suddenly, Ginny felt a wash of air and a heavy blow, the body that was on top of her seemed to disappear. She scrambled up from the ground and found Severus grappling with it as he flew without aid of a broom. Fire erupted on the corpse as Severus threw it into a crowd of Inferi that were still shambling forward.

Severus flew back, drenched in blood and sweat with a wild look in his eyes. "Go, get upstairs with the Healer. I'll hold them off." His voice was lower than usual, a feral fear dripping from it, but he stood his ground as he started pushing the pair towards the door. "Better idea, Harry..." Severus reached into Harry's new tactical robes, pulled out a vial from the left breast pocket, clicked something on the top of it, and threw it towards the pile of dead that was getting back up to give chase.
"What was that?" Harry asked as he and Ginny were helping the near unconscious Healer up the steps. An explosion roared behind them, leaving a blast of hot hair hitting them in the back. Severus nudged them up the stairwell as he closed the door to buy them a bit more time.

Fleur moved in beside Krum, shoving him back a step. She lit her right hand aflame and steadied it underneath the thing's jaw. The Veela took a deep breath, centered herself the way one would before you cast something big and Dark, and pictured the end result like you would any Transfiguration. She imagined her hand coming out through the top of the skull like a spear, then thrust with all her strength. She tried to spear her flaming fist through its head in hopes to destroy the brain. She felt her hand go through the soft tissue under the jaw with a sharp, wet, movement, then her fingertips went through the soft palate and bone at the back of the mouth, and kept going. Fleur screamed as she felt her thumb enter the strange emptiness of the sinus cavities. *Merlin forgive me...*

It reared back from the Veela, its jaws trying to open as it clawed at its mouth with the only free hand, letting the medi-wizard fall back onto the bed. They got their first glimpse of the wound. The chest was broken and had a gaping hole in it. Broken ribs gleamed around the blood and skin like a grotesque white picket fence. Neville stared down into that hole and retched as he realized half of the heart was gone and had been consumed. *Inferi weren't supposed to be flesh-eaters!*

"Oh, Merlin!" Neville said. The sharp tang of warm acid hit the air as he vomited at the horror before him. Viktor felt queasy already, and having the Auror throw up beside him made it even harder to keep his own lunch.

The inferi tied to the bed had finally broken free of the magical bonds. Both hands were clenched at Fleur's wrist, trying to wrench its head free. The now-deceased mediwizard shuddered and began to rise as one of the undead as well. Panic and rage competing for supremacy, Fleur let the fire in her hands blaze brighter as the impaled Inferi burned, letting her shove the animated corpse away from them. As it fell, the hands were frantically batting at its own burning skull. Fleur lobbed fireballs at everything coming at them now without any compunction or mercy. The broken corpse at their feet went still as flesh receded to expose bone, and the smell of burning hair hit the air. Neville, Krum, and Fleur exchanged a look between themselves. Just a look, no words, and they turned towards the rest of the room with one goal in mind: get to the stairs any way they could. There was nothing left to save on this floor but themselves.

I looked up and found Draco and Narcissa at the far door with a male Healer sagging between them. He wasn't dead yet. *Great.* I yelled, "Run!"

We tried. I sensed movement and turned in time for a corpse to tackle me full on and send us both crashing to the floor. My wands were instinctively doing the *Sectumsempra* curse as I sliced toward the jaw, trying to keep its teeth off of me, but it moved and I instead transected the throat. Black, dead blood splashed across my face in a luke-warm thick-liquid rush, blinding me for a second. I could feel it jerkily moving over my body, legs straddling my hips. It was dead, and I was grateful to realize that the corpse only wanted to kill me in this position.

I kept my right hand pushed into raw shoulder, trying to hold it back as it strained over me. Even with a wand in each hand I felt helpless as my vision was obscured by the Inferi blood. I wiped it out of my eyes with the back of my left sleeve as I tried to keep at least one wand on it. It snapped at me like a dog, and I screamed. My wand was nearly is its mouth as I cut its cheek so deep the wand tip scraped on teeth. It screamed and twisted, sinking teeth into my hand. I screamed as it shook its head like a dog with a bone. Through the haze of pain, my hand released, dropping my wand. *I had two wands... where did the Elder wand go?*
It came at me, cheek and neck sliced open, milky-blue eyes wide in fury. It was a wizard at one point, but the foreign look on him now reminded me more of a Goblin. It went for my throat. There was no time to grab the dropped wand, so I went for its eyes. I lunged into it, plunging my thumbs into its eyes, using our combined momentum to push them deeper than I could have done by myself. I felt the eyeballs rupture like peeled grapes, exploding in warm fluid and thicker things.

It screamed, shaking its head back and forth, fingernails breaking as it clawed into the back of my hands. My grip on the Inferi's skull was absolute until Draco was suddenly there, pulling it backwards, banishing it across the room to impale itself into a half-shattered wooden door. I looked down at my hands, shaking and dripping with sticky undead fluids. **Amazing what you can do when you're terrified.**

I was on my knees, grabbing the dropped wand and summoning the other. Narcissa dragged me to my feet, and we were almost to the door.

Draco steeled his nerves as he used a cutting charm and decapitated it, lifting the severed head by the hair. The jaw was still snapping at him, and panicking, he threw the head away and looked at the rest of the body as it was jerkily attempting to wrench itself free. **Merlin's taint, it's still alive!**

My wife looked at it in a mix of horror and curiousity, carving into its chest and summoning the heart with a simple *Accio.* "The head is gone, the heart is removed, so why is it still active?"

Pointing the Wand of Destiny at it, there seemed to be a sort of magical kinship between them. "Incendio." I cast, wondering if Wand beats Rock. Narcissa did the same with the heart, and Draco followed suit with the disposed head. I knew that the image of the heart burning to ash on the floor of Saint Mungo's would haunt my dreams some other night. **Valentine's Day will never be the same for me.**

We looked around at the other corpses who were fighting their restraints to attack us, each with that eerily similar look of consciousness in its face. They knew we knew how to finally kill them, and their struggles to be free became more frantic. Three of them broke free at the same time, and I blasted two of the corpses back, trusting Draco would get the third. Instead, he had spelled at the Inferi I had slammed across the room, and it took the opportunity and jumped him.

I tried to align a spell at it, but the Inferi was already on top of Draco's back. I hesitated for fear of hitting him, then I realized that it wasn't trying to eat him. **These aren't the zombies of Muggle legend, Granger!** It slammed Draco's head twice into the floor, hard. I gulped in fear for his life as it then looked up at me. Spellfire erupted from the other end of the hallway, and I could tell in my periphery that Fleur's team was alright and came up without any survivors. There was something in the eyes of this Inferi that hadn't been in any of the others. It wasn't just the communal consciousness, but there was an intelligence. There was fear. It held fear of us. Afraid of being stopped, as if it had orders to do something in particular. Afraid of failing its master, maybe even afraid of dying.

It shoved past Narcissa with an unnatural speed and scrambled through a gaping hole in the wall, as if it were late for some appointment. **The white rabbit is off to see the Red Queen, it seems.** I forced myself to focus, realizing my mental state was fragile if not already fractured. Fleur threw a fireball but missed as the undead creature scrambled and began to climb its way up between the walls. **There's enough space to crawl between the walls? Blocking the stairways was pointless then...** I knew it had to be stopped, that if it escaped, it would do something very, very bad. Draco was bleeding from his head, possibly even unconscious from the impact. Instinct took over as I cupped Narcissa's cheek and my eyes pleaded for her to understand. "Save our son." She nodded, putting her arm under Draco's and started dragging him to the stairs. Krum, Fleur, and a shell-shocked Neville was there to help them. It would have to do, it would have to be enough.
Narcissa felt a sudden rush in the room behind them as they went for the stairwell. Neville stumbled back against the wall as he used his wand to close the door. It slammed closed with Hermione on the other side of it, with a finality that left her feeling uncomfortable. She saw Viktor swing his wand around as a corpse came up from below them. Fleur reached to open the door, only to be surprised as Arnie Peasegood burst through and warded it shut behind him.

There was a rumbling whoosh of air as if a giant had drawn a deep breath, and the faint smell of brimstone told Narcissa that the second floor was now filled with fire. Flames licked the door as the orange-gold glow shone through the gap at the bottom of the warded door. They could feel the intense heat beating against the walls as Fire alarms went off with a high-pitched scream. Peasegood doubled down, shielding them all as they scrambled up the stairs, waiting for that tremendous heat to crack the wards and spill over all of us.

"HERMIONE!" Narcissa yelled, feeling powerless as she and Neville took Draco back upstairs. Fleur was lobbing fireballs down and incinerating the Inferi that tried to use the stairwell as Viktor and Arnie took point and cleared a way for them to regroup upstairs.

"She said fiendfyre was the only sure way, Cissy. These Inferi seem... not alive, but-

"-aware. And damn hard to kill."

I slashed my wand outward, like a conductor ceasing an entire orchestra at once. The fiendfyre obeyed me, and a small part in the back of my mind knew I should be scared that I was able to do this now. Bodies burned, and I was grotesquely reminded of flame-broiled hamburgers by the smell. I recoiled as the smell and other things came over me, and I braced for the backdraft. Instead of heat spilling over, it was coolness, water. What the..? I raised my eyes to see sprinklers were flooding the room. Looking around, I saw that the corpses were burned to ash.

The room now cleared, I went over to the gaping hole in the wall where the quick Inferi climbed into. Alarms were louder now, and I had realized that there were two different ones going off, mixing together into a skin-crawling noise. Narcissa stepped into the room, and I heard her voice over the maddening noise. "Pote de Cristo!" It must be Italian...

I turned to face her as the water pounded upon me, soaking my hair and clothing alike. Narcissa looked shocked, like she finally saw too much as her eyes landed on the only burned body that didn't turn completely to ash. It wasn't an Inferi when I used the Fiendfyre. He was dead now, beyond any help I could give him. We still had one more corpse on the run. I laid my fingertips on the body's neck just under the jaw, and I went about decapitating and segmenting him into parts in case the body would be re-animated with the stone.

The Hit Wizard robes finally hit me, and only then I realized who it had to be. Narcissa was shaking at this. Shit. I should have grabbed my wife and said, "He's dead. Gumboil is dead." But I couldn't do it. I got to my feet. "Cissy."

She was still staring into the room at the dissected remains of Arnie's partner.

"Narcissa!" I yelled, pleading for her response. She turned, but her eyes had the thousand-yard stare as if she wasn't really here at all.

"We've got one Inferi on the run. We can't let it get away."

She stared at me with dull eyes. Merlin, I needed some help here! I walked up to face her, saw the emptiness like she were under the Imperious Curse, and I slapped her decently enough to leave my
own hand stinging. *Damn, that was harder than I'd meant.*

Her head snapped to face me, and I braced for her to slap me back, yet she didn't. She just stood there, hands shaking in tight fists, eyes blazing with a fury that needed a target that deserved it. When she didn't slap me back, I said, "Bad thing went that way." I pointed at the hole in the wall. "We need to stop it."

She started to ramble in Italian. I couldn't understand much of it, but the fear and anger translated fine. I looked into her eyes and touched her mind. I didn't hear the door open behind me as Severus' voice called, "Hermione!"

"I thought I lost you."

*No, I'm here.* The intelligent inferi was still on the loose. *Bugger this.*

"Please snap out of it, Cissy!" I went back to the broken wall, stepping over Gumboil's torso. Severus came in from a stairwell and was also drenched in blood and water, eyes blazing with the heat of battle. *The sprinklers must have turned on in the stairwell, too.*

"Did you see it?" I asked, unsure if he knew what I was talking about. He cast a spell, his eyes seemingly looking through the walls.

"Down two floors, end of the hall." His jerky motions betrayed the usual calm exterior he always maintained, but his voice was flat and distant. *May I if I survived this, I could also go into shock, too.*

I half-turned as I wedged myself into the gap between the walls. "I'll go down, you take my wife."

"Mione." Narcissa's voice cut through and it felt like a gentle knife in the gut. She tossed her pistol towards me, and I summoned it to catch it gently in my left hand and checked the clip. I looked at her in relief that she seemed coherent.

"The Goblins have the stone; we'll need a survivor to tell us who's been using it." I hadn't realized how much I had been looking forward to killing the goblins for this. I nodded as I wedged myself and slid down a level.

Harry was glad to see almost everyone on the top floor. He and Peasegood looked through the vials on his right side and figured out how to revive the Healer as Draco's bleeding head wound was being taken care of by his girlfriend Ginny. It was unmistakable, the connection between the pair of them. *Almost like what I have with her.*

The screech of the fire alarms ended as Viktor found the speakers and destroyed them with a vicious glee. The instant silence was almost too much as he watched Healer Strout fuss over the injured Healer as Gilderoy Lockhart huddled with the Longbottoms.

"How's Draco?" he asked Ginny. Her eyes darted around the room as if she had to get her bearings again.

"...um, his pulse is there, strong and sure. He's unconscious, but alive. I'm not certain if reviving him is a good thing though. Healer?" Ginny asked, and Strout came over and nodded her agreement.

The Healer that was injured winced as he nodded his thanks to the Aurors. "I'm Healer Rutherford Poke. Call me Ford. My brother Royden warned me that the peace treaty with the Goblins went
bad."

Fleur put a consoling hand on Harry's shoulder. "The level is secure, 'arry. Go to her." Harry nodded his thanks as he realized her accent was coming back. He finally had a moment to decompress, and all he wanted to do was kneel beside Ginny and be there as Draco was revived. Ginny readily accepted him by her side as they both smiled through tears as they saw Draco's black and swollen eyes force themselves open to the sight of them.

"I... made it?" Draco asked, hope etching his face before the pain made him wince down to a squint.

"Don't scare me like that again, Ferret," Harry said, "else I'll dump you."

"We'll dump you." Ginny corrected, relief and grief and happiness all coalescing into a crushing hug between the three of them.

I paused and steeled my nerves as I realized I was on the first floor. I decided to disillusion myself, just in case I was walking into a trap. Okay, I know I probably am, but still... The fire-sprinklers were going off here, too, making a type of waterfall down the concrete steps to the morgue. Din from the fire alarm mixed with the quarantine alarm, and I did everything I could think of to ignore it. I looked around the hallway; near one end were rising stairs, the other end went down. I had no idea where it had gone. It could have double-backed just to lose my trail.

_I need to find this thing!_ I couldn't be certain why it seemed to important to stop it, but I'd been right about the coming Dark and the corpses. I'm trusting my... gut. They were just animated corpses, but a kind that the Wizarding World had never seen before. But they could burn, and I had the Elder Wand. If there was a link between Stick and Stone, I might be able to sense it.

I couldn't tell if it was the adrenaline, or just sheer willpower, but it was like a switch went off in my head. I was instantly calm and rational, when I probably should have been freaking out like my wife had. A type of coldness went over me, once I took a moment to consider it, I realized that my mind had gone to a very calm, quiet place. The awareness stretched out in that smallest infinitesimal fraction of time, where all moral qualms were gone. _I exist, and because I exist, anything opposed to me existing must die._ I knew that thinking like this wasn't normal, but I also knew that I could worry about this later.

I needed to twist the _Hominem Revelio_ spell. _It was just like Specialis Revelio, wasn't it?_

Sweeping the Elder Wand, I knew what to cast. "Mortuus Revelio." My vision swam with dead bodies all around me, but I was able to filter it all out. I spread my senses out and found the one blip in my senses that scrambled with fear, moved with that unnatural quickness the dead should never have, and knew it was the Inferi I was looking for. _It moved too fast, and it was definitely trying to get somewhere._ It just seemed... brighter, as if the Goblin took more of an effort to reanimate this one.

I jerked my eyes open, not realizing I had ever closed them. Up, it had gone back up. _What's still left for it to attack? _If all the floors were swept, we should be fine, right? But If I was wrong, then... I hadn't been to St Mungo's enough times to know the entire layout. Excluding the specialty wings on each floor, all of the Inferi should have been neutralized.

There has to be a special wing on the third floor, though. Could Severus, Harry, and Ginny have missed it? I ran back up the stairs, trainers slipping on the blood-soaked stairwell. There was a
woman crumpled upon the steps, lying motionless, but still breathing. She looked like she was only a few years older than me, and something about her lying there screamed 'innocent bystander'. Taking a moment to be merciful, I checked her vitals and found she was losing too much blood too fast. My fingers went to her red neck, and I found the wound that was killing her. *Even if I had all the dittany in the world and blood-replenishing potion, she might not make it.* The witch had to want to live, yet she looked like she ready to die.

Looking her over, I recognized the robes and the cheerful-looking tag affixed to her robes. Using my fingers, I wiped away the thick, drying blood to read it. *Wendy the Welcome Witch. With a name like that, what else was she going to do?*

"Wendy, can you hear me?" I asked, my left hand trying to squeeze like a tourniquet around her neck as I summoned a bottle of dittany. A few vials came towards me, but most of them were broken or leaking. Focusing the spell, most of them fell to the ground as one intact vial hovered in front of me. *That was useful, though I never could have done that before.* I stowed my Elder Wand to pour the dittany over the wound.

She tried to talk, and the movement in her throat told me no sound would come out. The larynx was crushed and she realized parts of her throat were rubbing against each other in ways that should never happen. She tried to make a noise, but the hollow noise was barely even a hollow whistle. The vocal chords where dislodged, rending her mute. I checked her vitals, and she still seemed like she might or might not make it. *I'm no mediwitch, I'm not trained to decide who can be saved and who should be left to... Pulling my hand away from her neck, my skin stuck to hers and pulled away in a grotesque manner. If I had jerked my hand away too fast, I might have torn her flesh off.* Dark red blood the consistency of molasses tried to drip from my fingers, and I tried to wipe it off on the floor. My hands were still coated with the thick, viscous blood. Cringing, I cast *scourgify* at my hand and felt relieved at the sensation of scoured, dry skin. It felt like I exfoliated my hands with pumice, leaving the skin pink and raw, but at least it was clean.

Something got my attention and my eyes met hers. She had been willing me to look, begging to somehow get my attention. *Don't do it. Don't enter her mind.* I winced as my wand pointed at her.

"*killme kill me please merlin if you have any mercy don't let me slowly die and rise into one of them i have a daughter at home don't let me become one of them and go home and hurt her killme kill me kill me please..."*

My eyes were dead and plain at the horror of her request. *I knew I could do this, I promised Cissy as much if she were laid up like the Longbottoms.* She tried to talk again, fresh blood pouring out of her neck and mouth. *Damn it!* I lifted my wand to her. I idly wondered if it would hurt. Any lingering emotions were chased away again as the static calm took over. *Avada Kedavra... unforgivable spell. Avada Kedavra... give everyone hell. It is so easy, I can do it real well. Go on and kill for free. The Deathstick's Plea...*

"*Avada Kedavra..."* I mumbled to myself, watching green light strike the body and it fell limp. The blood that was pooling out of its neck changed direction, as if the neck were an absorbent sponge. *It's reanimating, really fast...*

"*Incendio.*" I cast the spell, watching the body burn to ash before my eyes. Something felt sluggish in my mind, like something had broken inside me. *Snap out of it, Granger.*

I looked around in a daze, taking in my surroundings. The special wing on the third floor was the nursery. As my mind focused on that detail, I realized I had been standing here for far too long. *Was
I ever going to be normal again? Stick to the mission. Kill the undead. Protect the innocent people upstairs.

I flew up the stairs, not certain if my feet were touching the ground anymore. I got to the entry of the wing as a mediwitch in garish set of pink robes rushed out and ran into me. Screaming, she jerked back, protective of the babies in either arm. Flecks of blood were on the baby blue knit hat on its head. It was odd to see that there.

The special wing is the Nursery. The Inferi was going to where all the babies were.

The noise of the alarms and the sprinklers overhead all seemed to hit me at once, destroying the silence. Adrenaline flooded through me. Stick to the mission. Kill the bad thing. Protect the innocent.

The mediwitch looked at me in horror, worried I was there to slay them. She seemed unable or afraid to talk... or maybe it was the fact that I was covered in the blood of everything I had been killing tonight. Even the babies were screaming in terror at me.

"Is it in there?" I asked. She trembled in place, and the acrid smell of urine told me exactly how scared she had been. "Get to the fifth floor. There is help there." I kept staring at her, waiting for her to move. She didn't.

"GET. TO. THE. TOP." I raised my wand at her, and she scrambled away, shrieking. At least she'll be fine... I hope.

I entered the nursery, scanning down the length of the hallway with my wand. Nothing's moving. The corridor seemed too long and empty with all of the closed doors before me. The alarms were still scraping the inside of my skull, making my ears ring with the noise. But even over the blaring nose, I could hear the babies screaming.

Only once had I heard a sound tug on my heart strings as much. Crookshanks had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and his tail caught under my mum's rocking chair. He had shrieked, and the noise was eerily human. The level of distress was heart rending as I finally knew where the goblins had to be. The damned Inferi ran to protect its Master.

Pulling the pistol out into my left hand, I started checking and clearing the various rooms. The speakers overhead cradled to life as the Public Address system was switched on.

"Hermione?" It was Fleur, her voice losing that edge of French accent. "You still among the living?"

I thought hard about Narcissa, and her standing up for me to my friends. The Patronus seemed harder to produce this time.

"I'm in the maternity ward. I believe the thing is in the nursery, possibly with Goblins." I was at the end of the corridor, but didn't really stop to suss out the threat beyond. I knew to be more cautious, but the crying noises were becoming more real, more piteous. A detached part of my mind was glad that this still affected me. The rest of me wanted it to go away for now.

"I'm on my way," Fleur replied.

Past the door, I saw a long expanse of window. I didn't have to inside to know it was the nursery; I could hear the crying newborns. The very sound triggered a hard-wired response that I never even knew I had as I raised my wand towards the door. I still had the pistol in my left, and whatever adrenaline I had was starting to wear off. The bite on my left hand began to ache, and I wasn't sure if it would affect my shooting.
I cast *alohamora* and let the door swing open, but for some reason it stopped with a sudden jerk. Looking down at the floor, I realized there was a body, adult sized. Since it couldn't get up and was essentially a door stop, I knew that it was nothing more than a torso and head. Feral eyes looked towards me as the jaw snapped at the air menacingly. I backed off and slamming the door open with my shoulder, budging it a few painful inches. I heard a woman screaming now, not just the babies. *I couldn't open the door soon enough, dammit!*

I rammed the door open again as I remembered I had a wand in my hand, and cast a banishing charm on the dismembered body, freeing up the door. Behind it must have been a goblin since it was flung back towards me like some sort of tennis match. Shielding myself, I heard the window shattering as the body crashed through it. The body landed on the ground with an un-ceremonial thump as I realized the severed limbs were still unaccounted for.

*The limbs weren't there.*

I tried to take it all in, but I didn't so much see see the room as much as mentally take pictures of isolated things.

Streaks of blood on the floor told me something strange. *The arms moved away on their own volition.*

The severed legs were discarded a bit further away, twitching on the ground and unable to gain any purchase. *I could incinerate it.*

The screaming woman's voice went silent, yet I heard something happen. *I have yet another Inferi to burn now.*

There were broken, overturned cribs. A tiny body was lying on the floor like a broken doll; an arm was missing as bright red splashed the ground round it. *The broken baby was moving.*

It crawled, and I realized that it shouldn't have been able to do that yet. *I wasn't sure I was up to cleansing this room with fire as well, no matter how horrific it was.*

I had to keep going, burn the monster that did this, and kill the Goblins that caused all this to happen.

I still heard a shrieking baby, but it finally hit me that it wasn't in this room. I looked to the door at the other end and blasted it open, the door revealing the waxy-paloured corpse. In its arms, it held a tightly swaddled baby. I only knew it was alive because it was making as much noise as it could.

The corpse was holding the baby up like a human shield. My first spell took it straight in the forehead, the next one through the face as it rocked back from the force of the first spell. It raised the protesting baby in front of its head, huddling behind it as our eyes locked in an unspoken challenge. It was creepy; I could see through the narrow blasting curse I used, through the skull and grey matter, all the way to the light on the other side. *I could see straight through the head and it didn't even flinch.*

"You will stop or the infant will die." The words rasped out of its neck, the vocal cords conveying the sense of rot and decay within. *It can talk. It has a hive mind, therefore the Goblin must be talking through it.*

"Who are you, Goblin?! How many of you are here!" I shouted at it, my mind focused on the body language and securing the area.

"I am Ragnok, and you are Hermione Granger. You killed one of my fellow Goblins, but the other
one will keep your little chicken-girl from interrupting us." **Was all this possible by only three Goblins?**

"Why did you attack Saint Mungo's?! There were innocent people here!" His name seemed familiar, but I couldn't seem to place it. **Where did I see Ragnok's name before?**

"They were Wizards, and it was Wizards who forced the decree in 1631 banning us from the use of wands! Their deaths were necessary to ensure our freedom." Without even thinking, my mind spat out the knowledge I learned from History of Magic.

"That's because you Goblins attempted a bloody revolution in Hogsmeade back in 1612! You slaughtered a dozen Witches and Wizards in cold blood because you thought the Ministry would be weaker than the Wizards' Council!"

"We have the right to survive!" The Inferi spat viciously, rattling the baby as it spoke. **Ragnok the Pigeon-Toed wrote the book Little People, Big Plans. It was the Goblin's version of Mein Kampf, and this would be their rallying point.** He planned on this massacre to unite all Goblins under his command to purge the world of Wizard-kind.

"NOBODY HAS THE RIGHT TO COMMIT GENOCIDE!" I yelled back, firing the *Sectumsempra* curse to hack off one of its legs. The monster threw the baby at me; I couldn't believe it as I hit it with a levitation charm and looked around, looking for a crib to lay it down in. **Dammit!** All of the cribs were destroyed or had slowly-moving infant body parts in them. I held the baby close to me in my left hand, tucking the pistol into my waistband as I took in the undead thing running into me at full speed. *Carve deeper next time!* An arm shot out with lethal speed and strength, and I barely missed the swing. The other arm darted out at it lunged forward, mouth open to bite whatever it could reach.

**It was trying to attack me and to eat the baby. Kill it, burn it now.**

I fired blasting hexes at the other leg, hoping to break the leg at the knee. It buckled and bent with a horrifying crack, and by the angle of the leg, I could tell the joint was ruined. **I could use some help here, Fleur!**

Even with the broken leg, the Inferi smashed hard into me. We landed on the ground, my head clacking hard as it bounced off of the ground. I could feel small bits of broken glass had littered the floor and cut the back of my head. The undead thing was too close and ready to tear into me as I cast the strongest banishing charm I could think of. It flew off of me, giving me enough time to switch over to the *Aduromenti* charm and to cover it in hot lava. **Burn, motherfucker, burn.**

I covered its chest and face first, eyes glinting with triumph as it screamed in pain. It fell to the floor, finally dead. I walked up to it and crushed the skull under my foot, casting another *Incendio* charm to ensure it was fully dead. "We're going to be okay, baby." I muttered, feeling relief as sounds of the fire alarm and the quarantine seemed to die down around me. I sat on the floor, exhaustion flooding me as a strange warmth ran down the back of my head and neck. **I feel sleepy.** My eyes surrendered to the Darkness around me.

Fleur could hear her own heart pounding in her head as she used her wings to fly through the building. Her hands were lobbing fireballs at every corpse's head she passed by, hoping that would be enough to ensure nothing would rise again. A mediwitch cowered at the sight of the Veela, but Fleur pressed on as she made her way to the stairwell down to the Nursery. **Looks like we have some survivors.** She landed on her feet and ran down the stairs, grabbing the railing to help fling her around the hairpin turn.
She ran out onto the new floor, not expecting to be hit with a blinding hex. Fleur's wings shot out in shock as she fell face-first to the ground. Her hearing and nose told her that an Inferi was nearby, but she knew Inferi couldn't cast spells.

_Fucking Goblins._ She felt the dead fingers claw into her and flip her onto her back. She shivered in fear as she took on the undead assailant. Fleur knew how to grapple, but as her hands landed on what must have been an arm, she realized that it was slippery as her fingers slid over slick fluids. She clenched harder only to feel the flesh rip on the forearm as the skin sloughed off, making the Veela let go of the detached epidermis in horror.

_I need to see!_ She thought, setting her hands aflame and doing her best to sense where the Inferi would attack from. Spellfire erupted, and Fleur instinctively threw a fireball in that direction. She hoped to hit the Goblin, but she knew she might have just as easily set a wall on fire.

The creature picked Fleur up by her shirt, another hand clawing into a thigh, and lifted her up like a barbell, only to throw her across the room. Fleur tried to use her wings to right herself, but without her vision she slammed into the wall and fell in a heap. _That was too fast and strong for a normal undead._

Fleur tried to stand up, but her inner ears were injured and left her disoriented, leaving her to lean against a wall only to slide slowly towards the ground. She could smell the rotten flesh and she gagged on it, opting to hold her breath as her mind raced to map out the room. _The Goblin seems to want to watch the Inferi kill me._

She lowered her head and had her back to the wall, reassuring her that she could only be attacked from the 180 degrees in front of her. Setting her hands aflame, she shot fireballs outward to make a semicircular perimeter. _That might buy me enough time..._ she patted herself down and found her wand, remembering the counter-curse.

"Oh no you don't!" Came a goblins' voice, "Expelliarmus!"

"Finite Incantatem!" She said, wand pointed at her own face as it was jerked out of her hand. The spell started to take effect as the Veela blinked away the darkness only to see movement rush at her with inhuman speed. Forcing herself up, she strained as the muscles on her left side screamed as she took flight, and threw down a half-dozen fireballs to where the undead creature was trying to kill her. The sound and smell of sizzling flesh let her know that she hit her target as bleary colors returned to her sight. Her eyes shot around the room, looking for the Goblin that had hexed her.

A blasting hex hit her right wing, dropping her directly onto the fiery undead. Burning fingers grazed and began to burn the clothing off of the Veela, making Fleur grateful that she is immune to her own fire. _Too bad my clothes aren't._ Fleur rolled off of the creature, only to find bony fingers clutching her fanatically. Rotten lips split to expose teeth in an almost loving fashion.

"I... hun... ger..."

Fleur screamed as she tried to wriggle out of its grip, using her flaming fingers to scratch and carve her way through the Inferi that was moving to kiss or feed on her. Swallowing her revulsion, she shoved her fingers into the dead creature's mouth, gripped the lower jaw with all of her strength, and prayed to Merlin as she ripped its mouth apart. _Okay, it cannot bite me anymore. It cannot eat me alive._

It stumbled back, flaming hands flailing where its jaw once was. Flames spread to its head and it finally collapsed and the animating magic dissipated from it. The goblin ran away, throwing hexes to destroy the area and leave more obstacles between the Veela and itself. It kept throwing spells and
Fleur heard shrieks of pain, and she realized that the Goblins had come to simply kill as many
Wizards as possible.

All they wanted was utter and complete genocide. She felt sore, her wing was probably broken
again, but a strange sense of conviction filled her. They wouldn't stop until every last Wizard and
Witch lay dead at their feet. And Fleur would no longer show any mercy to them in kind.

"GOBLIN! Your undead horde lays ruined, and there is nothing that will stop me from claiming
your head." Fleur shouted as she scrambled over the rubble left in its wake. The spells died down, as
if he were going to make a last stand. So much the better to see the life drain from his eyes.

"I have many corpses to serve me, Veela. That you stopped this one means nothing to me. Know
that this here today was the work of only three Goblins. Wizard kind will die in vain."

Fleur mustered as much revulsion as she could to spit back at him. "Fuck you."

She caught up to him, both of her hands ready to lob fireballs as he had two wands trained at her.
The pair of them faced off and locked eyes, as if this moment could last forever.

Spells flew towards her as she pitched herself for a tight roll to her right, throwing her fireballs at the
Goblin as she felt her right wing take the impact and finally snap.

He missed.

She didn't.

And she laughed darkly at her victory.
I was certain that I had died. Then I realized I wouldn't be in this much pain if I were. At the thought of the word 'pain', my eyes jerked open and more pain blazed within me. I was lying down, and it was so bright my eyes hurt. My skin felt raw and singed, as if fire lived beneath my skin. My arms flailed instinctively, trying to brush the heat off of me. A pair of hands latched onto my shoulders and I kicked out with my legs, deep aches making the knees stab with pain.

"Help me hold her down!" The voice was familiar as my eyes tried to slowly open and take in the vision of my wife, but everything was too bright, too blurry.

Weight landed on my arms, hands, my ankles, and my knees. All were hands holding me down. I tried to struggle, I didn't like the sensation of being restrained, but the pain started to recede as a wave of lethargy took over.

"Blood pressure is dropping fast." I couldn't recognize the voice. Some of the weight upon me receded, and I tried to open my eyes again. I could make out shapes and light, blurry movement as a phial was brought to my lips and I jerked my face away from it. What are you giving me? I tried to ask, while keeping my teeth clenched.

A grey hue took over my vision as tears leaked from the corners of my eyes, and I felt the cool embrace of familiar darkness come back to claim me. It was the sensation of falling, scary but safe.

The man's voice sounded more panicked. "We're losing her!"

Darkness took over, muting the pain, and quenching the light. A feminine voice cut through the dark, "Let me try." Lips touched my own, and it was familiar.

It was safe.

It was home.

It was life.

I reached out with my own self as I returned the kiss, and drew her around me like an old, familiar blanket. The Darkness was still there, but I knew I'd be safe. The man's voice sounded reassured. I let the Darkness hold me.

Fleur had taken glee at immolating the final Inferi as Narcissa unloaded her muggle weapon at the Goblin. The goblin was under her foot as she dry-fired the P90 to an unsatisfying click. In the end, Kingsley had to show up and take the prisoner, but Severus wanted to do a complete search to ensure the Resurrection Stone would not be lost again.

In the end, only three babies survived. Counting the patients, Healers, and mediwizards, only ten people were rescued in a Hospital that holds around five hundred patients. This was designed solely to be a massacre; there was no bargaining chip nor hostage situation here, nor was there any common ground between the two races that could be found anymore. The Goblins opted for 'scorched earth' tactics and were willing to commit genocide, and the Wizards couldn't respond to that with just a stern warning. That the ringleader was taken alive was nothing short of a miracle.

It was a strange twist of fate that they were now using the dungeons at what once was Malfoy Manor on behalf of the Ministry. But then again, the wing of the manor that had housed Hermione's parents
was now a makeshift infirmary.

"He's unconscious from multiple sleeping potions, we'll be lucky if he ever wakes up again." The Minister said, stress wearing away at him.

"Minister, there is no need to revive him for an entrail-expelling curse." Severus said dryly.

"Vat? That could kill 'im!" Viktor objected.

Severus pointed his wand at the unconscious goblin. "Accio Resurrection Stone."

Nothing happened. "I searched the remains of the other goblins already. It has to be inside this one." Fleur nodded as she clinically cast the spell. The only small mercy was that the Goblin was still asleep and therefore didn't have to experience the sensation of having its organs and entrails pushed outside of its body, making her job of finding the stone much easier. It was one of the cruelest spells that was still perfectly legal since the results weren't always lethal. *Not always lethal. Pretty to think that.*

The Goblin had indeed swallowed it, and with a few strategically-placed spells she knew exactly where the stone was inside the sleeping Goblin's organs. Either she would have to summon it to take the natural course to exit, or she was going to have to pierce the flesh and dig it out. Fleur decided to cut it out of him.

Harry had arrived, breathless and shell-shocked from Saint Mungo's with Longbottom. "Merlin! How is this not an unforgiveable?!!" Harry cried out, taking in the gore before him. Fleur reversed the spells and the Goblin was reassembled, the Stone in her hand.


"It's done, Minister. The muggles are on-scene, putting out the fire of the supposedly abandoned department store building." He took a deep breath. "No more hospital."

Severus had helped move the injured survivors to Granger Manor and direct the Fiendfyre to take down the building as quickly as possible. Cancelling the spell and leaving only non-magical fire for the muggle firefighters to battle had been the most surreal thing he would have to do, as Obliviators had been dispatched to reconstruct eyewitness accounts.

"Kingsley, this does not remedy the greater issue at hand; that other goblins are seeking to capitalize upon the chaos that has already claimed hundreds of wizards." Severus warned.

Kingsley frowned at that; he didn't want to say it out loud for fear of it becoming all the more real. "The Wizengamot enacted Emergency Powers. All Goblins are now banned from our territory under pain of death."

Harry's voice dropped to arctic tones. "What does that mean?"

Kingsley pinched his nose bridge. "It means, after all of the death and destruction the Goblins did, *and* that it took *only three of them* to destroy our hospital and kill hundreds within an hour, the Ministry is no longer willing to engage in diplomacy. They have sanctioned a complete purge of the Goblins from our lands."

"You have to stop this, Kingsley!"

The Minister seemed winded as he admitted it.

"I can't. The magical governments of France, Spain, and Germany have acknowledged the situation and declared all Goblins in our land as terrorists. They have even sealed their borders to deny them
any possible entry." He looked down at the ground, ashamedly. "Even if they request political asylum. I've distanced myself from the decision and decried this as the act of a few extremists, but..."

Viktor spoke up. "But we can't be certain which Goblins are innocent."

Harry looked surprised at that. "They don't all deserve to be killed, though!

Fleur's voice was filled with venom. "How many Wizards were killed by this so-called 'rebellion'?

Harry huffed at that. "That doesn't matter!"

Fleur's eyes turned blue ice against her pale, avian-like features. "It matters to the public who wants security! The Ministry doesn't have the support of the public any more; Godric's Hollow has followed Hogsmeade's steps and is in open rebellion. They don't trust us to protect them, so they are taking up with Anarchists."

Kingsley's voice betrayed his guilt at it. "At least a thousand. More..." his usually rich voice cracked from the pain of admitting it, "...more than in the war against Vol-Voldemort."

"That can't be true." Harry looked like he was just told that Father Christmas wasn't real. "Voldemort was more evil... he was trying to..."

"He wanted Pureblood supremacy and worked the fear of the people. Wanted to round up the muggle-borns and enslave them. As detestable as it all was, he valued efficiency and didn't want to have to kill too many of them. The Goblins, however, just want to see our world burn." Narcissa spat out, "The Goblins are, believe it or not, a worse threat."

Neville was shaking his head at the aftermath burned into his memory. "It only took three goblins to take down the hospital. How was that so... easy?"

Viktor spoke up, his own eyes looking haunted. "They used hit-and-run tactics, poison gas. Then they turned the dead into an instant army."

Cormac, bloody and bandaged from his own battle in the courtrooms, spoke up. "They even had loads of Inferi to let loose in the Ministry as a diversion when St. Mungo's was overrun. Where did they get all those from?"

The reason for Kingsley's guilt was apparent. "Azkaban. Remember the Soulless that we couldn't agree on what to do with? The ones who would die anyways? The Goblins decided for us. Sent them back to try and kill all of us."

Ron walked in, handing over healing potions to the Healers in the makeshift hospice. "Brilliant strategy. Evil, but brilliant."

Harry's eyes centered on him as he shoved his former best friend into the wall. "I NEEDED YOU HERE RONALD!"

Ronald refused to look at Harry. "One more wand wouldn't have helped."

"You don't know that! Doesn't even matter. You should have been here. People died. Good people!" Tears streamed down his cheeks as Harry pointed down the hall. "Hermione's still fighting to survive! Your own sister and Draco were hurt."

"She shouldn't have been there! It's not her job to save the world!"
"Someone has to, Ron." Harry wiped tears away. "Someone has to."

"Well, George and I are restocking the basic healing potions since you torched the hospital." Ron said bitterly. Harry wanted to make a nasty retort, but a plain-looking wizard showed up with a cauldron in his hands and Draco by his side. Draco's face was still bruised and sore, but at least the skull fractures were healed.

The former Malfoy looked as if he wanted, or needed, to embrace Harry. To comfort him. But he couldn't just yet. "Harry, we may have found a way to deal with the Goblins."

"It can't be good, if you're with Bob here." Draco and Harry had decided to call the Unspeakable 'Bob'. Bob refused to give up his name nor show his real face.

Kingsley looked equally mistrustful. "What do you have?"

"It's a relic from Gringelwald's time. Blood magic, designed to wipe out bloodlines." Bob said.

Draco frowned at that. "It was designed to kill the muggles. We can modify it for Goblins, and will take them all out in a 300 kilometer radius." Fleur understood what that meant. *It would wipe out most of the goblins in the UK, but it could also take out some in Belgium and France.* She remembered the carnage of the past few weeks and she knew she'd light this fuse herself if she had to.

Harry shook his head. "We can't use it."

Kingsley talked over him. "It's not our decision anymore. The Wizengamot has spoken. Unspeakable, do whatever preparations you require. Merlin forgive us, forgive us all."

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Severus swooped in through the door and sat beside me before the door could swing closed. His movement seemed off; he didn't have his regular teaching robes billowing around him. Even his frock coat was gone, leaving him in his usual white Victorian-style shirt with a black cravat tucked in between the second and third buttons. It was expertly neat, even down to his pressed trousers, a leather belt around his narrow waist, clasped with a silver pair of serpents in a type of eternal struggle. It had been charmed to have absolutely no shine, to give zero reflection and to avoid attention.

What really stood out was the muggle shoulder holster that held both a muggle gun and his wand for a quick cross-draw. It hugged his chest and it showed me exactly how strong and muscular he was under all of the robes. Overall, the look made him seem a bit more real than the abstract dour Potions Master. I realized that this was the first time I'd ever seen him out of what would serve as his shield. *He felt safe around me.*

"For once, you're not dressed for a funeral. Try wearing a splash of color, then you'll scare everyone." I said wryly. *Holy crap, did I just say that to Professor Snape?* I tried to look around, and realized that we couldn't still be in St. Mungo's. The ceiling looked familiar… too familiar…

He smiled for a second, then his face went to careful scrutiny. "Hermione, you are not one to usually make light of my wardrobe."

We exchanged looks that conveyed little. "You seem serious. What happened? The Goblins have been stopped, there are no more Inferi going around trying to kill..."

He shook his head as I realized I was in my home. Apparently we got out of the hospital but I couldn't remember any of that. I started to sit up, and Herpy was there, helping prop me up and put
pillows behind me. Bless that dear elf.

"There have been no new reports of Inferi." he said.

"Then what is bothering you?" I seemed to ache all over, which is probably due to being slammed onto the ground a few times. My chest hurt, my skin felt raw, and my head felt tender and sore.

He tried to smile. It looked like it was too difficult. "You nearly die, essentially get brought back by your wife's kiss, and you ask me what's wrong?"

I arched an eyebrow at him. "I didn't know you cared." As I said it, a strange thought went through my head. This is exactly how Narcissa would be with him."I'm acting more like Narcissa would with you." My eyes focused on his face, his jawline, and I could see the eon of pain that was etched into his soul. I wanted to cup his face with my hands, and tell him that it would be okay. My mind flashed onto a memory where Narcissa had held him as he wailed, unable to keep his emotional barriers up after Lily left him in Hogwarts. I knew Narcissa had always cared for him, but I never expected to feel her memories like this. Severus had said those exact words, 'I didn't know you cared', to Cissy as she offered him a handkerchief when they were in the Advanced Potions classroom after curfew.

His eyes met hers… my eyes… as he said my wife's reply. "Perhaps I care more than I should."

I said the next line automatically. "Lucius' monogrammed handkerchief. You know you don't have to go through with the Bonding…” I pulled away from the memory. "Severus, why do I have my wife's memories?"

"She had to strengthen the bond between you two in order to share some of her life energy." He looked pensive for a moment. "You were gravely injured; not just the concussion, broken bone, fractured skull… there was a cursed wound upon you, sucking the life out of you much like…"

My heart pounded in fear. I knew that there was something about that Inferi, but that it could deliver cursed wounds? Had I been rotting like Dumbledore?! "Is Narcissa…” I couldn't finish the question. It was too scary to even fathom.

"She's fine. Just… tired. Chased down the final Goblin as it tried to escape. Gunned it down and emptied her clip of sleeping potions. He'll stand trial, after a fashion." I searched my mind and my feelings for what was Narcissa. Had she been inclined towards men, she could have loved Severus. I couldn't keep my eyes on him as I realized that.

"Sev, if there haven't been any more attacks, why do you look so… beat?"

"Fleur only woke back up yesterday." Yesterday?

"How long have I been out?"

"Three days. You depleted your magic; anyone else should have been unable to cast that many spells." I nodded my head, comprehending the implications of using the Elder Wand. It was trying to seduce me to kill, to use it more. Even to wipe my memories of guilt, of even using the wand in the first place.

"How bad was Fleur hurt?" I asked, noting his body language.

"Broken wing, concussion. She'll heal." He gave nothing away, which was a tell in itself.

"Draco is fine, he got a small concussion. Ginny suffered a nasty bite... it wasn't cursed, though... everyone else made it without any real physical damage. I've taken the liberty to refrain Gilderoy Lockhart from signing photographs as a 'get-well-soon' gift to you. Molly didn't seem to understand why."

I smiled at that, but there was something he was attempting to hide from me. "Drop the other shoe, Severus."

His eyes narrowed. "I have no idea what you speak of."

"I've known you for far too... Narcissa's memories of you are indicating you're still hiding something."

"The Goblins are to be culled by order of the Wizengamot."

I tried to sit all the way up; shocked at the news I had heard. The more I tried, however, the more it hurt. My chest ached, and so did my shoulder. Rammed the door open. Right. I tried to reach to touch the back of my head, only to feel how sore my arm muscles were. The skin felt tight and stretched around my hands to boot, making an ache whenever I was stubborn enough to move.

I flopped back into my half-sitting-up position and relaxed. The pain receded as I grimaced at how laid-up I was because of it. The Goblin who tried to kill me had done it from a distance, where I should have been safe if he hadn't stolen wands from the dead.

I let go of the frustration as I remembered the more important thing: I had almost died. That I was still alive means that maybe it's a good thing that I'm laid up like this for a while. I needed to not run off and play the hero by myself. Maybe I should leave this up to Severus and Fleur, and go back to a relatively safe life and finish at Hogwarts.

My mind flashed to remember the deaths in the hospital, and at the awards banquet, and the battle in the middle of Diagon Alley. I couldn't just lie here and hope that the rest of the Goblins would peacefully surrender and be executed for conspiring to commit genocide and destroy the Ministry.

Merlin, not even Voldemort wanted the Ministry destroyed. He wanted it taken over.

"Hermione?"

"I heard you, I need to get up. Goblins to kill." Severus cast a spell, opening up the door to the room I was in. A mediwitch rushed in, meaning that I must have been more injured than I had thought. Or Narcissa is spending a lot of Galleons on us. My mind went back to Saint Mungo's. Why wasn't I there getting treated now?

"Miss Granger, you're in no state to be getting."

"-Misses Granger." I corrected automatically, "what happened to the hospital?"

The mediwitch looked familiar, like I should have known her from Hogwarts. She was my own height with short blond hair, and her demeanor conveyed professionalism and exhaustion.

"What do you think you're doing, Misses Granger?"

"Getting up. This is my home, correct? What happened to the St. Mungo's?"

She tittered as her head shook slightly. "This may be your home, but you're my patient."
"You can either help me up, or be in my way. Severus, where is my wife?" I demanded.

Severus' face gave nothing away. "She's resting."

"I'll get the Healer." The mediwitch rushed out.

My eyes met Severus'. "What happened?!" He stood, graceful as flowing water. It reminded me of the water rushing down the stairs to the Morgue. *Something happened there, something really bad.* I couldn't seem to focus on it.

"I'll see if Cissy is awake." Severus swept out of the room, and it seemed odd without his regularly billowing robes in his wake. *He considers my wife like family; had he even gone home? Where was home for him?* It hit me then; his house might be at Spinners End, but home for him is near his loved ones. *Which is precisely why he's been keeping a vigil upon us.*

"Thanks Sev," I muttered to the now-empty room. I pulled back the sheets to see my legs. The knees looked like overripe bananas. I hadn't known bruises could come in dark yellow. Wincing, I pulled back my sleeves and saw deep purple and brown bruises across my forearms, and a healing bite mark on my left hand. The fact that I had been out for three days and that I still looked this bad with magic was saying a lot.

*The Wizarding War is over, yet the Goblin's Rebellion is even worse... what kind of world are we going to create out of all this?*

Healer Strout came in through the open door, and she was already doing diagnostic spells as she was talking to me.

"Hermione, you've been unconscious for a few days, so what in Merlin's Beard do you think you're doing?"

"Getting up. I want to know what's going on." I demanded.

"Stay seated, and I'll answer whatever questions you ask."

I looked up at her resolute face and decided that I was in too much pain to argue. "Can I get some real clothing?" I started to reach out instinctively, and realized I didn't know where my wand was. "Where are my wands?"

She ignored the question. "What questions did you have for me to answer?"

"What's going on with the Wizengamot? Who secured and cleaned up St. Mungo's? Was the Stone ever recovered?" I thought for a moment. "And what on earth was my wife doing with Rita?!"

"You need to stay calm, Misses Granger." The Healer soothed in an oddly firm voice. Narcissa staggered in, arm around Severus for support. The ground fell out from under me. *Oh my god, who hurt her?!*

Her wand-arm was in a muggle cast, and her face was black and bruised. Understanding the look of horror on my face, she spoke quickly to assuage me. "Saint Mungo's was too far gone; it was left to burn to the ground. As for me, we were low on potions, and we can't risk taking Fleur into a muggle hospital, so she got the last of the potions and I saw a… Doctor. Never had to swallow pills before. I've already had Severus cast *episky* to fix my arm, but I have to do a follow up appointment and..."
would rather not have to try explaining it." I knew rationally that she couldn't have looked worse than me, but my concern was all on her at this point. She limped over to me, and, with assistance from an awkward Severus, leaned down to kiss me. Her lips were dry and harsh, and my own was swollen and painful, but the kiss was everything I needed it to be. It was reassurance, and it lightened the pain. "You're not mad about what I did, are you?"

I smiled, shaking my head imperceptibly. "You saved me, and now I have some access to your memories. Do you have mine, too?"

"Yeah. Draco was quite the prat to you." I chuckled lightly, enjoying her aroma near me.

"I love you Cissy. Thank you." I whispered as she righted herself and clutched Severus for balance.

"And I love you, Hermione." She turned her face to Severus. "Let me sit down."

"Shall I whisper sweet nothings into her ear for you as well?" His dry wit made Narcissa blush.

"I think I can handle that myself." I replied, my eyes locked on my wife. "What's happened in the past few days?"

"Well, we recovered the resurrection stone from the Goblin. It was… horrific." Narcissa closed her eyes to banish the memory from her mind. "Kingsley is nothing but a figurehead while the Wizengamot has invoked Emergency Powers. Neighboring countries aren't accepting Goblins as refugees and aren't condemning the order of execution. To be honest, I'm not surprised.

"So far, there have been zero Goblins that have decried their violent Rebellion. In fact, Ragnok is being celebrated as a Living Martyr, jockeying to commit the next act of mass destruction in his name. I'm fairly certain that the other countries are hoping for us to put down the rebellion as fast as possible at this time."

I shook my head at that. Were there any good guys in this? A Goblin did those injuries on Narcissa, and I nearly died.

"It's just complete madness that they'd strike at us like this, logically, they have to know that they won't be granted the right to wield wands after this."

Severus spoke up. "You make the mistake of assuming they think like humans. They revere strength and brutality over logic, and do not have a sense of humanity."

"Then self-preservation, then! They must have known that if they tried to wipe us out completely, that we'd retaliate just as inhumanely." I replied, wondering what the right course of action should be.

Narcissa shook her head. "Look at the Goblin Rebellions. They always expected the weak Wizards to capitulate entirely, and it would take a lot of compromise on both sides for it to get through. Now that they have wands, they must think they can kill all of us off faster than we can pick them off ourselves."

"But the negotiations?"

"They expect Wizards to lie with words, that we will always try to trick them. If they really wanted to have a civil negotiation, they shouldn't have tried to wholesale slaughter us."

I thought about it. "They can't all be on board with this, though."
Healer Strout looked at me with sympathy. "If there were any provably innocent Goblins that didn't want to kill us, possibly even surrender, we'd take mercy upon them. However... There haven't been any. They are going to fight to the last, and take as many of us down with them as possible.

"I need to get back out there."

"The Aurors and Hit-Wizards can handle things for a few days."

Healer Strout conjured and held a large hand mirror. Her gaze flicked to Severus, and it wasn't friendly. "If you would please stand back, Master Snape?"

"You're the Healer," Severus said dryly, giving her some room to move.

"I'm pleased that you remember that," The Healer said sharply, handing me the mirror so that I had to see myself. My face wasn't as bad as my arms or legs, there wasn't much other than the black eye, bruised face, and busted lip, but there was a noticeable, worn-out look in my eyes. I had done too much and needed to rest.

"Fleur is in worse shape; she was literally thrown around like a rag doll. She's only alive due to her Veela blood. You are a bloody miracle and yet you need to be told that you're not invulnerable."

The bruise sprawled over my cheek, around the eye and eyebrow, and the lowest point ended at my jaw. The skin was a dark rainbow of purple, black, and dark red skin with maroon freckles scattered across it. This had to have shown up after my first day in their care, when the healing charm wouldn't have helped any. *Bugger, it's a deep bruise. My face is going to go through shades of green, yellow, and brown over the next week. I could cast a glamour charm, but the soreness and pain will still be there.*

"Yes, my face is bruised. I look absolutely horrid, and no man will ever want me." I said reproachfully, "Now I want to get dressed and out of this bed."

The Healer frowned at me, made a note on my medical chart, and washed her hands of me. "I'll have a mediwitch here in a moment." Narcissa and Severus exchanged a knowing yet relieved glance at each other.

Ginny was left in charge of the rescued babies from St Mungo's as Draco was tasked to find their surviving relatives. They made a decent team; he helped her change diapers and bathe them before feeding time. The surviving Healers and Mediwizards were extremely thankful for this, as they were also dealing with injuries from a coinciding attack upon the Ministry.

"Draco, take this girl and put her back, I'll get the last one." Ginny said, amazed at the efficiency the pair of them had together. Herpy was already there with a bottle and checked the warming charm on it.

Draco took over the baby boy and put him back in his crib. He was glad to see the family heirlooms finally see some use. "Sweetie, after this one, I want to check your bandage and stitches." Ginny nodded at that, she also felt odd about having to resort to muggle medicine, but Fleur's injuries as well as the babies had to take precedence.

"After this, do you want to have dinner? I'm going to help explain stir-fry to Herpy." They had been trying new foods lately, and had Harry over whenever they could as impromptu dinner dates. He enjoyed kissing them both goodnight, but worried what people might think when this gets out to the public.
"I'd love that!" Ginny said, leaning over to give him a quick kiss as thanks.

"What do you think you're doing with him?" The voice startled the pair as Molly Weasley rounded upon them. "You go gallivanting off, get injured, and I get no word?!"

The babies started to cry out and Draco went to scoop one up to comfort her, having a look between being cross and guilty at the Weasley matriarch.

"Well, mother, seeing as I have a bottle in my hand, I'm trying to feed him."

Molly's maternal instincts seemed to kick in as she took the remaining two babies and picked them up to help shush them as well. She leaned over to Ginny in an attempt to whisper. "I meant, what are you doing snogging Draco Malfoy!"

"Mother, I'm a grown woman and I'm allowed to snog anyone I want!" Even to Ginny it sounded petulant.

"At first I could forgive you for staying with Harry despite his unsavory connection to... you know..." Molly got both babies quiet instantly and laid them back into their cribs.

Draco arched an eyebrow at her. "My step-mother?"

"It's positively scandalous! The age gap alone-"

"-was fine when it involved Tonks and Remus, right? I can't believe you could be such a hypocrite, mother!"

"Well if you listened to the Wireless lately, and knew what kind of people the Malfoys are, you might just change your mind!"

"Oh that rubbish with Rita? You know she's always had it in for Hermione, even back during the Triwizard Tournament!" Draco added defensively.

Somebody was coming in through the doorway, peeking around for Molly's attention. "Oi, there you are Ginny. I heard you got hurt while I was defending the Ministry." Cormac's hair was oddly styled and Ginny could have sworn he was hiding flowers behind his back as he came into the room.

"Yeah, we all were in the thick of it for a bit." She replied, glaring daggers at her mother. *There was a reason for this surprise visit, wasn't there?*

Cormac strode in, and everyone but Molly seemed surprised that both of his hands were empty. He stretched his own hand out to Draco for an awkward handshake. "Good job with the Hospital. Glad you were able to bring these babies out."

Draco shook hands, his face back to showing nothing. "We all have our parts to play."

Cormac looked at him, mystified, for just a second too long. "But of course. Well, just came in to... see how you all are doing."

Ginny nodded as she kept bottle-feeding the last baby in her arms. "We survived."

Cormac nodded sheepishly, making the conversation even more awkward. "You know you're going to be a natural at that." He used his smile to deliver the line that he thought would work. "Motherhood." He added after the fact.

"How would I be an unnatural mother?" Ginny asked, handing the bottle off to Draco and started to
burp the infant.

"I um... yeah, I dunno. Say, you-" Molly cleared her throat as Cormac's eyes widened at her. "I gotta get back to work. Security is really high right now, we're expecting a Goblin retaliation... be careful out there." He left quickly and Molly was right behind him. She paused, and decided to try another tactic.

"Ginny, I have a bit of dittany for your neck so it won't leave a scar."

"I don't want it, mother. I earned this scar by saving people." The silence was deafening. "Too many died for me to want to just wipe it away and forget, like Ronald and you have done. Yeah, I saw what you did to Fred and George's room."

Molly stiffened at that. "Draco, would be so kind as to-" He sprung into action and held the door open with the arm that wasn't holding a baby.

"show you the door? Good day, Mrs. Weasley."

I looked over to Severus. He nodded in understanding, cast *muffliato*, and left the room. "Cissy, I have your memories and I recall you meeting with Rita recently. And how she kissed you. When were you going to tell me about that?"

"We got busy, hon. And honestly, I'm ashamed of what I did to her in the past."

"You groomed her to be your informant and to destroy reputations on a whim. Thought she'd stay loyal to you as a lover. I didn't realize demanding monogamy would make her our enemy." I sighed, still uncertain on how to approach it. *I can't share her with that predator, this witch is mine.*

"She doesn't want me now anyways; she has more power by threatening to 'out' people as gay and would prefer to remain closeted herself. Rita very much wants to keep things as they once were. Us together is an outright threat to society in her mind."

"We'll deal with her when we have to. You're mine, Narcissa Granger." There was a deft knock on the door, and Severus opened it up, canceling the spell he had cast before. In came in a familiar-looking Mediwitch.

"I work- worked, in the nursery," the nurse said as she brought in my clothes, helping button me into it. She didn't use any magic around me and I looked up at her, unsure what to say. "You yelled at me to get to the top. Yelled it at me." She helped me sit up, feet hanging off the bed. I sat there for a few seconds, realizing that we were going to stand ... and my legs would have to work.

"I'm sorry you saw all that," I said, unsure of what comfort I could provide here. I couldn't say 'oh I killed it', because I'm no heroine, I acted out of desperation. And what we'd be doing next for survival was even worse.

She started slip the black panties up my calves, but I pushed her hands away. *If I can't even manage my own pants, I can't fight.* If I was truly this injured, better to know now.

I was still sitting on the bed, and decided to lay back and shimmy them up my thighs. I didn't care if I looked pathetic, I was going to do this myself.

"Let me help you with the rest, so you don't have to bend too much," the witch said. I relented, hating to feel like an invalid and unable to take care of myself. At least she didn't argue that I was far too injured to be getting up, though it was apparent.
"I've worked in that hospital for ten years. It was my first job. James took me under his wing..." Her eyes were dry, haunted, and there were dark circles like purplish smudges, she was fighting her sleep because the nightmares would always take her back.

I thought of the body that had blocked the door in the nursery, and idly wondered if that was the same body that crashed through the window. If that were him. She probably knew, maybe even had lunch with him regularly. If she wanted to talk about it, I could listen.

I struggled, but got the denims on without help. The same couldn't be said about the trainers. Things were still looking up. Herpy could help me with my shoes for now.

"When I close my eyes, it starts all over again. I see the babies." She was tying the laces when she looked up. "I keep thinking I should be remembering my friends, coworkers... but I can't recall them to save my life. I only see the babies, those little bodies, crying. I close my eyes, and I hear screaming. The arm. The red. Every night." Tears rolled down her cheeks but there was no sniffle; she was surprised as she wiped the moisture from her face. She didn't even know she was crying.

"See a counselor, a muggle-born psychiatrist, a minister, or whomever you trust," I said. "You need help."

She tied the other shoe and gazed up at me, her eyes stuck in a thousand-yard-stare. "I heard the Goblins also attacked the Ministry. And they are organizing to strike us again and again. Using our own dead."

"I've heard that too."

She checked the laces of both shoes to be sure they were not too tight, as if she did this regularly. She at me with those hollow, haunted eyes of hers. There was an emptiness there. "They are exterminating us like vermin. I've sworn to preserve life, but these Goblins no longer count. Kill them. You have to kill them. Kill them all, please."

Her face conveyed a level of trust that only belongs on children or the mentally deficient. Looking at her eyes, I realized she went from being a capable mediwitch to Lennie from Of Mice and Men. There was no doubt in that face. Reality was too much for her right now. I knew what she needed to hear. 'I'll kill them. I'll kill them all.'

I had said it because she needed to hear it. After what I'd seen them do, it was the only real course of action. Maybe that's why the Wizengamot voted to do this. Knowing Tiberius Ogden as the Chief Mugwump, it probably was. Narcissa knew him to never be hasty in his decisions, even when he resigned in protest. But he enacted Emergency Powers to override Kingsley's protests against killing them all. As for using a relic from Grindelwald's era, I'd heard of worse plans. As a way of life, it was evil and barbaric. As a way to stay alive, it just might work. As for keeping your soul intact, it failed. Was it worth a bit of my soul? Save the next hundred Wizards? Keep the Resurrection Stone from falling into Goblin hands again? I knew these Goblins wouldn't stop at our shores; if they could topple our Ministry and kill every last Witch and Wizard here, they would cross the channel and start working on France.

I was willing to trade a piece of my soul to stop our own extinction. Cissy, Draco, and myself did so in order to kill The Dark Lord, and I won't ever apologize for that. Perhaps that was my problem. I've become willing to compromise myself, my soul, to stop the Darkness. The Wand of Destiny - no, Deathstwhick - was egging me on. But there will always be another villain. Grindelwald, Voldemort, Ragnarok. No matter who saves the day and stops the monster, there will always be another. Evil is unlimited. I am not. The scars on my soul would add up, losing parts as I hacked them off to slay the bad guys. But it was finite; once I used it all up, there would be no going back. I would save the
world and lose my soul. Others would come after me 'for the greater good'.

But I looked into the witch's face, and saw faith fill her empty eyes. Faith in me. I wouldn't refuse her. I can't let the goblins win, even if it meant losing more of myself. Merlin help me if I'm turning into Harry, arrogantly running off to play the hero. God help us all if I'm wrong.

Fleur was happy to see Hermione back on her feet, though she felt a twinge of regret as Severus still had to help Narcissa get around. Because of her condition, she was given priority treatment because she couldn't be seen by muggles. She planned on speaking to Minerva about transfiguring herself to look more human. Hermione was slow on her feet, but her mind was as sharp as ever.

"Severus, what do you know of Broderick Bode?" She asked, eyebrows furrowed in thought.

"He was an Unspeakable. Died under suspicious circumstances in St Mungo's. Nobody accidentally gives Devil's Snare as a gift."

"That's what I thought, and he died around the time that there were break-ins to the Department of Mysteries. He would have had access, right?" Hermione asked. Severus nodded, face as neutral as ever. "Severus, do you think he was aligned with the Death Eaters?"

"Broderick Bode was not a Death Eater. I, however, cannot deny that he may have been under the Imperious curse."

"I'm wondering if it was more than that. What if he was the traitor to the Unspeakables? One of the Unmarked?"

"Well he's dead now, so there's that at least." Severus replied as Harry and Kingsley approached them.

Harry shook his head ominously. "Did anyone actually see the body?"

"Oh, shit." Fleur said, realization hitting her like ice-water.

"BOB!" Harry called out. "Neville, have you seen Draco? I need to find that Unspeakable."

Hermione looked at the Minister. "Fleur and I will deal with the Goblins. They can't be allowed to slaughter us anymore."

"Hermione, there's got to be a better way." He faced her, and it felt like it was a challenge.

"No, not really. Not anymore." She looked up to him defiantly. Kingsley shook his head, trying to shunt off the weight of her gaze.

"What about SPEW? Or when you said the Fountain of Magical Cooperation was rubbish?" Shackebolt had wanted to rail against someone about this, and Hermione was a ready target.

"House Elves are enslaved and haven't tried to kill us all on sight. I still have mercy for them, but not for the Goblins."

Harry stepped between them. "Hermione, this isn't you. You've changed since you won the Elder Wand." Hermione pressed her lips thin and let Harry see more of her true self than she ever had before.
"No, Harry. Fifth year, we were captured by Umbridge and she threatened to torture you with Imperius Curse." Harry looked at her, surprised at bringing that memory up.

"Yeah, you made some bluff that got us into the forest so we could give her the slip. Lucky thing Grawp and the centaurs showed up."

"The two of us, unarmed, against an able Ministry official? I don't do luck. I plan things." The energy in the room dropped to a cold boil; everyone seemed to take a step back from the two Gryffindors.

"Hermione, you couldn't have planned on Grawp actually helping."

"I wasn't. You and I were still underage, so I loudly trampled through the Forest for the Centaurs to run into her."

"Wait, that's what they said! They said you had expected them to deal with her for you, like they were your trained pets... why would they?"

"Harry, don't you know the mythology behind centaurs? Ever wonder why they are all male? How they reproduce?"

"I... did they...?" He couldn't even form the words on his lips. Such a naive little boy after all.

"Yeah. They did. Ron even teased her in the hospital wing when he made clopping noises in her sleep." Harry paled as he heard that.

"How could you do that to her?"

"She was horrible to you, and I knew she'd never see one day in court for the crimes she committed against the students. Don't say she's innocent, not after that muggleborn registration act that had scores of muggle-borns turned into the Soulless, left to die and rot in Azkaban!"

Harry fumed at that, looking as his friend and realizing he had never really seen her before. Huffing, he rounded on the Minister. Hermione and Narcissa disapparated away with Grindelwald's Cauldron.

"Kingsley! You can't let them do this." Harry shouted, not caring who heard him.

"Like I said, the Wizengamot made the decision. I don't have to say that I like it or that I'm having any part of it. In fact, I'm on record as opposing this. The only other option I have is to resign which I will not do." Kingsley's voice carried a note of finality to it, and Harry looked shell-shocked at the futility of it all hit him.

"I thought we were the good guys," Harry said, his voice cracking as he fought tears. It had that note of a boy who just had the last bit of his innocence stripped away. Like he finally realized that sometimes good and evil aren't polar opposites, but instead two different sides of the same coin. All that matters is which end of the wand you're on.

"We are." Shacklebolt affirmed.

He shook his head. "You aren't."

Kingsley frowned at that, doubting the legacy he'd leave behind. It was something that he'd been loosing sleep over. Having it thrown in his face like this? It made him snap. "If you can't handle the job, POTTER, go work in a joke shop! Get a desk job. I don't care, just get the hell away from me."
Harry stared at him as he pulled out his Auror badge. "Understood, Minister." His voice was colder than it had ever been before. He tossed the badge back to Shacklebolt and turned to leave, glad to see Neville had his back on this issue.

A nondescript wizard cleared his throat. "Needed something, Mister Potter?" Harry nodded, putting his hand out for him.

Neville dropped his own Auror badge onto the ground as the three of them disapparated into the night.

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Draco arrived at the rendezvous point with Healer Poke. He was met by Neville's wand, lit and ready at his face.

"Hey, it's me. I brought Ford just like Harry asked." Draco said, startled at how Longbottom had grown into a formidable force.

"Just checking. Can't be too careful, can we? Why do we need this bloke?"

"Healer Rutherford Poke. My brother Royden was working on the peace treaty with the Goblins." The three of them went inside a tent that opened into a full-sized house. Harry was fumbling with the tea in front of him.

"We can't let them do this, Bob. Why did you give them that cauldron?"

"They asked. It wasn't Unspeakable, it wasn't hidden. The item is a historical footnote. Therefore, I had no way to conceal it."

"Well, there has to be something we can do! Is there something... wait. The locked door! What about that?"

"Harry Potter, you don't have the faintest idea what lies behind there. It's... too dangerous."

"Albus told me that the Ministry kept it locked at all times... that it contained a force that is more wonderful and more terrible than death itself! He said I possessed lots of it and Voldemort had none... it's Love."

"That daft, sentimental fool..." Bob said, frustrated. "It's NOT... No. I'm not even going to answer this. It's too dangerous."

Healer Poke scoffed at the exchange. "Going to save the world by sending the Goblins little candy hearts and charmed cherub-dolls? I doubt that's why you sent for me."

Harry looked up, relieved. "Royden had contacts with the Goblin liaisons. I you to see if there are any sympathetic to the Ministry."

"What good will that do? Make a joint strike team with goblins in order to stop them from killing us, and from the Ministry from doing their horrific solution?" Draco asked confoundedly.

"No, no more fighting fire with fire. We all just... wind up burned that way. But that 300 kilometer radius means that-" Harry's excited voice got cut off by Draco.

"-Scotland is safe! We get as many Goblins as we can, least the ones that don't want us dead, and head north."

"We're going to openly defy the Ministry? Sneak fugitives away from certain, but unjust,
execution?" Neville said, nodding. "Yeah, had to say that out loud. I'm in."

"Now you're talking like an Unspeakable." Bob said proudly. "See why we try to stay neutral?"

Ford shook his head at this. "But what if this is a trap? We round up Goblins, tell them 'come with us if you want to live', which I'm sure they'll say yes, then take the time to stab us in the backs for all our trouble?"

"We're offering to save their lives, they have to trust us. Besides, the goblins who attacked St. Mungo's are dead or captured. Griphook stood by our agreement." Harry affirmed, biting back the part that he and Ron decided to try and swindle their way out of it.

Ginny found herself content, a copy of *Tales of Beedle the Bard* in her hands, flipping through the tale of the warlock's hairy heart with the babies asleep in their cribs. Draco had went off with the Healer to meet with Harry. Herpy had started preparing dinner, and seemed excited once she tasted the ginger and knew how she'd want to saute it.

Hermione had poked her head in to see her friend. "Hey Ginny, Narcissa and I are going to go have dinner with my parents at their new home tonight. A mediwitch should be here tonight to watch the babies soon, and uh... I guess I just wanted to say thank you for helping out."

Ginny was pleased at the recognition. "It's no problem, your wife has got me interested in pursuing Healing once I'm done with Professional Quidditch." Hermione beamed at that.

"Hey, any luck finding family for them?" She asked, pointing at the sleeping infants.

"One, yeah. The others are all dead ends though. Harry suggested hiring some gum-shoe." As Ginny said it, she realized how awkward the conversation could become after their row.

Hermione shrugged it off. "It's okay. A muggle private investigator might be useful."

"Yeah, about Harry..." Hermione waved away the comment.

"I can sympathize with his reticence, but he needs to face reality. I think we all tried to protect him a bit too much... and he turned out to be too naive for this world."

"Are you sure? I mean, Harry means well..." Ginny had been slightly worried about this as well.

"He should have known what I had done to Umbridge. It was obvious, because he was there. Then we went off to the Department of Mysteries, I warned him he had a bit of a 'saving-people' issue. I shouldn't have been so tactful; I ought to have been blunt and said that it felt like a trap because Voldemort knew of Harry's hero complex."

"But the wholesale execution of the Goblins is a bit much."

"There fewer Goblins than Death Eaters and their supporters have attacked us, yet they've killed more during this rebellion than died during the war. Honestly, Ginny, do you think Harry would be able to cast the Killing Curse in order to stop Voldemort? Or would he try to talk him down first, to surrender and stand trial?"

Ginny couldn't answer that. She knew the answer. *Harry would have let You-Know-Who kill him. Again.*

Hermione left without saying another word. Ginny decided to cheer herself up and read *The Wizard*
and the Hopping Pot to them as the Mediwitch came in to watch over them for the evening. Ginny made her way to the dining room, the air fragrant from sauteed ginger and pork.

That's when she saw Harry pinning Draco to the bar, reaching around him to grab a bottle. Harry was mixing a drink around Draco, and there was no space between them as Draco was slack-jawed, grinding his ass into her (their?) boyfriend.

She was equal parts intrigued and jealous at the exchange. As much as she loved seeing the two of them together like this, she had never really had Harry ever get so flirty and assertive with her before.

"How long until dinner, Harry?" Draco asked, neck tilted as Harry's lips traced a delicate line of kisses up his neck.

Ginny spoke up, startling the pair. "You should ask your House Elf that, not my boyfriend." The pair of them split up, looking a bit sheepish and guilty.

The house-elf heard her name and called out, "Herpy is serving the food now!"

Ginny blushed as she came over and kissed Harry. "You ought to be a bit more assertive with me like you were with Draco. That was..." her arms snaked around his hips, "enticing."

Draco was sipping a bright green drink in a martini glass as he slapped her on the arse. Ginny yipped in surprise at that. "Harry won't ever be able to do that to his little princess; he's too much of a good guy for that. Let's go eat."

Ginny smirked at the exchange and dinner flew past them. They seemed to enjoy it, but were too busy dealing with the sexual tension between the three of them and the surreptitious glances they gave each other.

As they finished up, Harry cleared his throat and his eyes held lustful thoughts towards Ginny. "Well, Draco, thank you and Herpy for a wonderful dinner; I think we should go back to my place for dessert."

The House-elf squeaked in delight. "Herpy made dessert too, Young Master!"

Draco chuckled at that. "I don't think he was speaking of the culinary type, but thank you." Herpy began to gather up the dishes as Draco finished his drink.

"Shall we?" Harry asked Ginny as he leaned over and kissed her. It wasn't his normal kiss, one that was a small peck and left a flutter of emotion in her chest. There was nothing chaste in this kiss, as his lips and tongue explored her mouth. Ginny melted into it and opened herself up, their tongues dancing as heat slid between them and he seemed to pour deeper into her through the kiss.

Ginny had begun this kiss seated, but found herself standing between the boys as two pairs of hands urgently held onto her body. "Wow. That was..."

Draco finished for her. "Good." Between both men, Ginny could tell they were both quite aroused and their desire spiked her own as she turned to face the blonde.

"May I?" She whispered, lips grazing Draco's as she plead for a kiss from him as well.

Draco smirked in that knowing way. "Oh, where are my manners?" His hands trailed down and possessively clasped over her bum, making her squirm in his embrace. "But of course, witch."
Severus was back in the castle, and for some reason he slept better in the dungeons than in the Headmaster's office. When school resumed, he was certain he'd have to return to his residence up there. And deal with all of the portraits trying to chat me up. On second thought, he knew exactly why he could sleep in the dungeons better.

No, the Potions Master liked the quiet of the halls right now. Things were winding down, and soon the world could move on from all of the pointless bloodshed. The new school term was slated to begin in a month. That is, after one more act of violent bloodshed. For Peace. For the Greater Good.

"Bloody Greater Good." he mumbled as he finished his tumbler of scotch, and headed for bed. A gentle knock on his door stopped him, and he put on a dressing gown over his satin sleep shorts as he flicked his wand to open the door. Who is calling upon me at this hour?

"Severus..." Fleur started, then closed her beaky mouth. "I can't sleep. Haven't been able to, really."

He sighed, knowing what she would be asking for. "I'm out of Dreamless Sleep. I have scotch if that helps."

She shook her head, small ringlets of blonde hair bouncing around in the torch-lit room as she entered. "No, Sev, I'm not looking for a potion or a drink. I just need," She fidgeted at this, "to not be alone."

"Weren't you taking up residence in Firenze's classroom?"

She looked nervous at that. "Besides the snoring, he um... well, you know how men can be as they sleep."

Severus nearly frowned at that. "As I am a man, I believe I can... know."

Fleur huffed, feeling terribly out of place. "He doesn't wear anything so I woke up to see... you know..." she tried to make a gesture with her hands as her wings subconsciously extended, alerting Severus of the reason of her discomfort. She saw him waking up fully aroused and... unfurled, and he's part-horse.

"Very well. I'll see to it that you get your own quarters. For tonight, I can transfigure a bed for you from my sofa..."

"No, Severus. I need... physical contact. Might I join you in bed tonight?"

Severus stood there, stunned. He went over and poured himself another finger's worth of scotch. "Why me?"

"Out of all of the men I know, you were one of the few that didn't trip over himself to try and impress me. And now that I look like this, you're the only man I've seen who isn't repulsed by me. You must have loved her very much."

"I did indeed. But there were two women in my heart."

"And I loved Bill. I'm not asking for anything more than a warm body next to my own."

Severus drained his tumbler for the second time and asked the question that had been on his mind. "You're a Veela. How did you survive the death of your mate?"

Fleur looked down in shame. "I don't know. My mother thinks I've brought shame upon the family."
"Any mother who would rather see you dead than happy and moving on is no mother. Trust me on that." Severus said, taking off his dressing robe and sliding into the bed. Fleur nodded her thanks, transfigured her own robes into something suitable, and curled up beside him for the night.

Severus wondered if this was betraying their memories, or inappropriate timing considering Fleur's recent loss of her own, but he couldn't deny the comfort that warmth and the sound of another person's breathing had on him as he closed his eyes and hoped to not have the same nightmares play in his head again.

The three of them got back to Harry's place and he checked on his godson as Draco and Ginny snuck up to Harry's bedroom. Draco cast multiple privacy and noise-muffling charms that he perfected from years of rooming with other boys in Slytherin House as Harry tip-toed in, eager to continue where they left off at dinner.

"Let's get naked," Ginny said.

Ginny actually made them both choke and laugh at the same time. "Hellcat, what has made you so bold?" Draco said, his fingers itching to touch Harry but worried he'll scare him off.

"Because we all want this and because it will take forever for the three of us to do anything. We could discuss it, negotiate it, make a suggestion, counter that with another... I don't want to discuss anymore. If we're going to do this, let's just do it."

"Really," Harry said, "doff the clothes, no sweet talk or foreplay first."

Ginny leaned into him, and the weight of Draco behind her back. Ginny looked up to Harry's face, and whispered, "We had dinner, so let this by my sweet-talk: I want to see if I can deep throat you."

He blinked at her, started to laugh nervously, then stopped, gulped, and muttered, "You couldn't before. You were great, but you couldn't-"

"I've been practicing," Ginny said; a wicked gleam in her eye. "I've been shut up with an all girls Quidditch team, and you know..."

Draco's voice was rich and suggestive. "Mate, she's got that look."

"What look?" Ginny said.

Draco answered, "That needy, knowing, 'I'm going to have you' look. The one that says that you're got dirty thoughts in your mind. Only you could put that much innocence and evil seduction into the same look."

"Wait, what do you mean, you've been practicing?" Harry asked, "How do you practice that?"

"I took a certain toy with me that kept me company many nights, and decided to practice as if it were you." She replied, "I made sure it was as big as you."

Harry blushed at that.

Ginny turned to Draco. "I don't get how I have a look that is both innocent and evilly seductive at the same time."

"You remind me of a fallen angel, hellcat. You do not stop being an angel merely because you may
have fallen from grace; you still have that heavenly beauty I've always admired from afar."

She blushed at his words as they both pressed in on either side of her. *Enough foreplay, off with the clothes.*

The clothes finally came off, yet Harry argued about which position would be better for her to deep throat him. *I didn't want to argue about everything, but I was damn certain I'd rather not be on my back for this.* Draco's diplomacy settled the argument, "Let Ginny try her way first, and we'll do yours if it doesn't." Ginny began to wonder if she and Harry could work as a couple. *We fought over the dumbest things at times; without Draco as our negotiator, Harry would still be upset at me playing Quidditch. What does it mean when we need a third person in bed to direct us how to fuck so we don't get stuck arguing?* Ginny realized that she wanted to let it go, and not worry right this moment. She knew she had to get out of her own way and enjoy it, and had to trust her boys to do the same.

Ginny had seen Harry nude before, but it had been a long time since she had seen him naked, on his back, with his length firming itself in front of her. Ginny bit her lip as she crawled, making him spread his legs as her hair traced the insides of his thigh, her eyes taking in all of him. Strands of her red hair tickled his groin, and she knew it was teasing him. But it wasn't just that Ginny wanted to tease him, it was also about having Draco there, also admiring Harry. He was magnificent to look at; even while only partially erect he was impressive, along with the flat plane of his stomach, the swell of his chest with his slightly-defined muscles; the broad shoulders, and finally Harry's face. The look on his face as he saw her. The rich, emerald-green eyes that were slightly unfocused in lust as Ginny's fingers traced the tip of him. She let her hot breath roll over his softest skin as her tongue delicately traced the length of his shaft. It wasn't much, the lightest amount possible, and it left him vulnerable to her sweet mercy.

*Where was Draco?* Ginny looked around to see him at the corner of the bed, still yet nervous. He was nude, sitting with one knee drawn up so that he was covering his own groin. He attempted to look suave in a devil-may-care pose, but Ginny knew him too well. She saw the stress in his shoulders and the tension in one thigh. He was doing the classic Slytherin neutral face with a touch of smugness.

Ginny rested her cheek against Harry's thigh, looking back at Draco. "This isn't a spectator sport." There was an electric, nervous air about them. Harry's legs tensed as her fingers played up and down them, her delicate fingertips trailing over the soft curls of hair as her eyes beckoned him to come join them. "I want to do this to you as well." She turned away from Draco, exposing her wet quim to him as her fingers gently wrapped around the base of Harry and she drew him into her mouth. She moaned as her tongue slid against that velvety-silky skin. Judging from Harry's moaning, she knew his eyes and head were rolled back as he savored the sensations.

Ginny licked along the length of him, like it was a piece of candy, and Ginny wanted to make it last. She licked back and forth, up and down, wrapping her lips around the tip of him, until he cried out and gasped as his knuckles went white in gripping the sheets. She had her own fingers sliding in and out, working herself wetter as she worked him to the back of her throat.

"Ginny, please, no more teasing." Harry said hoarsely.


He shuddered, and it took him a moment to remember how to speak. "Then um, let me do you."

Ginny looked at him, the hesitant eagerness in his face, the look of desire in his eyes. Ginny could
feel what he wanted, the silent scream aching from within him. She looked at Draco. "Switch."

Draco shrugged, light sarcasm in his words. "Whatever pleases my lady."

Harry moved his leg around her and stood, facing Draco as they both realized the other was fully aroused at this. "We're eventually going to have to touch each other, Harry."

"I know," Harry said, "but we're naked now... it's just a barrier we haven't crossed yet."

"We will. " Draco said, pecking him on the lips quickly. Stepping around Harry, he slapped him on the ass in a playful manner. "Now get to work." Ginny giggled at the interaction.

Draco laid down in front of Ginny, and kissed her deeply, probing for any remnant of Harry's flavor. "You okay with this?" She nodded. "Good girl, I've always wanted to feel your lips upon me."

Ginny wrapped her hand around his base, and found that he wasn't quite as firm as she had hoped for. She squeezed him, enveloped him into her mouth entirely, and worked him to be fully firm while inside her mouth. *Merlin, the feeling of him harden inside me is... wonderful.*

"Grab her shoulders and help hold her in place." Harry said as he slipped himself into her. Ginny moaned throatily and Draco felt it as she was taken deeply.

Ginny kept her hand on the base of Draco as she slid her mouth over him. He wasn't completely hard yet, and Ginny moved her hand so she could enjoy as much of him as possible. It was a bit easier when he was somewhat softer, she could swallow past a certain point. It reminded her of when she had practiced before and left no teeth marks on her toy. He got fully erect and her body said, no more, we're choking. *Nothing this big should be this deep in me.* Her body wanted to panic and gasp, but she knew better. She knew that if she didn't struggle, she could actually breathe with this much down her throat. *I can breathe, if I don't fight it.* She could fight her way down the long, thick shaft, if only she relaxed while she worked for it. It was like flying to her; you had to think while not thinking about it at the same time. Be in the moment and one with the broom.

When she felt her lips and nose touch the base of his body, Ginny paused for a moment and then, slowly, began to slide back up. *It's so much easier going up than coming down.* Ginny's mouth was completely free of him and she was breathless, but satisfied. She was worried she'd gag or start to lose her lunch, but the practicing had helped.

"Harry, did you forget something?" Ginny asked as she realized her boyfriend had grown still inside her.

"I didn't want to… um, distract… Merlin." His hands held her hips loosely as he began a slow and deep rhythm inside her.

"That's better." Ginny didn't give Draco any time to catch his breath as she slid her mouth back over him and swallowed him down. She took him until the back of her throat convulsed around the sensitive tip of him, her throat closing around him so terribly deep. Ginny slid back up the long, thick, shaft of him, met his eyes purposefully, then forced herself back down, down, until she met his body with her lips, and could take no more of him inside her. It wasn't like she tried to squeeze him with her mouth, rather her throat convulsed on its own, needing to be wrapped around him as her body was trying to get rid of something too impossible to swallow. Ginny had to swallow her own saliva so she wouldn't choke on it. When she knew she couldn't take anymore, when shoving him one more time deep in her throat would hurt her, did she let herself stop swallowing. Ginny pulled back and let the wetness from her mouth trail off of her lips, onto the thickness of him until he was as wet from her mouth as he would have been between her legs. The look on her face was blissfully
drunk, as if she were dazed from having two cocks inside her at once.

Draco's voice cut through the hormone haze. "God, Ginny, God."

Ginny raised her eyes to his, her own saliva trailing as a thick line from her mouth to his body. She raised herself up, slowly, so he'd get the full visual.

He was staring down at her, his eyes too wide, breathing heavy as Harry pounded himself into her mercilessly. "Ginny," he said, grabbing her by the hair and forcing her to resume pleasing him. His eyes met Harry's as he was pressing his tip against her cervix. They exchanged a knowing smile as they both worked their ways inside of her, knowing that they wanted to make love to each other.

Draco sat up and got onto his knees, reaching out for Harry and kissing him deeply as they both pounded away at their girlfriend together.

"Good girl, Ginny" Draco soothed, fisting her hair in his knuckles and began to thrust himself into her mouth.

Ginny turned, spilling Draco out of her mouth, and panted before she could speak. "Boys, I want to be on my back. Draco, fuck me. Harry… wanna see what I can do with my mouth now?" The two guys nodded and pulled out as they repositioned themselves. Draco was nearly lying on top of Ginny as she turned her head enough to take him in. Harry's hand caressed both heads as he felt Draco's lips nuzzle and graze his arm.

Ginny wanted to face them, wanted to watch their faces. She released Harry from her lips and found herself kissing Draco as he fumbled to slide his erection into her slick folds. "Um, little help." He said as he missed and looked down. Ginny tried to position herself as she felt a hand deftly come between the two of them and helped guide Draco inside of their girlfriend.

"oh! Thanks Harry!" Ginny said, gasping as her eyes took in the sight of Draco sucking on Harry. It made Harry pause for a moment as he realized it as well. "Draco?" The Slytherin was pumping himself into Ginny and had to extricate the Chosen One from his mouth.

"Not… supposed to talk with your mouth full, Potter." Draco gasped, realizing how much he had truly enjoyed himself.

"So who is better?" Ginny asked playfully, taking over for Draco. Harry's eyes rolled to the back of his head as the two of them teamed up on his throbbing member.

"I um… not sure I should answer." Harry breathed, "almost… there…"

"Good answer." Ginny said, chuckling darkly.

"Either way, you come out on top." Draco added as Ginny rolled out from under him.

"Actually, Draco, I think I want to be on top. Harry, come join me." Ginny said, her voice husky with need. Harry joined her on the bed as she wrapped her hand around both men and purred at the wantonness of it all.

Harry and Ginny kissed each other, gently at first as they made their way down to Draco, where she bent her head over him and slid the Slytherin into her mouth. It was easier to take him in; she knew she could go faster, harder. With Harry it had always been a delicate thing; no matter how good it felt having him inside her, it was always gentle, tender, and restrained. With Draco, even just from how he was fucking her mouth, she knew he wanted to be deep in her throat, making her struggle just a bit to breathe, to swallow, to ensure she didn't choke. She loved the feel of him, ripe and hard in her
mouth, contrasted by the oh-so-soft skin, and how it pounded inside her mouth.

She pulled away, her lustful eyes meeting Harry's as he wanted to savor him as well. Ginny watched Harry's body while he positioned himself over the blonde. His body writhed, his heavy breathing making everything from his stomach to his shoulders move. Both of his hands were clasped around Draco's erection as Harry convulsed, firmly stroking him as he brought his mouth down upon him for the first time. Draco's head lifted from the bed, crying in a sound that was both a moan and plea that ended with Harry's name. He settled back to the bed, eyes closed, and Ginny took the moment to look into Harry's face without Draco watching. Harry let her see how much this meant to him. The feel of trust and togetherness that they had for this, the shared affection between the three of them, and that he was able to give himself over to such desires. It had shown in his eyes, and Ginny knew that as patient and careful as he'd been with her, it was nothing to how careful he had been by adding Draco.

"Stop," Draco said, "stop, or I'll go. Oh, God, stop." He tried to sit up, breathless, and the look on his face was happy, free in a way that nobody looked these days.

Harry slid him out of his mouth, while Ginny watched his face. Draco fell back into the bed, almost bonelessly, as Harry licked the head of him, making him convulse again, chuckling at the moment.

"Please, Ginny, please, make him stop. Let me catch my breath, or I won't last." Harry smiled at that and stroked his hand up the wet thickness of the Slytherin.

Draco shuddered at that. "Hand, too, Salazar's Snake, just stop, please!"

The last please did it, holding bit of frenetic energy in it. Harry took his hand away and lay down beside Draco, his hands tracing the blonde's jaw. *It's hard to be demure when you're naked in a bed with two men, but I did my best.*

Draco let himself relax into the bed, let the tension of pleasure slide away. Ginny's head rested against his thigh, her fingers loosely tracing over both of her boys. "So was that enough foreplay?"

"Foreplay before..." Harry said nervously.

"We all have a go." Ginny replied, kissing him. Straddling Draco's hips, Ginny grabbed her wand and cast a contraception charm on herself. Draco found himself perfectly aligned and squirmed in anticipation.

"We sure about this?" Draco said as he felt Ginny's wet quim slide up and down his length, his fists clenching the sheets.

Ginny nodded, again.

"Yes," she said, still smiling.

"Yes," Harry said.

Ginny rocked her hips and Draco tried to answer with his own thrust, but they missed. They tried again as Ginny's fingers weaved between Draco's, pinning his hands to the bed. There was a grunt of frustration as she had to turn her head towards Harry.

Her voice came out strained, needy, "Please."

"Please, what?" Harry asked cautiously. Draco's teeth were on Ginny's neck, nearly robbing her of coherent thought.
"Does it hurt?" Harry asked as he saw Draco biting her. Ginny shook her head, gasping. "Lend a hand, Harry. Help him..." she gasped, "in."

Draco released Ginny from his mouth as fingers wrapped around him and guided him inside the witch above. Ginny looked up into Draco's shale grey eyes, and whispered, "Thank you, Harry."

Draco raised his face to hers, his hands clasping her own, both in the moment as he was inside her. Ginny opened her mouth for him, but he stopped short of a kiss. He licked the edges of her lips. It was a game between them, an 'I'm not kissing you' that left them both smiling as they closed the distance and kissed powerfully. Waves of pleasure went through her as he tried to work himself into her and she used her position to pin him to the bed. He was her fire, and she was his air, and together they burned magnificently.

Harry was always her protector, her refuge, the cool drink of water at the end of a long Quidditch practice, and she wanted, needed him him as well. She was the earth to his water, the shelter he always needed. They both complimented her and they would work better together.

"Fuck me, Harry."

He looked at her as he took in her words. He wasn't certain she meant that. "Ginny..."

"Fuck me," Ginny said, "fuck me, Harry Potter. Merlin, fuck me, just fuck me. Fuck me, fuck, fuck me, please, please, please just fuck..."

Ginny screamed, screamed in need as Draco reached for his wand and cast a few charms on her. "She's ready, mate. Go slowly and take her direction." Ginny's eyes were wide and pleading as she looked at Draco, her head nodding slightly as if she were shivering.

Harry tentatively pushed himself inside her. Ginny was tight, and he tried to pull back, but the moment he was inside, she rocked back and sheathed him with a gasping moan. It was as if Harry passed some sort barrier, as the two boys moved in to kiss either side of her turned head.

Harry's voice came out strained, "Tight, Merlin, you're too tight. I don't want to hurt you." He used his arms to hold his weight up off of the pair of them, and saw he had the perfect view. Perfect for watching Draco's eyes as he fucked her.

Ginny arched her head back. "Don't stop, God, please, don't stop."

"But... you're too tight." Harry worried. Draco freed one of his hands and cupped the back of Harry's head, and kissed him.

"Is she wet?" Draco asked.

Harry gave him a look, still feeling nervous. "Um, yeah."

"I trust that you will not hurt her."

Ginny sat up, and since Harry wasn't far enough in, he slipped back out. Ginny's throat released a ravaged moan, a primal need that Draco quelled by grabbing a fist full of her hair, pulled her back down, and started pounding her harder. Their lips met as Draco patted her bum as a signal to Harry. Ginny melted into the kiss, gave herself over to the sensations as the Slytherin slowed down his rhythm and pinched a nipple between deft fingertips.

Harry slid back in, and slowly moved in time with Draco as Ginny shuddered in pleasure. Draco's hands gripped Harry's shoulders as Ginny's hands slipped under Draco and clamped onto his
shoulders.

Ginny pulled away from Draco's kiss with a gasp, her throat pitched low in passion. "You will not hurt me, Harry. I want this," she clenched on both of them at once, "I want you both."

Ginny lowered her face into the pillow Draco was on and the other two took the time to savor the kiss between them. Harry moaned as he moved himself back and forth in long strokes. Ginny was wetter now, more relaxed and willing, but Harry still felt like he had to push his way in for every inch he got. The feel of them both inside her forced small whimpers from her throat, as Draco increased his pace with her.

Draco found himself all the way in, until he hit the end of her, and smiled as he realized he hit her cervix. Ginny raised her head up off of Draco, raised up enough to look over her shoulder kiss Harry as well. Seeing him as he was inside of her, she slowly closed her eyes shut, feeling of all that thick potential being so carefully used, made her orgasm start to build.

"More. Merlin, more..."

Ginny angled her hips, and Harry fucked her, as deep and as fast as he could. She idly wondered about riding him this way later, but for now it was good. So good.

Draco caught the rhythm of Harry and started shoving himself inside her, as hard and deep as he could. It was harder and faster than Ginny had ever had before. She didn't know she'd love him hitting that spot deep, deep inside her body, until she became undone on top of him.

Draco's arms held her close to him, and he pumped with complete abandon as she pulsed around him, gripping as her orgasm tore her to pieces in his arms. Draco's lips kissed to top of her head as he began to go as well, his eyes wide and locked onto Harry.

It wasn't until Ginny heard Draco's voice, "Harry" and felt his rhythm falter, that Ginny realized that Draco was done as well, leaving Harry carefully on top.

"Put your weight on us. Fuck us. Just come, Harry. Please."

Harry had finally taken her at her word. He pounded into her, fast and hard, the sound of flesh on flesh thudding until he too finally cried out and released into her. Lips hit lips and for a moment, nobody knew who was where, doing what, and it was okay. Ginny felt Harry tighten as a switch was thrown in her, and another orgasm slammed through her and she found her nails raking their way down Draco beneath her.

Harry spasmed as his rhythm crashed and he shuddered inside her, so deep that he wasn't sure he could ever find his way out again. "I think... I think I want to be in the middle next time."

They collapsed in a breathless, panting heap. Harry drew himself out, gently, and rolled onto his back panting as Ginny rolled off in the other direction, leaving Draco pinned between them.

In a shaky voice, Harry asked, "Did Harry hurt you?"

Ginny couldn't help it, she laughed. She laughed as the endorphins faded and the post-orgasmic bliss filled her. Ginny laughed as she began to feel the ache from what Draco did between her legs. Ginny laughed, not because it hurt, but because it felt so good.

Draco started to laugh, too.

"What?" Harry said.
Ginny had one leg sprawled over Draco, her head resting on his chest. She was too tired to move as she said, "Ginny not hurt. Ginny happy."

Draco chuckled as the stinging finally sank in and he saw some blood on her fingernails. "Draco got clawed up. Draco okay with it."

Harry finally got it as he laughed as well. "Well you shagged my brains out and I forgot who I was." He rolled onto his side and kissed Draco, then Ginny. The three of them lay, spent, unable to move. They fell quiet, as the three of them embraced. It was amazing.
Minerva's Tale

Chapter Notes

A/N: Continuing with the NIN song associations:

Harry (regarding Draco): closer - (regarding Ginny): the perfect drug
Ginny (regarding Draco): vessel - (regarding Harry): love is not enough
Draco (regarding Ginny): home - (regarding Harry): meet your master

Minerva enjoyed Hogwarts in her cat form, for some reason it made the school feel as large as it did in her childhood, when she was able to run around with exuberance on the weekend (if there were no Prefects about). As a cat during the holidays, she could chase mice to her heart's content like it were Quidditch for her again.

She knew Severus was back in the castle, but the gossip from the portraits seemed to be hiding something from the Deputy Headmistress. *They know who would be more willing to pour turpentine over them.* Skittering down the steps to the dungeons, Minerva pawed the door open and sprung up to the bed.

Deep down, she knew Severus always wanted a cat, despite his grumpy exterior. More than once he found himself stroking her during his days as a spy. Once he killed Albus and became the Headmaster, the quiet rapport they had with each other died.

It was odd to think of it that way, but she could have sworn Severus missed the comfort of having another living thing curl up next to you and not judge as they slept by your side, and it only made Minerva even more shocked as she noticed the white-blond locks of Fleur Delacour in bed with him. She was almost certain she yelped as she jumped off of the bed in surprise, accidentally using his softest bits as a springboard for her leap.

"Damned feline..." Severus shouted, then realized the company he had there. Fleur was sleeping on her stomach, her wings folded in as much as possible, her left arm lazily draped over the Potions Master. She was awake as well, but uncertain as to what was going on.

"Pourquoi parlez-vous le chat?" She mumbled as her mind put things into place. She was in bed with Severus, who was talking to a cat.

Minerva transformed herself back into her human form, trying to refrain from blushing at the situation. "I apologize, I had no idea you were going to have a guest over, Severus."

Severus recomposed himself the fastest. "We are all adults here. She and I are both decent under the bedsheets. What do you want?" Severus wasn't about to feel guilty when nothing had happened.

Fleur sat up in bed, face blushing shamefully. She couldn't get herself to even look up at Minerva, who rolled her eyes slightly at the deference she was getting. Fleur fidgeted with her hair and attempted to charm it to lie flat and straight.

"As Headmaster, you are required to inspect the school before the new term starts and inform the Board of Governors about the state of the castle. Seeing as we quite literally had this place turned
into a war zone, I believe you'll need to do more than the usual letter."

"They are asking for a guided tour, aren't they? Any good news for me?" Severus said, casting a braiding charm on Fleur. It was an old habit for him, one that he did as he went to sleep by Lily. As soon as he noticed that he had done it, he got out of bed and attempted to ignore her as he set out robes for the day on his armoire.

"Draco has inherited Lucius' seat among the Governors, seeing as Narcissa will be ineligible." She said shortly as the bathroom door slammed shut behind him.

"I guess I should go." Fleur said awkwardly, transfiguring her clothing back. "I have to go pack up my home in Shell Cottage anyways."

Minerva's lips pressed in consternation. "Let me go with you; I could use the fresh air. Besides, we have much to discuss about transfiguration."

Ginny woke up first, finding herself between both of her boyfriends in bed. It was nice, but she was hungry and would have to crawl over them. "Draco? Wake up, sweetie." He looked almost angelic in his sleep, so she felt bad as she crawled over him to get out of the bed and down the stairs.

She had always needed something in her stomach first thing, and she knew exactly where Harry (or was it Andi?) kept the bowl of fruit. She was halfway down the stairs in just a pair of Harry's boxers when she heard the sounds of someone trying to feed a boisterous toddler downstairs.

"Shit!" Ginny ran back up the stairs and summoned a t-shirt to her hands, quickly pulling it over as she made her way back down.

"Oh good morning Harry..." Andi said automatically, startled as she saw it was Ginny instead. "Sorry Ginny, I didn't know... he had company over."

Ginny wondered how she could reply to that... Yeah, he had me and Draco, actually. She realized that she was facing Draco's aunt and a wave of guilt hit her as she realized she just had a threesome with two guys. In the heat of the moment, she had begged Harry to... she shook the thought off.

"Yeah, I just needed the loo and was looking for some breakfast." Andi was feeding Teddi with a spoon, coaxing him to open his mouth. Ginny shuffled herself off to the bathroom on that floor as if she were doing some awkward walk of shame. "Be right back." She used the loo, and caught sight of herself in the mirror. She looked disheveled and thoroughly fucked. Holding her head high, she washed her hands and made her way back to the kitchen.

"If there isn't any out, there should be some in the icebox. I just had some toast between feeding my grandson here and keeping him from levitating anything he could get his eyes on." Another spoonful went in. "I forgot how much effort it took to supervise a magical baby; wish I had an extra set of hands around here for that. You'll know what I mean in a few years."

She saw the baby's arm swing wildly, trying to reach for the spoon himself as he gurgled happily. Ginny was certain that the contraception charm was done properly, right? What if I got pregnant from Draco? Will his family or mine ever talk to me again?

"More like many years from now."

"I remember being your age, and thinking I would live my life before settling down and getting pregnant. Though my family wanted me to marry the man they selected for me, and I fell in love
with a muggle..."

Ginny grabs an apple, nods awkwardly, and makes her way back upstairs. *How will the public react? Will I get booted from the Holy Head Harpies? Will Harry lose his career as an Auror? Would the Wizarding World reject us for attempting this kind of relationship?*

She kept going upstairs, slower this time, and realizes that there's a silencing charm up again. *What if Harry is actually gay and wants Draco more than me?*

As she reached the top of the stairs, she broke the boundary of the silencing charm. She could yell all she wanted up here and Andi wouldn't hear a thing. She however, could hear the panting and creaking of the bed that indicated that her boys were indeed up for the day.

There was a rhythmic slapping, a sound that she knew all too well. Last night she was aroused at the thought at sight of her two boys making out with each other, but now... they were without her. *They didn't need her.*

The muffled voice of Draco cut through the sounds of sex. "Use me... Slytherin's Snake, use me, Harry..."

The sound of flesh slapping against flesh grew faster and louder, echoing in her mind as she remembered Harry using her in the same way last night. A flash of fear and shame went through her as she heard Draco moan in a painful pleasure. She stood behind the door, unwilling to barge in mid-coitus, as Harry's speed and intensity got even harder as his own moaning crested, the unmistakable sound of his own orgasm...

Ginny's mind couldn't help but fixate on the sight as she went through the door. Harry's seed had poured deep into Draco as the blonde was face-down in a pillow, Harry still plowing into him as he began to collapse bonelessly on top. *That was us last night.*

Her skin crawled at the sight; he was able to be rough enough with the other guy but not with her. *He'd rather bugger that boy than fuck me like a real man.* Harry must have noticed the look on her face as he pulled out and cast a cleaning charm on them both. Draco winced at the quick extraction, but looked equally concerned at her. She didn't realize she'd feel so jealous at feeling excluded; she just wanted to run and forget this ever happened.

"Hey, Gin, you okay?"

"I um, no, maybe... the window's open." She looked down to her hands, and realized she was no longer holding the apple. *Get a grip, Ginny.*

"It's nice out, we wanted to enjoy the weather." Draco said offhandedly.

"By FUCKING MY BOYFRIEND BEHIND MY BACK?!" Ginny was surprised at her words, and was ready to apologize for it, but decided against it. *Should I be angry over this? Harry has always been so... frustratingly delicate with me! I was gone for less than twenty minutes, and I walk in on this!"

"I thought we were all involved together." Draco said, rolling over. "Or is this more of an issue of you not being a part of it this morning?"

Harry tried to play the diplomat. "Ginny, I don't think that every time will be a threesome like last night-" "-can we just stop talking about that?" She replied in a rush, her voice nearly cracking at the higher
than usual pitch. "What if Rita flew in here as a bug and reports us to the Wizarding World?"

"I don't care; the wizarding world can just get over it!" Harry said defiantly. Ginny started to see what Hermione had been saying. *Merlin, he really is that naive...* She didn't want to bring this up, but maybe some harsh truth will help.

"The rest of the world won't 'just' get over it. Harry, haven't you noticed how we only meet at your place or Draco's?" Ginny asked tentatively, hoping to break it to him slowly.

"No. What's that have to do with-" Harry was cut off by Draco.

"Oh hellcat, she didn't." He looked stricken. "When did this happen? Was it because of..."

"When did what happen?" Harry was lost.

"My mother," Ginny started, trying to choke back tears, "decided to start reducing the number of rooms in the house. Fred and George have already moved out, so she's emptied that room already, but decided that if I couldn't make better choices in whom I associate myself with..." She took a breath and looked at Harry "this was before she saw me kiss Draco yesterday. She's livid about Hermione, and why we're still friends with her. I... I'm going to be on the road a lot, so I can put most of my stuff in storage." *Mum's going to kick me out.* She couldn't actually say the words, it was so un-Weasley of her.

Draco frowned angrily as Harry stood up. "I ought to go tell her off for that!" the Gryffindor said as Draco's hand caught his elbow to still him.

"Leave it be; that will only make matters worse. For now, Ginny, I've got a room you can have."

Harry relented. "So do I!" Ginny smiled at the offer but shook her head.

"I just need storage, and you're place is going to be busy with Andi and your godson. When the Harpies give me time off, I'll come visit you, Harry. I just don't want to you to lose your dream career." She smiled as she wondered if she could follow through with her promise. Between his naivety and his career as the youngest Head Auror ever, Ginny wasn't certain trying to date both of them was a good idea.

"Um, Neville and I resigned." Ginny looked at him in shock. "The Ministry is willing to engage in genocide, and I won't be a part of it!"

Draco got out of bed and summoned his clothes. "Sounds like you two have more to talk about, and I'd rather stay neutral if you don't mind. I care for you both deeply, and... I don't want to say the wrong thing." He leaned over and kissed both Harry and Ginny a quick goodbye. As soon as he left the room, Ginny cast *Muffliato* and realized she was going to dress him down while he was still naked.

"Harry James Potter, why did you quit your job?"

"I can't be a part of that. In fact, I'm trying to try and save as many of them as I can. They aren't all evil."

"Merlin help me, you're going to oppose the Ministry. I guess I'm going to have to make sure you don't get yourself killed."

"Ginny, I can take care of myself."
She fumed at him. "No, you really can't."

Fleur apparated the pair of them to Shell Cottage, a few paces away from the grave marker that held Dobby's name. Minerva shuddered at the sight of it; sometimes the smallest losses hurt the most because you don't remember them in the grand scheme.

"Such a brave elf..." Minerva said as tears came. Fleur couldn't mourn his death, only be pissed off at it.

Her eyes were dry, and it made her more angry as her hands lit on fire. "I cannot shed tears. I lost Bill, and I changed. I no longer look or feel human. All I have left is fire and rage!"

"Fleur, you still have us as friends. Even Hermione." Fleur brushed the comment aside with a flick of her wing.

"Severus is the only person who doesn't flinch in revulsion at the sight of me!" Minerva couldn't face Fleur in that moment, because she knew she had also winced at Fleur's new appearance. "Do you know how easy it is to lose your humanity when all you can see in the mirror every day is a monster?"

"I offered to help transfigure you back to looking human." Minerva said quietly. "I don't know about the wings, nor the fire, but the face? It will be risky but I think I can help. So why are we here?"

Fleur lead her into the house as memories of her blissful-yet-tragic marriage flooded her mind.

"Bill and I were trying to start having a child. Raising a family." She conjured a box and summoned the dishes to fill it. "Won't need these at Hogwarts."

"Fleur, I... you don't have to pack this up." Minerva said, understanding why she was brought here.

"I can't come back to this. I'll see Bill. His scruffy face. Having..." her voice cracked, "...having dinner on the beach."

Minerva was starting to understand, or at least thought she did. "I can help you pack."

"I can't sleep! Every night, I see that same horror again..." Fleur whispered into the empty corner.

"What happened in the hospital was not your fault." Minerva said soothingly.

Fleur turned around, surprised. "I meant... Gringott's. Bill died to save me and Harry. I had to... fly away and leave him to burn."

"How are you coping, Fleur?"

"Coping?! I SEE HIM EVERYWHERE! Always asking why I couldn't save him. Why I was too slow, too weak, how I survived the death of my mate..."

"He loved and married you. He wouldn't blame you for what happened."

"Have you ever been married?!" Fleur shrieked, making herself shrink back as she felt her humanity slipping. *Merlin, I'm losing it, I can't even stand to see myself in the mirror...*

Minerva nodded, and conjured the ingredients and set herself to making tea. "I have been married, Fleur. I'll tell you about it if you tell me something." Fleur nodded her agreement. "Why Severus? The man's seen two women he loved marry someone else only to then see them buried. If it's just a
rebound shag you are looking for, don't look at him for it."

Fleur shook her head. "When I'm around Severus, I feel safe. The memories are quiet. I have purpose; conviction. Something to do. Something to keep my mind on." A pang of guilt was in her voice. "Some way to to keep Bill's eyes out of my head."

Minerva nodded as she poured tea for the pair of them. "I've always been known to be a bit of a spitfire, and so was the first man I fell in love with. My father was a muggle Presbyterian minister and my mother a witch. She didn't tell him about the world of magic until after I exhibited magical talent. I particularly liked making the bagpipes play themselves. He didn't really understand but tried his best to. All he knew was that there was a Statute of Secrecy that made him have to lie to people, and he blamed it for my mother Isobel's dishonesty. They had two more sons after me, and despite my father's prayers, both showed signs of magic, and I had to help my mother reverse any accidental magic they did.

"Once I got my letter for Hogwarts, I realized exactly how different the worlds were. My father only once quoted 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' from the bible and my mother would not have him speaking that way about their children. She had gone so far as to lock away her wand and renounce magic to make her husband happy, whereas I was getting accolades in transfiguration.

"In my final year, I was Head Girl and won Transfiguration Today's Promising Newcomer award after having to register my Animagus form with the Ministry. The only bad thing was my quidditch injury against Slytherin. I got fouled, a concussion, and multiple broken ribs as Slytherin took the cup." Her voice was full of scorn and unfinished business.

"I graduated, and despite the healing charms I had, the broken ribs I had seemed to still bother me when the weather got bad. My first job was with the MLE, but being in Scotland, more days than not I felt soreness in my ribs but one day it really just winded me.

"That's when I met Dougal McGregor. He was a muggle, but oh, he was so handsome. He asked about my injury and for the life of me, I couldn't think up of a better cover story than playing rugby with some boys back at school. He obviously didn't believe me, and he was clever enough to look up the rules and catch me in that white lie. Never did tell him the real reason. But he was light-hearted and funny about it, and oh, he was always making me laugh.

"It was a lovely romance, him asking me out after a long day of working on his farm or taking care of his livestock... I don't know when, but I fell in love with him. And I was sad because I couldn't explain to him I that live in a different world." She chuckled softly. "So when Dougal McGregor surprised me in the middle of his springtime plowing by proposing, I said yes.

"I was too caught up in the moment to think about the logistics of it all. Later that night, I wondered how I would ever be able to marry him in the church. How I'd have my magical friends among his muggle ones. How was I to keep hiding that I was a witch until after we were married so the Statute wouldn't apply?

"And if he couldn't handle it and wanted to divorce me, would I send Obliviators to erase me entirely from his life?" Her eyes held the same haunted look as no tears could come anymore.

"I couldn't do it. I couldn't give up my magical life like my mother did, and I broke off the engagement the very next day. Never told him why, and he knew I loved him. Even as I broke his heart.

"I asked for a reassignment and got it, but I lost my taste for Magical Law Enforcement after giving up the love of my life. I came to work at Hogwarts, and for a few years I was happy to be alone. M
former boss Elphinstone Urquart showed up and we had a decent friendship, and it started to feel like it would have been more."

"What happened?" Fleur asked, hoping for a happy ending.

"He surprised me with a proposal in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop. I was shocked, we had simply been spending time together at Hogsmeade weekends and the occasional Quidditch match. I... threw my drink at him as I declined. Rather forcefully, I imagine." She nodded as she reminisced.

"I was still in love with Dougal. Elph didn't care; he tried again, and again. And the first war came, and he fought bravely, and still tried for my hand in marriage. Then after the war, I realized I did love him, and we got married in 1982. He died three years later by a Venomous Tentacula." Minerva finished her tea and vanished it. "I think I loved enough for my lifetime."

"I don't have any such plans with Severus. I just want the memories to go away for a while." Fleur said as the pair of them kept packing up the small home.

I was in bed, eyes wide open at the canopy above. Everything had been set up in the lower courtrooms at the Ministry and were under the best protections and constant guard, all that was left was to invoke the magic stored in the rune-inscribed cauldron by pouring a life into it. Executing a Goblin Terrorist that was bent on killing as many Wizards as possible is one thing, but to use his own death to kill hundreds more?

That's what had me awake still. I thought I had made peace with the decision; that the ends would justify the means and would save so many more people in the long run (and possibly make Goblins think twice before attempting any sort of mass-murder of Wizardkind).

And yet I was faced with insomnia. It was around one in the morning, so it wasn't my occasional 3am waking hour, and I didn't feel like I could just roll over and get back to sleep. In bed next to me was Narcissa, who seemed fast asleep while Crookshanks slept loyally at my feet. When he was younger, he's curl up next to me and purr as I held him like a fluffy teddy bear. He doesn't do that as much anymore unless it's a particularly cold night, and wants to slip under the comforter with me.

Dinner at my parent's home was decent, though it had happened almost seven hours ago. Maybe I'm hungry? I sat up and tried to think about it. I could get a sandwich or some leftover stir-fry that Herpy made earlier. Deciding to do something, I got up and made my way down the hallway to the kitchen. At the far end, a light was on which reminded me I had a mediwitch here looking after the four babies.

My home is a temporary nursery. It seemed strange, since only a few months ago this place wasn't mine, and it was covered in corpses. Maybe this is a change for the better, I know I'd be happy to see things improve.

I continued down the hallway and found leftovers in the icebox. Herpy wasn't sleeping here anymore, which made me wonder where she was at instead. A quick warming charm later and I was faced with instant delicious gratification.

A meowing took my attention down towards the floor as Crookshanks head-butted himself across my calves for attention. He reared himself up on his hind legs and did a jumping face-rub across my knee.

"Crooks, kitties don't like curry. You really don't want any of this." I said, taking another savory
spoonful into my mouth. "Also, chicken. Kitties really don't like chicken." I shook my head sadly and tried my best to not laugh at my attempt at sarcasm.

Crookshanks, however, knew that he liked chicken curry as he helped himself up onto my lap and put a dainty paw upon the table. Instinctively, I brushed his paw off of the table.

"No paws on tables. That's the rule, even though this is a new place. You're a respectable cat who also does not beg for table scraps."

"Mooooowww..." He replied to say 'human, I have no shame when it comes to chicken'. I kept eating, ignoring the feline on my lap.

"No, cats do not like chicken. It's really horrible stuff. Really." I replied, realizing that I wasn't exactly ignoring him after all.

He turned on the charm as he rubbed his head against my chest, turning chin upward in a cute way as he purred up against my heart. Damn cat, playing on my heart-strings...

"Kitties don't like more than one piece of chicken." I said, relenting to feed him a piece. Narcissa stumbled in, yawning and pouring herself a glass of cranberry juice from the icebox.

"Your cat is a bastard," Narcissa said, "he jumped off of the bed by using my stomach as a springboard." Even so, she reached over and scratched him between his shoulder blades as he purred contentedly. I tried to stifle my laughter at it, but failed. I wasn't really hungry after all, it seems.

"You usually wake up around now?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"Once I'm in bed, I'm out to the world." I put the container of leftovers into the sink along with my utensils for Herpy to deal with later. Running my tongue over my teeth, I cast a cleaning charm on them and turned to go back to bed.

"Narcissa, I um... came out here because I can't sleep. I thought I was maybe hungry, but that wasn't it. Could you, um..." How do I put this nicely? Give me time to frig off so I can get back to sleep? "...I need to do something."

The smirk on her face shone with knowledge. "Do... something?" She took a step towards me and the look in her eyes pulled me forward as well. Delicate hands wrapped around my waist, making me arch my back towards her. "Your memories are mine, including what you thought mere seconds ago." The room felt a few degrees warmer as the silk rubbed against my skin and my lips were drawn to hers in a delicate kiss. Yeah, that's what I need.

Cissy's fingers trailed up my bare thigh and under the thin silk, cupping my arse possessively. "I've got your sleep remedy right here." Her other hand mirrored the first one, and without words I knew to hop up as she lifted and I wrapped my legs around her, letting her hold and carry me as I found myself on the kitchen table. Our kiss deepened as my arms held her and her fingers pressed a firm pattern into my most sensitive spot that I couldn't follow.

"Oh god..." I moaned, feeling myself get wet at her ministrations. I gasped, trying to keep my mind rational as lust threatened to drown me. "What about... other..." I shuddered as her free hand pinched my nipple just enough to clear my mind of everything.

Narcissa resumed her kisses, chuckling darkly as she had me in her thrall. "Silencing charm and a repelling spell. The mediwitch won't hear a thing and will be discouraged from coming down here." Desire spiked in me at her touch and my skin craved her fingers trailing down my spine. The connection between us, the Compulsion, wasn't forcing us together as much as reminding us that we
were both on the same lazy stream drifting us together and we might as well enjoy it. It felt restorative, as if our souls needed this mingling after all of the horror we had seen. *Merlin, I did need her; I needed her around me, with me, and in me.*

I was on my back, arms splayed out as Narcissa made quick work of clearing the kitchen island with a levitation charm. Fingernails traced up my thighs so very lightly that I twitched at her touch. Lips pressed against my own, then left quickly as her head moved further down my body.

"Hermione Jean Granger, I've seen you through your own eyes throughout your life and you're much more wonderful and deserving of love than you give yourself credit for." Her lips kissed my knee and I squirmed slightly at it.

"From using the Time-Turner to save my cousin," her lips trailed slightly higher, "to the way you looked at the Yule Ball," another kiss, "wanting to liberate the House Elves", moist lips trailed up to where it met my hip.

"The scheming you did for Dumbledore's Army." Teeth grazed as she nipped my hip bone and I shuddered. "I love you for your intelligence, your convictions, and your loyalty to your friends." A knowing chuckle came from her throat. "Not to mention your body is perfect." Lips pressed in on the joint, and worked a trail of kisses to my swollen labia. "Soft skin, radiant eyes. That majestic wild mane of yours." The tip of her warm tongue licked my labia. "And your taste." That last part came out husky and filled with the same need that I felt.

My legs buckled and her hands slowly pushed them back onto the counter. My mind knew her memories, and I could tell that Narcissa had glimpsed over my entire life, wrapping my memories around her like a comfortable blanket and breathed in deeply for their scent.

She knew me better than anyone else had, because she wanted to, and because she loved to know. My eyes widened and looked at hers. Our minds touched as her thoughts whispered into me.

"Your worries, your fears, your battles, your insecurities, your joys... for all of that and more, *I embrace and love you entirely, Hermione. You're the woman I've always wanted. Someone I could share myself with to the deepest parts of me that I hide from the world.*" Her thoughts were in her eyes and spoke inside my head.

It had that reassuring feeling that I would never have to be alone again. *I love you too.* I hadn't tried to explore the link as much, but now I was curious about her own memories. I could see the Marauders, how Cissy was back at Hogwarts, when she first realized she liked women, even when she first met Odette. In that moment, I knew I didn't have to be jealous of her anymore. *I can see and live through Narcissa's life and love her just as deeply...*

"*In time, my dear. We have the rest of our lives to experience together.*" She replied as her tongue and fingers worked me up and I couldn't think of anything but the joining of our minds and bodies as one. Where I was once fighting this, scared to be magically bound to her, I let go and embraced everything that was happening now. I felt incredibly tight as she seemed to fit inside me like we were made for each other. This was all I ever wanted and needed. I was all she needed as well. I tightened my walls against her and loved the slick friction we were making.

Though we came together under unusual circumstances, it happened as if it was always supposed to. The Compulsion was integral for this to work. It was everything. And it was **good**. As lips and teeth worked my body like a fine-tuned instrument, I could feel everything that my wife wanted me to feel. I could feel the honesty, the trust, the love between us. It was a raw force of nature, something that gave us strength... admitting that I loved Narcissa was the scariest thing I ever had to do but once I did, I realized I was no longer bound to the Compulsion. In effect, surrendering to my emotions
made me realize that I was free.

"Merlin, I love you, Narcissa..." I whispered as my hips bucked at her touch.

"You're amazing, wife. Beautiful, wonderful, worthy, and mine." Narcissa said as she kissed me again, and I could taste myself upon her lips and lapped at her mouth hungrily. This kiss seemed to hold something and we both felt it; a swell of magic between them as her lover's fingers went from playful to purposeful. What once felt like pleasure was now turning into need. Narcissa's fingers curled and worked me inside and the thumb on the outside, hitting both points and working them with firm determination.

Because Narcissa had my memories, she knew exactly how I wanted to be touched and knew my body better than I could as she perfected the slow, hard rhythm better than I ever could alone. I was beyond wet as I felt my insides clench on their own against her pumping fingers, waves of pleasure building up within me and ready to crash as I idly wondered how many fingers she had in me.

"Just three so far, do you want a fourth?" My eyes rolled and my body forgot how to use language. Had I even said anything? I wanted the fourth, but didn't know how to tell her. Even my mouth seemed to no longer be under my own control as I tried to nod yes.

"You're so good," Cissy said, pulling her fingers out, licking her pinkie finger, and sliding all four in at once, "so... bloody... good." Her free hand reached under my neck and lifted my head to see her, my eyes slack and gone in passion as I realized my teeth were chattering as I lay undone and at the brink of orgasm. I had to orgasm, I needed to come, the frustration was taking over...

My wife's eyes were wide in amazement, proud to see me so undone by her. The thumb resumed the pressure on my clit as the four fingers changed from curling inside me to just pumping in and out.

"Narcissa... wife... I'm..." words failed me as I gasped for air, realizing I wasn't going to last much longer but lost the ability to say it.

"Come for me. Come as I kiss you, let me experience your orgasm together." Her lips were close to mine, greedy for the moment to come upon us.

"Almost... don't stop... please don't... Cissy..." I whimpered frantically.

Everything stopped for a millisecond before it exploded within me, the waves of pleasure burning through me as lips met mine and between lips and tongue, I moaned and screamed my release as she kept working me as I clamped down around her fingers and trembled as the orgasm took me over. Time was lost to me as I collapsed on the surface beneath me. I was dimly aware I was still alive and that my eyes closed.

My eyes slid open at a sluggish speed as reality reconvened around me. I was in the kitchen, tired, and in need of my bed. Narcissa made sure I was aware enough before she hit me with the featherlight charm and carried me off to bed and tucked me in.

Severus was at the front gates of Hogwarts, noting the differences now that the war was over. No longer would he stagger in, bleeding and suffering the aftershocks of the cruciatus curse. No more was he worried about The Dark Lord breaking his mind and blowing his cover.

The sun was out and it was brighter than it had been in over a year. No more Dementor mist. Though the lack of Dementors is equally troubling.

The meeting with the Board of Governors went smoother than expected, and there were no complaints to the War Hero about the state of the fully rebuilt castle. Everyone was smiles and ready
to move on, sure that the Ministry was going to put down the Goblin Rebellion weeks before the Hogwarts Express makes its run. As everyone left with salutations and compliments, Draco stayed back.

"What is on your mind, godfather? You look more morose than usual."

"I'm fine. Just had an... interesting morning." Draco scoffed at that.

"Mother would want you to know it's okay to let go of her and move on." Severus turned away from him, letting his robes billow and slap him in the face as he made his way back to the castle.

"What do you know of this?!" The Headmaster demanded. Draco followed him, undeterred.

"The portraits love to gossip. Besides, Lily and Tonks both saw you for the good man you were in the end. At least you got to hold them at night."

"I still worried she was thinking of another man. I'm tired of fighting against a memory." Severus wasn't certain what he wanted, or how he should feel, he just knew that he didn't want to be 'not the one' again. He couldn't be the place-holder in a girl's heart while she waited for another to come around.

"Love isn't a competition for someone to 'win'. Love just.. is." Draco said as the two of them came to a stop. "Will you be okay? I have... I have to go."

Severus nodded. "I'll be fine." Draco wasn't entirely certain.

Proudfoot’s headache has been unrelenting for weeks now, but knew to stick to his duty. He couldn't let Scrimgeour down, not after he authorized the sleeper program to take out the Death Eaters. The Ministry has been taken over by You-Know-Who and Undesirable Number One. It was muddled, because he was to protect Harry if possible, but he was also the enemy now. They all are traitors. Even Kingsley is working for him now. He was under disguise, outside of his department, and he had his list of known Death Eaters and sympathizers that had to be taken out.

At least he could still get word back to the Minister as he wrote out his report in code with an invisible ink. If the Death Eaters had taken over, how was Scrimgeour still there? He brushed the thought aside, knowing it would only make his headache worse. He’d be glad to hear that Hogsmeade had been secured, now crawling with covert security. If any undesirable death eaters dared show their face, they would be hunted down like foxes after a rodent. No quarter to those bastard blood traitors.

Proudfoot rubbed his head again, hoping that it would clear up after a few hours sleep. He sealed the scroll, making sure that nobody could intercept it nor guess the person that it was going to. Constant vigilance. His trusty owl was there, ready to make the long journey in the dead of night.

Take this to Rufus Scrimgeour, he said, ready to collapse in his bed. The owl hooted sadly, worried over the state of his human as she went to the scary witch once again, ever since her owner started suffering constant headaches over a year ago.
Dobby and my boys sprung forth and attacked. I got away from Bellatrix.

I then somehow found myself on the other side of the room, spells and curses flying haphazardly. Harry used my wand to defend us as a spell hit and disarmed Draco. There was a break in the fighting that bought us enough time for Dobby to take us away.

Then Bellatrix threw the dagger, and in a moment of panic, Dobby wrenched one step left to avoid it. I saw it coming towards us as it struck him in the shoulder, the crunch telling me that it broke the joint. We had started to twist out of reality as another spell slammed into us, blinding me as I had the elf’s arm in a death grip.

In the confusion, I fell to my hands and knees with the painful realization that I had been left behind, holding onto a lifeless severed arm. The wandfire stopped for a moment that seemed to last minutes as my vision returned, red tinting my vision. I blinked the blood away to see the floor beneath me.

"She is MINE!" Lucius proclaimed, confidence he could slay one defenseless little girl. Bellatrix was cackling and jumping in place, gleeful that she mortally wounded Dobby as the snatchers and Fenrir had ran in fear, heeding Harry’s words that Voldemort was angry and coming to punish them all. Draco and Narcissa had looked broken and defeated as they huddled away from what was about to happen.

The clattering of wood on the floor caught my attention. I couldn't dwell on if it had been there all along; I took it out of sheer desperation and sliced at Lucius with the most powerful Sectumsempra curse I could manage.

I bolted awake, my heart pounding rapidly as more of that fateful duel was in my mind now. Upon reflection, it seemed peculiar to have Draco's wand manage to fall into my hand at that exact moment. I would have died otherwise. More details seemed to come back to me now, and I realized I had never really questioned how I had survived it.

"Bad dream, my love?" Narcissa asked, a hand rubbing my back comfortingly. I nodded, pushing the memory aside as I thought about what was to happen in a few hours. The Goblins will kill us all if they get another chance, so I ought to stop them before they can, right? But it's small-scale genocide.

What I'd be doing is repugnant and evil. Yet it would save so many more, innocent people who do not deserve to be exterminated like vermin. This would help save the Wizarding World here, and stop Goblins from rebelling across the globe. My morals weren't as clear-cut anymore; it had me wondering if this was a society worth saving, and at this price.

I thought of the babies in our home, and Harry's godson, and Draco, and my wife. They were
definitely worth any cost for their safety. My alarm was to go off in about half an hour, so I decided to get up for the day. I leaned over and kissed my wife before getting out of bed. "I'm going to get an early start at The Ministry; what are your plans?"

"The relatives of the youngest girl are showing up today. We'll be down to three left. It's been nice to have them around." Narcissa sounded wistful as she stretched and sprawled to take over the bed. Crookshanks jumped off of the bed, and I could practically hear him grump as he made his way to the litter box. *Again the talk of having children around.* I knew I should bring it up with her, but now really doesn't seem to be the right time.

Cormac McLaggen was finishing his late night security shift with Ernie MacMillan, having guarded the lower courtrooms under Kingsley's direct orders. The two of them were surprised at the abrupt resignation of Harry and Neville, but it did mean that there would be a greater need for Aurors and Cormac was going to take advantage of the situation, specially if he could get Aunt DeeDee to pull some strings.

Ernie broke the silence in the early morning. "So why are we guarding this empty floor? Aren't the wards strong enough to repel Goblins from tunneling in?"

Cormac shook his head, hoping that this shift would go smoothly and without incident. He was tired and looking forward to getting some sleep. "No idea, but I plan on proving I can hack it and take Harry's place as Head Auror."

Ernie frowned at that. "Hey, you ever feel like we're bit players in someone else's story?"

Cormac scoffed at that. "What do you mean?"

"Let's look at our first year; if it were a story, it would be called 'Harry Potter and the Huge Upset to Slytherin losing the House Cup... oh, and the mysterious disappearance of Quirrell'. And our second year here? 'Harry Potter's a Parcelmouth as the Chamber of Secrets is opened, and exams get cancelled'."

McLaggen laughed at that. "Merlin, you would remember exams getting cancelled."

Undeterred, Ernie continued. "Third year: Harry Potter and the death threats by Sirius Black. We get to spend Halloween sleeping in the Great Hall, and everyone else has to deal with Dementors as upgraded security."

Cormac frowned at that. "Well, now that you mention it..

"Fourth Year: Harry Potter as the fourth Triwizard Tournament champion. And he starts saying You-Know-Who is back."

"To be honest, I honestly was rooting for Viktor to win. Then his Quidditch career seemed to disappear."

"Our Fifth Year: Harry Potter gets publicly discredited alongside Albus... Though the Ministry finally admits You-Know-Who is back but only after Harry and friends get caught in the Department of Mysteries and yet avoid prosecution for trespassing."

That one stopped Cormac cold. "Yeah, how does he keep getting away with this? Leaves school without permission, breaks into the Ministry, destroys a part of the Department of Mysteries... You know we could never get away with it."
Ernie nodded as rolled his eyes. "Sixth Year: Harry Potter is 'The Chosen One'. Like he needs any more attention foisted upon him..."

"I don't really think he looked for the fame like Lockhart did..."

"Oh, and this last year? Potterwatch. He had an underground radio show all about him."

"Yeah, well, the Wireless is all shite, isn't it? You know that one station, nothing but the couple gabbing away and doesn't play music? They now have Rita Skeeter on there."

"Cor love a duck, that's where she is now? I heard she got fired from the Prophet."

Ernie summoned a Wireless and turned it on. "Yeah, they just loop their stuff now to broadcast all day. Here..."

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_Narcissa "Granger": Pitable Pureblood or Scheming Slytherin?_

"We're back with Rita Skeeter. We've missed your articles in the Prophet."

"Ever wonder why I went silent for awhile two years ago?"

"Now that you mention it, you weren't around back when rumors first spread that the Ministry covered up underage magic by Harry Potter. Dreadful work there."

"Yes, I can't fathom how people could go so far to attack such a sweet heroic boy. But I had no idea that the little spat I had with a fifteen year old Hermione Granger years ago would earn me the ire of Lucius Malfoy's wife and get me sacked."

"Are you saying that she was having an affair with the minor back then, and that's why you were silenced?"

"All I'm saying is that the Malfoys had a lot of Galleons and that bought a lot of sway. Hermione as you recall, was pretty cozy with Quidditch star Victor Krum, and as we know, his career ended soon after under mysterious circumstances. When a woman like that wants to get her claws on you, either you give in or get destroyed. I bet Krum stood in her way."

"That's shocking! Do you think that the Ministry will keep turning a blind eye as that predator keeps playing house with her?"

"It's an abomination that they even call themselves married, if you ask me. But as you know, Hermione and Minister Shacklebolt are really good friends; I wouldn't be surprised if they kept trying to shove their indecent lifestyle down our throats this way. If anything, I pity the girl."

"You pity the girl? How have you come about this change of heart?"

"I have discovered, through a former victim of Narcissa's (don't bother asking her name, she wishes to keep her anonymity), that Narcissa was Bonded to Lucius in the Old Tradition. No divorce, no disobedience, no vocal disrespect allowed. The only way she could get out of the arrangement was, quite literally, over his dead body."

"That's unconscionable!"

"That is exactly how those backwards Purebloods think. So when I first heard that Narcissa had been widowed and remarried all at once, I was shocked. I mean, who could ditch one marriage and find themselves in another so quickly?"
"I know I couldn't do that to my wife..."

"And that is precisely why I investigated. Hermione Granger was captured and held prisoner at Malfoy Manor during the war, then Nacissa's former House Elf showed up and before you know it, Lucius lay dead. Quite the coincidence, is it not?"

"That's quite shocking indeed. But how does this make Hermione supposedly 'married' to her?"

"Oh, can't you figure it out? Hermione had to have killed Lucius in a magically-binding duel on his property and she was saddled with his Bond to the now widow. She. Was. Set. Up."

"Oh, really?"

"Think about it. The same year that Lucius meets Hermione Granger, Dobby is 'accidentally' freed, who then winds up at Hogwarts. Within a year, Dobby set himself up as the only Elf to clean the Gryffindor Tower, keeping a close eye on her.

"Then came the Quidditch World Cup, and we all saw Lucius and Draco sitting next to Minister Fudge, but Narcissa was nowhere to be found. Curious since she had always played the part of a loyal wife, wouldn't you agree? By the end of that school term, Lucius was in prison and Narcissa was finally free of him."

"That's really interesting. But is there any proof?"

"Don't you find it odd that Harry Potter and a handful of students were able to catch Lucius and other Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries? Seeing as Hermione is considered the brains behind the so-called 'Golden Trio', and she was safely taken out of the fight by a non-lethal spell just before Narcissa's cousin, Sirius Black, was killed. It's too convenient, if you ask me. Plant a loyal House-elf, keep tabs on the under-aged witch you fancy, and send the young heroes off to help you get rid of your husband."

"Yes, but why would Narcissa want her cousin killed off?"

"Sirius loathed his family and knew the kind of deviants they were. I can only imagine he would want to protect those dear children from her corruption. But as we know, Lucius didn't stay in Azkaban. Something more drastic had to happen."

"That's true, so how did Hermione wind up in Malfoy Manor?"

"You know the kind of pull the Malfoys have always had in the Ministry, particularly when You-Know-Who had taken over. Hermione was Undesirable #2 with a heavy bounty on her... but to be brought in alive. When she was captured alongside Harry and Ronald, the boys were sent down to the dungeon, leaving the defenseless girl all alone with the admitted lesbian.

"That's where it gets interesting, you see. What can an unarmed girl really do when outnumbered by armed Death Eaters? How could she have survived that? How did she happen to stumble upon a wand and get locked into a one-on-one duel whose result would be considered magically binding? If you were alone, unarmed, and facing a dozen Death Eaters who wanted you dead, how long do you think you'd last there?"

"Not long at all."

"Precisely. Dobby must have passed a wand off to her and given her the perfect shot. And you know Hermione would have taken it, unwittingly shackling herself to the conniving sexual predator we now know as Narcissa 'Granger'."
Ernie and Cormac looked sheepish as Hermione Granger stood over them, flicking the Wireless off with her wand. "Don't believe a word that witch says. She's had it in for me for years."

Cormac nodded. "Though, she sounded pretty sympathetic to you there."

Ernie bit his lip. "What part did you come in on?" *Good going, you want to be an Auror and a witch can sneak up and scare the pants off of you.*

Hermione's scowl rivaled Severus'. "Where she said I had been set up. I killed Lucius, true, but to suggest Dobby was working to get me to kill Lucius so Narcissa could have me?" She shook her head at them. "I'm part of the next shift to guard here. One of you two can go."

Ernie understood the look in Cormac's eyes and took that as his dismissal. Earlier in the shift together, Cormac had asked about his former girlfriend, Hannah Abbott, and tried to act nonchalant when he admitted that he was now seeing Justin Finch-Fletchley. He had tried pursuing Hermione before, what made him think he had a better shot now that she was married? Ernie shook his head and left the pair of them to guard the empty courtrooms.

Cormac extended his hand to me in a friendly gesture as I fought the urge to roll my eyes at him. The war seemed to take the swagger out of him, and I wondered if maybe I ought to give him a second chance to make a first impression.

"Morning Hermione." He lowered his hand sheepishly, noticing my uneasyness. "I uh, used to be really conceited back in school. A bit of an arrogant toerag, actually. I'm sorry for how I was disrespectful to you."

"Oh. Maybe he has shaped up." *Apology accepted, Cormac.* His face lit up a bit.

"Actually, I just go by McLaggen now." *Still a bit of a prat. Some things don't change entirely, it seems.* "Glad you're here. I heard about Harry's resignation from the Aurory because of... you know. Tough decision, but this is for the greater good. If my parents were still around, they'd agree."

My heart went out to him, for parents I didn't even know. "Cor- McLaggen, I didn't know." I couldn't recall if he was a Pureblood or Half-blood; I definitely knew he wasn't Muggle-born...

"My mother was Muggle-born, and father decided to break ties with Uncle Tiberius and ran away from the Ministry. Snatchers caught us..." His eyes shone uncried tears, "but we put up a fight. We put up one hell of a fight."

"I'm sorry about your loss." I replied, grateful that I shipped my parents off.

He shrugged. "Others had it worse. My aunt Dee-Dee took me in. Some things you thought you wanted as a child turn out to be completely rubbish, you know? I wanted to make my Dad proud by becoming a famous Quidditch player, get rich off of endorsements through Malfoy Industries." He shrugged it off. "Childish dream, that." He looked past me. "And there's my relief. I'm not tired at all, mind if I stick around? A look went over his face and he went stony. "Bugger." He muttered under his breath.

I turned around and saw Viktor, levitating an unconscious Goblin along with Kingsley and Chief Mugwump Ogden. *Is Tiberius Ogden Cormac's Uncle?! Tiberius can't be that common of a name."

The look between them was icy, but not as frosty as between Kingsley and Ogden. "The prisoner is now yours, Tiberius. If that is all you need, I'm going to be nowhere near this when it happens." He
looked to me. "Hermione, you don't have to be a part of this." With a tap of his wand, the Goblin was revived and he glared at us even as he tested the magical bindings. "He is allowed to have last words; it would be too easy for you to slay him while he was unconscious."

I stood resolute as Ogden pointed a bony finger at me. "She's not about to turn tail and run away like you want to, Minister. You should at least have the decency to resign if you won't do your duty like Harry Potter did."

I set my jaw as I faced off with him. "Chief Mugwump, I have my own reasons for being here, but do not lump me in with the likes of you. Kingsley here is waiting for this crisis to be over and your Emergency Powers to come to an end. I wasn't certain I liked Shacklebolt's approach to making a more muggle-friendly Ministry, but Ogden's unilateral suspension of basic rights was just scary."

"We will see. Sticking around, nephew?" Tiberius said plainly. Viktor and I shared a look, and we both knew we were simply choosing the lesser of two evils.

Kingsley frowned, ready to give his last-ditch attempt to stop this. "I thought you were better than this, Hermione. That Damned wand has changed you."

I looked at him, refusing him to make me feel guilt over my decision. "And if the goblin's rebellion breaks out into open warfare overseas? Slytherin's Snake, if we are all massacred as the Goblins seem to want, what makes you think they will stop there? Then they will turn on the muggles."

Ragnok laughed darkly. "The men would be put to good use in mining. The women, well..." The way he leered at me left nothing to the imagination, and my stomach churned at that.

"We are putting you to death today, and with your blood, your kind will be wiped from these lands." Viktor spat.

"Wizard trickery will always fail." Raknok said arrogantly. I cleared my mind, not allowing my anger or rage direct me. The Chief Mugwump lowered the wards to the courtroom and motioned for us all to go in.

Kingsley was resigned as he turned away, leaving us to do the execution without him. "You even talk like the the Death Eaters did, Hermione. Merlin save us all."

Harry found himself with Neville and Rutherford Poke in the Forest of Dean. Ford had been able to contact the Goblins and tell them that there was a way to avoid the Ministry's attempt to kill them all in one fell swoop. They wouldn't believe him until he disclosed that Harry Potter would be leading them away in defiance of the Ministry in order to help save them. Maybe the good will I started with them by handing over the sword helped after all.

The next pop has Harry and Neville's eyes and wands up and at the ready. Ginny and Draco had apparated in, both wearing tactical robes and they took stock of the potions in their robes. Once checked, Ginny reinforced the defensive charms in their robes as Draco put down a protective ward to reduce hostile magic. Harry had barely recognized the spell from his Auror training, and had not known that the Malfoys knew of it.

That's when it hit him, his boyfriend and girlfriend weren't just here for support, they were armed for all-out war.

Harry cleared his throat. "Hey, we don't need that. This is just an escort." Ginny and Draco
exchanged a glance and Draco kept working as Ginny faced him.

"I'm protecting you and Draco and that's that."

Harry fidgeted nervously as he wanted to say something to Draco, to hopefully have him get Ginny out of here. Draco knew the look and shook his head.

"Harry, if you're worried this much about Ginny's safety, then you know you need a bit more firepower here."

"Yeah, but this is different. I'm defying the Wizengamot, committing treason. You two don't need to follow me down this path. " Why couldn't they understand this?

"We love you, you prat." Draco said, holding Ginny's hand. "We know you're following your heart." There, it was said. He said it to you, and if they are here and willing to risk their reputations here, then you have to accept it.

"We're here to make sure you survive it." Ginny added. Harry went over and hugged them both, realizing he couldn't send them off even if he wanted to.

"You heard from your mother?" He asked the ginger. She shrugged in resignation.

"She's overjoyed at having Percy back, and Ron is burying himself in work. George has been keeping me in the loop. Our family isn't going to be the same." Ginny said sadly.

"I'm so sorry-" Harry was cut off by her.

"-It's not your fault, Harry!" She snapped back. "It's hers for being so stubborn and unwilling to..." she deflated as fast as she had blown up at him. Draco was comforting her and giving Harry a 'stop it' look.

Harry looked like he was going to try to apologize, but Neville's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Family can be tricky. You're a lucky guy, Harry, to have so many people love and fight alongside you. Gran thinks we should let the goblins all die... but is glad to see me following my own morals."

"I was honestly worried I'd have Hit-Wizards sent to stop us or something. I mean, Kingsley wouldn't put up with us undermining him, even though he disagrees with the order."

"What?" Healer Poke said, slightly panicked. "I thought most wizards and witches would be grateful that we're not attempting the wholesale slaughter of a race; proving we're better than You-Know-Who."

"Yeah, you would think. But the people are scared and are willing to do anything for safety. I know I've always tried to do the right thing. I once tried to cast the Cruciatius Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange. I don't have it in me; I am never going to be swayed to embrace the Dark Arts."

"But you have been swayed to have a witch and a wizard as a lover." Ford replied. He quickly raised his hands is if to prove he wasn't armed. "Just an observation. People will talk about this."

"Well, they can talk as they want... but just because I want them doesn't mean I'm Dark. Anyways, Ford, when are the Goblins supposed to show up? This is the rendezvous point, right?" As Harry said that, the earth shook slightly under their feet.

The ground nearby erupted, grass and dirt opening upward to make a small cave-like entry. The tell-tale hobble of Goblins came up from out of the hole, wands pointed as a dozen Goblins made their
Severus was in the Headmaster's office, the desk cleared of normal school paperwork and instead had a map of the British Isles. It was a war room of sorts, and he was waiting for Minerva and Fleur to show up.

"I can't believe we're about to do this again, for 'the Greater Good'." Severus muttered to the map, noting the lack of Dementor activity in Great Britain and marking the dramatic increase of Goblin activity. They seemed to be living underground somehow, recuperating and making surprise skirmishes anywhere. They are known for their tunneling skills, we had never expected them to make it into a war tactic. They seemed able to just pop up anywhere, as if they could apparate themselves all over the country.

"Albus. I find myself in need of... advisement. The Ministry is enacting a small-scale genocide 'for the greater good'. This has the stench of Grindelwald all over again, but Wizarding Britain faces certain extinction."

"My boy, if it is as dire as you say, you ought to think of yourself as a man soon to die. What kind of world would you want to leave behind, having done all that you could? What will people say when they look at the life of Severus Snape, and how he spent his final moments?"

"You think I ever gave a damn what others might think or say of me? I am my own man, Albus. I could care less over the state of my soul nor any public approval rate. Leave that to the politicians."

He turned around to see Fleur was already there and in his office. She's a stealthy witch when she wants to be...

"Look at me, Sev. Honestly look. You know I'll never be a heroine, not to the wizarding world. All they will see is a freak and a monster. But if I try to hide and let others die, what was Bill's sacrifice for? What has my life been for?"

Severus nodded, getting the answer he had needed all along: not absolution, but understanding.

"Then let's go, and damn whatever they say of us." The pair of them apparated to the Ministry to defend it during the execution.

I did a security sweep of the courtroom as McLaggen and Viktor situated the prisoner. It only then hit me that I had been barely able to move the day before, and I was now walking around like I had never been injured at St. Mungo's. Narcissa must have done something to help me heal faster. I should thank her later for that, I guess. The Goblin was seated in the chair in the middle of the room, and straps had him latched in place just like in Harry's trial. Ogden put on the red judge robes that reminded me of the Spanish Inquisition as he sat as the sole member of the Wizengamot.

Viktor brought the cauldron and placed it on the Goblin's lap, just under his head. "Prepare to twist the curse, Hermione." That's right, Granger. We're twisting a curse, just like Grindelwald used to do.

"The Wizengamot has found you guilty of mass murder, Grand Larceny of Wizarding monies at Gringotts, and Conspiracy to overthrow the Ministry; the penalty is death. In addition, the Emergency Powers Act empowers me on behalf of the Ministry to stop further uprisings and therefore authorize this Warrant of Execution to be used to its full potential in order to secure the immediate safety of the Wizarding Populace. Anyone found to stand in the way of this lawful
execution, or attempt to continue in this rebellion, forfeit their rights as described within the Ministry of Magic. Any last words, Ragnok?"

*If anyone tries to stop us, we're to shoot on sight.* It seemed to go without saying, yet how he said it unnerved me. My moral compass felt like it was spinning, yet my convictions were holding true. I felt like Prince Hamlet, and his 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy came to mind.

*Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer*
The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune,
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?

I was taking arms in this, and I'd be maligned by Harry, Kingsley, and other Order members. But could I turn my back on this, let the countryside burn just to be in their favor?

Of course I couldn't just walk away from this, even if my moral compass was slipping. I'm not doing this for glory, but for survival. Like Severus did by being the maligned spy and hated Professor for over a decade, I'll be the anti-hero here. *They can scorn and hate me, but at least they will be alive to do so.* Using the Wand of Destiny, I twisted the curse and activated Grindelwald's Cauldron.

"It's ready." I said, realizing how quiet it was in the empty courtroom. I turned to Viktor and Cormac, who also noticed the unnatural feeling with unease. *It wasn't just quiet, it was too quiet - silent.* There were no sounds coming down the hallway whatsoever. Cormac left the courtroom in order to investigate the hallways outside.

"Any last words?" Ogden said, his quill out to record whatever was said.

The goblin shook his head slowly, denying us any request for clemency.

"Then I sentence you to death." An explosion rocked the hallway, collapsing the silencing charm. Veela shrieking could be heard and I knew that Fleur was lobbing fireballs and that the Ministry was indeed under attack. *They knew the time of the execution!*

Viktor handed me the silver stiletto dagger, and ran to the doorway and began to lay down protective charms.

Ragnok and I looked at each other, and he knew I was about to kill him.

"Who leaked the time for your execution?" I demanded of him, stiletto pressing against the skin of his neck. His eyes and face gave nothing as the fighting got closer. *He wasn't going to say.*

"Hermione! Now!" Ogden shouted in panic. "They are coming!"

"Shit! They brought Inferi! INCENDIO!" Cormac said in the hallway corridor. Viktor began lobbing fireballs and directed Cormac to do the same.

My hand held the stiletto over his neck, where I supposed a major artery would be just like for humans. *Just push in and pull out. The blade is designed to not let the wound close.*

I froze there, eyes locked on the unapologetic Goblin who refused to speak. My eyes met his and I dove in, searching for the answer.

"Who betrayed the Ministry, and told them when we were killing you?!" I spoke directly into his mind, and knew that I could prolong his suffering, shred his mind apart and find the information if he refused to cooperate. *It would be so easy, I could use the Elder Wand to wipe away thoughts and*
memories that would get in the way...

A hand clasped my own and I felt warm liquid gush over my hand, pumping out with every beat of his heart. The mind I was walking in reacted to the pain and shock, and the pain slammed into my head as if the blade were killing me. I ripped myself out of his mind, flinching and letting go of the stiletto, blood pouring into the cauldron. **Would his death have taken me too?** I shuddered at the thought, having little pity over the goblin who was bleeding out in front of me.

I turned to see the Ogden there; his own hand covered in blood as he had been the one to force my hand forward, piercing the Goblin's neck. "Thank you, Hermione Granger." He grasped the goblin by the hair and wrenched his head so that the blood sloshing out of his neck would fall into the cauldron. The carved runes lit up and glowed darkly, pulsing a wave of magic outward and its shockwave went through all of the walls as it crashed outward, as screams of pain and agony tore through the Ministry.

Cormac and Viktor were back at my side, conjuring towels to dry the blood off of me. It was done, the curse was twisted and a chain reaction was spreading throughout the land. The smell wafted in and the stench of burned hair and death came in on the heels of Severus and Fleur. **They were okay. We would all be okay.**

Before I knew it, Fleur had me in an embrace and I finally let myself break down and feel safe. "They are gone, Hermione. Their blood boiled and they are all dead." I sat and rocked myself in her arms, and just quit worrying and let the emotions flood out of me.

Draco nodded to Harry and lowered his wand, and luckily so did everyone else. Harry began speaking to the Goblins about how they would be spared if they took the portkeys we had for them. Draco felt a bit uneasy about this plan, but kept his mouth silent as Neville approached.

"What a day. Oh, thanks for the water earlier, Ginny." Ginny sent a confused look to Draco.

"Um, Neville, I didn't-" Draco interrupted, his mind flashing panic in his head.

"-no problem." The Slytherin nodded in a friendly manner and turned to whisper in his girlfriend's ear. "Just... let it go. If it's what I fear, the Fates are set."

Ginny turned to him, even more confused than before. "What?"

Draco sighed, and looked to Ford. "Did you see anything?"

He shrugged, uncertain. "I thought I saw a black Irish wolfhound... just thought it was a stray dog in the forest."

Ginny's eyes returned the look of concern to Draco.

He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "Whatever happens, Ginny, I love you." Ginny nodded, swallowing down her fear.

"You too."

Draco's heart thudded as he took in the two omens of death. **It's not us, and we can't stop what's happening.**

Harry pulled out the portkeys and the Goblins refused to travel without at least one wizard on each. Draco was going to have to be separated from her. He leaned over to her and whispered his only
piece of advice. "Don't attack any crows you see, okay? I'll explain later."

Draco had a clothes hanger to share with four other goblins, as did each of the others in his party. As Harry activated the illegal portkeys, Draco didn't even have to do the math to realize that they were outnumbered at about four to one. The sensation of a hook grabbing him from the center of his mass, just behind the navel, knocked the wind out of him as they all were whisked away to the Orkney Islands, on the northern part of Scotland.

Draco realized that not all of the portkeys left and landed at the same time as he found himself crumpled on the ground, throwing up every defensive spell he could as the Goblins that they had rescued from certain death were now throwing all that they had to kill them all.

Healer Poke had been the first casualty, and had been revived as an Inferi along with two other goblins who must have been cut down in the fight so far. We went from being outnumbered by four-to-one to nearly five-to-one by reviving Ford to kill us.

Ginny had naturally taken a defensible position and started lobbing explosion curses, as if the forest ground had been mined. The two sides of the conflict dove for immediate cover as Harry panicked and attempted to get a cease-fire.

"Whatever happened, goblins, it must have been an accident! We're not trying to kill you all off!" Harry called out across the wooded area. "Neville, Ginny, stop! They just overreacted from panic!"

Neville stood, lobbing off a curse and exploding a tree in the distance. "It wasn't an accident, they killed Ford while aiming for me! This was a setup to kill us, Harry!" A white bolt of light hit him and he fell over. Draco crawled under cover to see if Neville had been killed or needed medical attention.

"Damn it, Harry! I knew it was a trap!" Ginny called out, throwing out fireballs to smoke out the goblins.

"No! I can't believe anyone would want to kill off an entire species! We are better than that!" Harry put up defensive spells, still looking for a diplomatic solution.

Hexes flew back and forth as Ford's corpse shambled and slowly went to attack Harry. Goblins seemed to be gleeful at this as they cheered and hexed in his direction.

"We will have our vengeance, Thief of Gringotts! You cost us our Dragon and our Bank!" The cacophony of sinister laughter from the goblins rattled in Draco's bones. They were willing to kill to the very last for vengeance.

"But I just helped save your lives from the Ministry!" Harry threw a fireball and immolated the Inferi that was less than a meter away from striking him. "We can work together!"

Draco's shield was collapsing as he realized Ford had seen the Grim. Please, ravens, if you come, come to our aid.

A shrieking stole his attention and he saw a slack-faced Neville dueling against Ginny at a speed he'd never seen the boy have in his life. Salazar's Serpent, he's under the Imperious...

A dozen goblins started to advance in all of the chaos, and Draco's rage took over as he threw a plethora of stunners into the crowd, taking the time to slice up any Goblin that he was able to stun onto the ground before they got back up. Looking over at his partners, he realized Ginny was slowly losing as Harry was only trying to disarm the goblins that attacked him.

"DUEL TO KILL, POTTER!" Draco called out, trying to do transfiguration on the fly and change
the battleground into a series of spiked pit traps. As he got the ground to open up and drop goblins
towards spikes to impale them, his shield charm failed and a hot knife-like sensation washed over
him as doubled over. His robes were sliced open as he saw his own innards strewn upon the ground
haphazardly.

_Fuck, FUCK, FUCK! I've been gutted!_ Draco's panic was subsumed by a rush of adrenaline. He
rolled onto his back, slid his intestines back into his body cavity, realized that it was just a partial de-
skinning charm, and cast a basic stasis charm that one would use over a cauldron on himself. His
breathing was ragged and time seemed to be going excruciatingly slow and fast all at once.

_Okay, I need dittany, I need my fucking gut cleaned, and I need to survive this. First things first:
survive._

"HARRYYYY!" Ginny called out, and Draco winced as he rolled himself onto all fours and crawled
towards the sound of her voice. Neville was deep under the Imperious Curse, trying his best to kill
Ginny. Draco's magical reserves and concentration were shot, as long as he wanted to keep the stasis
charm to keep his own body alive.

The remaining goblins were still advancing, including a few that had died and were reanimated. _They
aren't going to stop, are they?_ Remembering what he saw Hermione do, Draco pushed the last of his
magic and spewed forth lava to roast and burn the remaining goblins to ash.

Draco fell upon the ground, the final reserves of his magic barely keeping himself physically
together, as his eyes spotted a raven circling overhead. "Morrigan... not today. Not..." he swallowed
his fear, "Not. Today!" The last part was spat out in defiance.

The Slytherin was too exhausted to move, to help, to fight. He was out of the battle, and all he could
do now was hear how the fight would end. _Damn it Harry, you had better save her..._

Harry finally gave up on brokering peace. "The Goblin controlling him has to be around here! Kill
him, and Neville will be okay!" The overlapping sounds of rapid spellfire and ricochets didn't
reassure Draco though.

"Neville's too busy trying to kill ME, HARRY! You look for him, he is probably underground!"
Ginny's voice was cracking with stress. Draco coughed as he lay uselessly, the taste of blood upon
his lips. _I could still die here; drowning from internal bleeding._

A hailstorm of stunners went off all at once, and the sound of Ginny collapsing onto the ground took
away the last of Draco's hope.

"NEVILLE! NO!" Harry screamed in fear. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The raven swooped down, out of Draco's peripheral vision as he lay broken on the forest floor. _Is
she okay?_

Another spell slammed into the ground. Then another. And another. There was a sobbing as a spell
was cast over and over, even though the duel was over.

Quietly he finally heard Ginny's voice, and he was relieved. "He's dead. You saved us, Harry...
harry, please stop." There was a wavering of uncertainty in her voice, the kind that you use when
speaking to someone who isn't all there any more. The wandfire kept going, but the rhythm was
broken. "Harry... stop hexing the body... he's dead. It's over." The spells slowed down, and Draco
could make out a very quiet manta from his boyfriend.

"expelliaramus. expell... i meant to... expelliari... i'm sorry... expel... please... expell..."
"I know, Harry. Please put down your wand. It's okay, it's over... Harry?" Ginny's voice wavered with doubt, as if she were uncertain she could reach through to him. "I'm here for you. Just stop. Please... it's over. He's dead."
Fleur found it unnerving at first, holding her friend and ally Hermione Granger as she finally fell apart. *The poor girl has gone through too much way too fast...* The Veela was glad to be able to comfort her friend and be the strong one for her, as it hit her that she had never needed to be needed like this before. She reflected on when she spent the evening in Severus' bed, the comfort of a warm body working as a talisman to keep the nightmares away. *There was something stoic and stalwart in him, a rock that I can depend on...*

Except Severus didn't seem to need her, and didn't seem to care if she stuck around or not. The small shakes from Hermione's crying seemed to lessen, and Fleur rubbed her back consolingly. *This will have to do, I suppose.* She wrapped her wings around Hermione as they sat on the floor of the Ministry courtroom.

"Thank you Fleur," Hermione said, "sometimes you feel like an angel, you know? A scary, vengeful one that you're glad to have on your side. Kind of like the Erinyes." Fleur smiled at that.

"Nobody can pronounce the term from Greek Mythology; even Snape calls me by their Roman counterpart, 'Furies'."

Hermione chuckled at that, and it was good to hear her even be able to do that. "This means the wars and battles are over now, right?"

Fleur wasn't certain if she wanted the truthful response or the nice-sounding lie. "The major ones, yeah... we still have pockets of Anarchist rebellion, and the reconstruction of the Wizarding World. Setting up a government that isn't pro-Pureblood."

Hermione nodded, adding, "nor pro-Muggleborn. It needs to just be fair to all. What will you do now?"

"Severus told me that he might have an opening on the Teaching Staff."

"Oh thank Merlin! I'll know at least someone there, then. Draco won't be going back since he actually finished his classes."

Severus stood over the pair of them, saw that they weren't injured, and turned away without saying a word.

Hermione spoke up again. "Looks like you might also be in need of a sympathetic friend."

Fleur's lips puckered as if she bit into a wedge of lemon. "He's a hard man to understand, and goes hot-and-cold often." Hermione seemed remniscent, and wore a wistful smile.

"I um, have Narcissa's memories of him. Still getting used to it, but he's not the type to just let himself fall in love anymore. He has to surrender to it as if willfully putting your head into a guillotine."

Fleur huffed at that. *Surrender to love like putting your head into a guillotine?* She bit her lip as she recomposed herself. "I don't know what you're talking about; I'm not interested in him."

Hermione's eyes met her own, and Fleur blinked rapidly as she looked away. "Fleur, I don't need to
use Legilimency. But I won't divulge this to anyone." Fleur nodded, perhaps a bit too fast.

"It's just... too soon, and I don't know if anything would ever occur. I just want some comfort. Speaking of, why did you not reach out to your wife?"

"I don't want to bother her."

"Well, it's nice to be needed sometimes, Hermione. Thank you." *I really haven't been needed in so long.*

"We did the right thing today." Hermione's voice seemed almost a question instead of a statement.

"I know we did." Fleur said it with absolute certainty. She knew they were coming after herself and her friends, and that makes decisions so much easier. *Them or me? It will be them. Every time.*

"I flinched. I had the blade in my hand, was left as the executioner as the Goblins tried to mount a rescue, and I couldn't do it. Ogden's hand pushed the blade in."

"You are not to blame then."

"Actually, Fleur, we were betrayed. I don't know who, but someone in the Ministry revealed to the Goblins when we were going to execute Ragnok."

"Why? And who? Nobody would willfully paint a target on the Ministry for the Goblins to attack..."

"That's what I thought as well."

"Draco, we have to help Harry," Ginny said as she went to her catatonic boyfriend. She gently pulled the wand out of his hand, and he had let her. *Small miracle there.* Harry's face was pouring tears, but the lack of response from her other boyfriend sent a shiver of fear down her spine. "Dr... Draco?" Her stomach dropped as she braced for the worst.

The silence was deafening. "DRACO!" She heard a spluttering cough and Ginny ran over to him. *Merlin, how has he survived this long?*

Draco was on his back, blood running out of his mouth and stomach. His eyes were half-lidded, The stasis charm left his internal organs visible to her, but Ginny was more worried at the lack of breathing. Ginny's mind seemed to either speed up, or everything else slowed down for her. She had all the time in the world if she thought it out right.

"Anapneo. Episky. Accio dittany." Ginny poured the entire bottle of dittany that came from her robes onto Draco's stomach, glad to see him wince and scream in pain. *Good, pain means alive.* Draco saw her, relief and pain on his face as his hands clasped hers. He tried for words, but couldn't seem able to.

"It's okay, we're alive. I got you." Ginny flicked her wand outward, incanting "Expecto Patronum... Cissy, Kingsley, Mom, help us! We're in the Forest of Dean!" Three Hungarian Horntails sped away, and Draco had a wry smile on his face at that.

Ginny just shook her head at him. "Yes, Draco, you *have* been a bad influence on me. I'm going to go check on Harry, okay?" Draco stiffly nodded as she stood, making her way back to their boyfriend. He was still slumped over Neville's body, his eyes lost somewhere that wasn't here.

In quick succession, there were three pops of apparition and Kingsley, Molly, and Narcissa all met
each other at wand point. Molly's eyes were fierce in rage, and Ginny realized her mistake.

"No, she's a Healer, and Draco's in trouble." The Slytherin's eyes widened and she found her son and went to tend to him. "Harry need help, too." The look of rage was tempered as she looked for Harry and gasped in soft horror.

"I had a feeling he was going to try something." Kingsley said, taking in the area. "Damn, Ford was a good Healer; good Wizard." The Minister saw the body amidst the dead goblins.

"So was Neville." Ginny said, "but he got hit with the Imperius Curse and was trying to kill me."

Shacklebolt took in the impromptu battlefield all over again. "Draco? ... Harry." His face fell in mourning as he pieced it together. "He did the right thing, Ginny. This won't look good to the public, though."

Ginny's face reddened in anger. *Who gives a FUCK about right and wrong right now?!* She took a long breath and steadied herself. "Harry needs to pull himself back together."

"Mother!" Draco rasped out, "Morrígan was here. Took the form of a woman and a crow." He panted a few times heavily. "Healer claimed he saw a black Irish Wolfhound, too."

"Slytherin's Snake..." Cissy cursed, "if that's true, then..." She flicked up her wand, and a diagram of braided lines of various colors splayed through the air. One went from gold to black, diving and climbing before it split, which Ginny found strange as a bright scarlet line wove around it, coiled like a snake on a tree branch.

"The Fates are in play." Kingsley finished, "Merlin help us all." He looked at Harry. "I never officially accepted your resignation. I would really prefer if you stayed. I need people with morals in my Ministry... and because frankly, you're still a hero to the people and nobody else can do the job right now. Besides, I'm putting in the paperwork to have Proudfoot declared as died in the war." Harry nodded, but it wasn't clear if he had heard a single word.

Ginny was glad she had the excuse of the Harpies to leave; she wasn't certain she could handle being around a broken Harry Potter. Draco had fought to the last and nearly died for them, and she didn't want to feel guilty if he had. Ginny realized that he was willing to do whatever it took while Harry's idealism to be the good guy wasn't working.

*It's like I'm seeing the difference between the fairy tale hero I used to dream of and someone who might seem to be a bit more pragmatic.* She realized it was a growing-up lesson that came at a steep price... One that she planned on never having to repeat. She bent over Draco, glad to see his mother able to stabilize him. She cupped his jaw in her hand and kissed his forehead gently.

"I need to... I uh, have to go. I'll be in touch."

Draco nodded, his skin no longer looking deathly pale. *He's either secure in our relationship, or too busy trying to not die right now.* "I love you, hellcat." He gave her his classic smirk.

She smiled automatically at that. "I love you too. Take care of yourself," she shuddered as she said the rest, "and Harry." With that, Ginny turned and apparated away.

Severus left Fleur behind to console a distraught Hermione, realizing that the accumulated stress from the previous days have finally taken their toll on her. *Narcissa might need some more Dreamless Sleep,* he thought idly. After a quick apparition to his lab, he was at his friend's home only to find her caring over an unconscious Draco.
"Severus, I did everything right! He was gutted by the Damned goblins, and Ginny did the right thing with the dittany. Then I used blood replenishing, pepper-up, then pain relieving, and he was awake for awhile... now he's not responding at all."

Severus frowned at that; it wasn't often to see her in a panicked state. *It would explain her missing the canned coma.*

"Cissy, is Draco alive?"

"What? Well, yes, but he's not waking up!"

"Then leave him be. He's alive and resting-"

"Ennervate isn't working!"

"His body is depleted, and you dosed him with blood replenishing, pepper-up, and then pain relieving? In that order, after a lot of essence of dittany?"

"Yes, I... oh Sev, I should have remembered."

"He'll be out for a few days at most. He is not dead, which was your goal, correct?"

She nodded gratefully. "Yes, thank you for being level-headed." Severus gave a tight nod. *Change the subject to something she's more sure on, perhaps she'll feel more sure about herself.*

"Still think you can handle teaching this fall?" He asked, glad to see determination on her face.

"I am, but you know you're going to have to deal with the repercussions."

"Leave that to me. I believe Fleur will be instrumental in this. Besides, more unconventional appointments have worked in the past."

"Speaking of Fleur, you really ought to surrender to love more often. Fighting it tooth and nail might send her the wrong message."

"What message is that? I spent years being the embodiment of a bitter old man, yet I made the mistake to embrace love once again only to have to bury her next to her husband. I shan't repeat such an error."

"Sev, you're an arse." Narcissa snapped at him.

"I don't deny it. In any case, your wife will not be permitted as a student in your classes. Perhaps she should hear this from you before the term begins."

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I felt a pair of eyes on me and pulled my face away from the white locks of Veela hair. It was Viktor, and he seemed more together than I was.

"Thank you, Hermione. We might not have survived otherwise."

"Yeah, I guess. I just need to get home."

"Malfoy Manor." Viktor almost seemed to spit it out.

"It's Granger Manor now." My answer seemed to mollify him.
"Sorry. You did the world a favor killing him." There seemed to be a bit of bitterness in his words, but I couldn't figure it out.

"I don't want to be known just for killing people."

"You're saving people and doing good."

"Pretty to think so. Rita Skeeter is telling people that Narcissa set me up to do that, and that she's had her eye on me for ages."

"She manipulates truth to sell a twisted story. Do not be bothered by it."

Fleur helped me stand up, giving me a wry look. "She was horrible during the triwizard tournament. There is nothing to her words."

Even so, I'm not so certain what happened during that duel.

"She does twist the truth. But there are moments in my duel with Lucius that don't make sense yet; I have gaps in my memory that need answers."

"That's common in moments of high stress."

I should be able to see her memories though, right? I wondered how to access specific memories, rather than just get whatever she was thinking about. That's when it hit me, my wife was home and frantically trying to revive Draco. He had been at death's door, curiously attacked at the same time we were.

"I have to go, my stepson has been hurt." As I tried to access the thought-memory, it was revealed to me that he had been trying to protect my best friend Harry. Apparently he tried to save a few of them by escaping north... I never thought he would be this naive.

I turned away from Fleur and Viktor, realizing Severus must have already left. Viktor's hand clasped my shoulder, but immediately let go as I quickly turned to face him. He took the gesture as hostile and pulled back apologetically.

"Sorry, Hermione, I just want you to know I'm here if you need me." I nodded and smiled at that, trying to ignore the familiar fluttering sensation I used to have with him.

trying being the operative word here; my body still feels a pull towards him.

"I know. It's just that so much has happened at once, I'm ready for some normalcy."

Fleur spoke up. "Normal is overrated." I might agree with her, but I was ready for a calm year at Hogwarts. No more Dark Lord, no need to look after Harry and write papers for Ron.

Once I was out of the lowest levels of the Ministry, I took the Floo home. Narcissa and a medi-witch were seeing the second baby off with its closest relatives. My wife looked radiant there, almost beatific in light blue robes. The new parents, however, were clutching their child away from her as if she were threatening to hex her. The man was missing part of his leg while woman looked to me as if I were some horrible victim.

"Hermione, I've heard your story from Rita. You don't have to continue to associate yourself with her, you know. The witch has cleverly designed the situation to force you to love her as she keeps her estate, all by questionable magic."
I frowned at that, understanding her concern while being curious as to whom else could inherit the Malfoy estate. *It would be Draco, who was nearly killed by trying to protect my friend. I'll have to look into this, too.*

I put on my best smile to reassure her. "I'm not being held here against my will, nor am I under the influence of any love potions. But thank you for your concern."

The witch and wizard seemed leery at my pronouncement but left via the floo all the same. *Ugh, there would be no convincing some people...*

My wife beamed at me as we came together for a soul-searing kiss. It felt like home, that all would be right in the world with her by my side. I could tell that Draco was going to be alright, that our son might have been injured but that the damage wasn't permanent. There was still a niggling presence on my mind, that shred of doubt that needed to be satisfied.

"Glad to know Draco will be fine."

Narcissa smiled sadly. "He'll be fine, but there will be a psychological price to pay for it. Post-traumatic stress, they call it."

"Where did you learn that?" I asked, impressed that she knew of the muggle concept. The wizarding world seemed to just be a hotbed of inbreeding and eccentric personalities.

"Draco said that it still be in the new curriculum this year, and your father was nice enough to direct me to the right bookstore for resources. It can't hurt to know this." I agreed with her, and she took me by the hand and lead me to the nursery.

We only had two of the babies left, and family members were en-route to claim them tomorrow.

"I'm glad that something is going well." I said off-handedly. Narcissa kissed my forehead in understanding.

"Everything else is just going to have to work itself out for the best eventually. That man is going to try to take me to court to pay for damages."

"What damages? We saved the life of that girl for him!" *How on earth could we get sued?*

"He's trying to blame us for the deaths at St. Mungo's, though there is no crime in killing the non-living. He was one of the people who survived my sister's work, the cursed wound that would have slowly killed him and fought all attempts to be cured or healed. I removed his leg using the only non-Light spell that would work. Don't worry however, our solicitor is already working on this for us."

Her hand traced her neck in a nervous gesture, and my mind was filled with a memory as our family's solicitor had come for payment to get Lucius out of Azkaban after the first war.

*Narcissa had been dressed in a skimpy, white sheer nightgown and had her wrists bound before her.*

*He had made the arrangements and used the power in the Compulsion to force her to comply. His sneer told her exactly what he thought of her.*

"Took your time to get me out, Cissy. While you whored your way through every witch you fancied, I was locked away as a play-thing for the Dementors!" *He opened a door and a delicate-looking woman came in, eyes glazed in lust and fangs at the ready. "I'm going to enjoy this."

*The vampire solicitor moved in a blur, ripping the thin fabric off of her and taking her to the ground, fangs sinking painfully deep as Narcissa was taken against her will, watching her husband stroke*
himself at the sight of her in pain, being used in any way the vampire wanted.

Through the vampire's bloodlust-driven excitement, Narcissa was stretched too far to accommodate four fingers suddenly. As she felt herself tear, she swore that Lucius would die someday in the worst way possible: at the hand of a Mudblood witch.

I pulled out of the memory, horrified at what it revealed. She had been plotting all this time...

"You did use me, didn't you?!"

"No, my love, that was thought in anger. Remember, I was handed over to her like a whore for payment!"

Her eyes met mine, and though we passively shared memories, I couldn't find what I wanted. I had to know, finally! My wand was out as I cast "Legilimens!"

I rooted around in her mind, searching for her memory of the duel with Lucius. I wanted the truth at long last, too know everything that happened that night to disprove Rita once and for all.

Memories surfaced, excruciatingly painful ones where she witnessed Death Eaters punished by being skinned slowly as her sister reveled in it. After she came back from her time in Azkaban, she went so far as to eat the flesh she removed in front of the victim. Severus had his wand-arm skinned entirely for waiting to return to The Dark Lord on Dumbledore's orders as Bellatrix was slurping on the dermis like wet noodles. I shuddered and thought I'd lose my lunch if I had eaten anything.

I wrenched away from the memory, realizing that her memories of panic and torture were coming to the front because she was frightened and in pain from what I was doing.

Another memory; Lucius deciding that he would demand sex from his wife whenever he wanted it, and would come home to her after he had laid with another witch and had her taste the other witch's juices that had dried on his cock. Sometimes she was married and had been coerced into it, other times it was a woman he thought Narcissa was in love with, and a few times it would be a prostitute that may out may not have survived the encounter. He would make her guess her fate as he thrust his blood-soaked member in and out of her as her hatred for him reached new depths.

Show me the duel where I was made to kill him!

My wife fought me, but flashes came forward. The free-for-all, Harry disarming Draco, Dobby dropping the chandelier, Narcissa diving out of the way with her son, and a well-placed banishing charm that put a wand right under my hand as I fell to the ground.

"occlumency!"

I found myself thrown out of her mind, the link fully severed between us. Narcissa was bleeding profusely out of her nose as well as one eye red from the ordeal. She put the wand in my hand that night. She wanted Lucius dead, and I killed him for her.

"What in Slytherin's name do you think you were doing?!!"

"I want to know the truth!"

"The truth is not black and white, my love."

"YES IT IS! And don't you dare call me that; nobody who really loved me would have EVER set
"How dare you! I've fought by your side, healed your wounds, and made love to you. And now you accuse me of having manipulated you into being mine? Forcing yourself into my mind isn't much different than forcing yourself into my body. Stay out of my head, Hermione!"

The air was too thin as I felt the walls closing in on me. That's what I've always felt about this place, it was filled with hatred and a need to destroy people. Rita was right; I've been her pawn for revenge this whole time.

"How am I supposed to trust you? Everything that our relationship has been based on is a bloody lie!"

Narcissa wiped blood away from her lip, the sclera of her left eye red with blood. "If that's what you think, then leave. Let Kingsley fake-divorce us and go find some man that will love and support you as much as I have."

Without taking a decide thought to reconsider, I ordered Herpy to pack up all of my clothes and to deliver them to the Leaky Cauldron.

To hell with this sham marriage. Narcissa had set me to deal with Lucius for her and I have been barely surviving ever since.

The first week alone in a room above the Leaky Cauldron went by like a flash, my only contact with the world was Herpy who still brought me food and did my laundry. She gratefully didn't ask any questions nor mention how much I had cried.

I was angry, damn it. Angry doesn't mean crying.

But I couldn't forget what I saw; how much she suffered at Lucius' hand, abusing the Compulsion in their Bond because she preferred women. And he was convinced that he simply needed to break her in order to have the proper and pliant wife that all Purebloods were expected to have.

But she used me when she had the chance. My own feelings are twisted to want her.

At the start of the second week, Herpy delivered a letter from Severus. It was the standard book list for Hogwarts, and it had me listed as an Eighth Year student, stating that the rules and housing for me would work differently and be explained at the Sorting Ceremony. I guess since I'm legally an adult as well, there would be differences in how I'm treated.

When I saw the changes in the reading list, I was shocked. I already had my core subject books for my final year, but there were new titles needed for a new mandatory course: The abridged works of Shakespeare, Animal Farm, 1984, Of Mice and Men, and Fahrenheit 451. Are they instituting a new literature course? Considering the reading and writing skills of my classmates, it couldn't hurt.

I composed myself, dried my eyes, and cast a glamour charm to hide the redness. I knew that my emotions were going to be turbulent, but I had never realized I was going to have this much anger and rage while feeling so sad, hollow, and alone. You could go back home to her, Granger.

I thought about that, and wondered what I'd say: would I have to apologize, or if she would even let me in the front door? I could demand she open the door and she can't refuse me. As soon as I thought that, I knew I never wanted to take away her choice again, and I felt ashamed of employing
Legilimancy against her to the point she bled.

As I went down the stairs, I looked around. It was odd to see the world so alive again, people walking about like nothing had happened. The Ministry kept the attendance to Hogwarts as compulsory for now, but cited that the coursework was designed to help the students recover from the horrors that happened during the war. Maybe it would help. Tom waved a hello to me as he served ice cream to a young girl whose mother was looking over a similar list that I had. *I ought to write my mum and tell her what happened.*

Diagon Alley seemed renewed and bright, but for some reason it didn't feel real. It was like I was dreaming and this wasn't reality, soon Death Eaters and goblins would come out of the shadows and start attacking everyone. It was only then did I notice that my fingers were brushing my wand, and so were many others. We all were expecting the worst to instantly happen. We all were unnerved by how suddenly normal everything felt.

"Hermione?" The light tones of Luna's voice called out, and I turned to see her. Cormac and Seamus waved as they patrolled the street, both now wearing Auror robes. Luna's pale-blond hair and almost-Malfoy-blue eyes had me unnerved for a moment as I took it all in.

"Luna, you're looking well." A flash of insecurity marred her aloof and pleasant look before it disappeared.

"I am." Her smile faltered as she saw me, and I tried to smile back only to realize how insincere it felt. "You've not been sleeping well." She said it as a statement instead of a question. I nodded.

"Took a room over the Leaky Cauldron." She looked at me with pity, and I hated it.

"Hermione, why are you staying there?" *We were both tortured there when it was Malfoy Manor, maybe?*

"Because I don't feel right about it. I mean, it's... complicated." *I was tortured, yes, but Narcissa did save me and made the place feel much better...*

"You've been crying, though." She put on a pair of glasses. "And judging by your glamour charm, you've been at it for days." I looked at her curiously as she put away the spectacles. "Glad to know my spellwork is up to par, though." *Luna can see through glamour charms with her spelled glasses? That's... incredible and scary.*

"Yeah, well, it doesn't matter now. I did what I had to do during the war and thought it was the right thing to do. It's over now." Luna shrugged at that, seeming to know I didn't want to talk about that anymore and she followed me into Flourish and Blott's. The smell of books hit my nose and it reminded me of my childhood, when I could curl up with a book and read to my heart's content and my father would let me stay up past my bedtime to finish 'one more chapter'. Without realizing it, my fingers were trailing over the spines as if there were a magnetic connection between us.

"Looks like we'll be reading muggle authors this year. This could be interesting." Behind us, a stack of books crashed to the ground, the noise loud enough to startle everyone there.

Before I could think, my own wand was out to levitate the books back on the table... yet people shrieked and ran for cover as others cast protective charms, so powerful that it deflected nearby people and the chain reaction made even more books topple and spill. There was a cacophony of panic and overreaction. Some people were crying as they tried to put up a shield charm while others seemed to have flashbacks to the Final Battle or the Goblin Rebellion.
"NOT AGAIN!"

"Who is attacking?!"

"Maybe a snatcher?"

"I feel cold, was there a Dementor?"

"No, it was a boggart!" Attempts to cast *Ridikkulus* and the Patronus Charm failed in the small, panic-filled room. Even more attempts to cast shielding charms fed into the frenzy.

"I think it was just a pile of books that fell over."

"The Slayer of You-Know-Who has her wand out, I'm not putting my wand away." *Is that what I'm being called now?* It took me a second to realize that people were afraid of me.

Luna leaned over and whispered into my ear. "Can you modify a cheering charm to be calming instead? If you use your Elder Wand, it should work over the entire area." *She knew I had the Elder Wand?*

I cast the spell as surreptitiously as possible, and Luna took the moment of mass confusion to speak to everyone.

"Okay people, it was just a stack of books that fell over. Nobody here wants to hurt anyone, so let's all lower our wands." *This is one heck of an act of trust here, Lovegood.*

Amazingly, one by one, so did everyone else in the bookstore. I was glad to see cooler heads prevail, but it was pretty close. After a beat, people resumed their book browsing. Luna sighed audibly.

"If these are just average wizards, I can't imagine what Harry must be going through." *What?*

"I'm sorry?" I asked, confusion as to what she meant by that.

"Harry. He defied the Ministry and tried to save the Goblins. Kingsley kept it pretty hush-hush since he disagreed with the Wizengamot's ruling and needed Harry as a touchstone to the Wizarding World." *Oh Merlin, I forgot about Harry!* I knew in the back of my mind that everyone else was okay, and that Draco was the worst injury, but I hadn't even contacted him!

"What happened to Harry?"

"He fell apart after killing Neville."

My heart hit the floor. *Harry killed Neville? He couldn't have; there had to be a good reason...* I've been so out of the loop that I hadn't heard about it, and Harry didn't bother coming to see me. *I need to get back in touch with him; not let our friendship fall apart.*

"Why would Harry..." ...*kill... "...do that?"

"Neville was under Imperio by a goblin and tried to kill Ginny. He apparently meant to only disarm him, but used the killing curse instead." *You can't accidentally kill, can you?*

"I thought you could only kill if you really meant to do harm?" *Maybe that was what was really messing him up mentally, that he's willing and able to kill now.* "I'll... see you at Hogwarts, Luna." I said as I left the bookstore and continued on my purchases, Harry's state weighing heavily on my mind.
Narcissa was glad to see Draco awake and alert, though their conversation was stilted as she felt like part of her heart had been torn out days ago as Hermione stormed away. She had informed Herpy to keep serving Master Granger and be sure she ate properly, but to not try and bring her home if she doesn't want to. Draco could tell that she was heartbroken, but swore to not meddle in their relationship. Once he was able to, he went after Ginny to let her know in person that he was alright.

Which is why she was now entertaining Harry in her library. There were obvious light spots on the walls where portraits once hung, and she reminded herself that she might want to add some muggle paintings here. Herpy had served the two of them tea as Harry seemed to have recently given up drinking after a day-long bender. His face was long and haunted, as if he spent days trapped in a closet with a dozen boggarts and it aged him.

_The only good thing about this conversation, she mused, was that he realizes the cost of his naivety after Neville's death._

"I can't stop seeing his dead eyes looking up at me, and thinking I how relieved I was that Ginny and I were safe. What else have I been wrong about?"

Cissy took a short sip as she thought of the right thing to say. "Your heart was in the right place, Harry, but you now know that the world isn't as black-and-white as it appears to be."

"Speaking of black-and-white, Rita Skeeter wants your head. I've never heard her go this far to destroy someone, not even Hermione or Albus."

"I know. She's trying to ruin my reputation and support, I'm certain." _Hell hath no fury like an ex-lover scorned._

"She's accusing you of orchestrating it all; getting Hermione to do your dirty work and kill Lucius off for you because you actually -literally- couldn't raise a wand at him." She wished that Hermione had known that.

"...and people will be willing to believe her. It doesn't really matter. I know the truth, and so does Hermione, if she sees past her anger. I can't help how others see me. I apologize for the rift between you and Molly for siding with me, though."

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry about the Weasleys. I never thought they could be so cruel."

"I did."

Harry continued, "Ginny told me how her mom reacted to her and Draco as a couple; Molly hoped that it meant Ginny would leave me."

"She, like most Purebloods, want things back to the way they were. She was pro-muggle, but otherwise just as conservative in social ideas, and fortunately... we can't ever really go back." Narcissa knew that Molly wanted to see Arthur sober again and her children all alive and well at Hogwarts. _It's only a fantasy at this point._

"I've heard Arthur got demoted for drinking on the job. Nobody wants to fire him because he's a war hero, but nobody wants to work with him either."

Narcissa nodded, finishing her tea. "All you can do is live the best life you know how for yourself, set a good example, and deal with the fallout from others when it comes."

"That's all I really can do, isn't it? I um... I ought to let you know. Ginny and I were dating Draco.
Together."

She smiled at that. "I know, Harry. He told me... after a fashion. It was obvious he was smitten with Ginny, yet I knew she was involved with you. My son wouldn't have ever made any overtures without everyone's approval. And... I was fairly certain he was bisexual." Harry smiled at that.

"So you're okay with this?"

"As long as it made all three of you happy, yes. Though there will be negativity from those who will frown upon such an unusual relationship, and it could cost you your career." Sometimes, though, she's worth it.

Harry nodded solemnly. "I've been thinking about that as well. Thank you for the tea, Narcissa."

As I finished my purchases for the day, Herpy was there to put them back in my room for me. Always willing to help, it seems.

"How is Narcissa?" I asked, guilt creeping in. It's okay to check in on her, right?

"Mistress is 'managing', she told Herpy to say if Master asked. But Mistress is the same as Master is. Herpy would rather see both together and happy." A stab of guilt hit me as Severus seemed to unfold from the crowd on the street.

"Miss Granger, fancy to see you here. Would you accompany me to the wizarding bank?" Surprised, I nodded and placed my hand into the crook of his arm with unusual ease. It hit me that this had been a standard thing between him and Narcissa before she was married. It wasn't a mark of possession as much as it was propriety and custom. Why did he want me here though?

"Is there a reason you need me on your arm?"

"I wish to not be seen alone at the opening of the new Wizarding bank. Witches are flocking to me as if I'm Lockhart." I remembered a young Severus sneering jealously as Sirius Black had girls around him like nifflers searching for shiny things.

I laughed softly at that, understanding his social anxiety at being hunted by a much more insidious foe than before. Severus went on to talk about how the Ministry recovered the gold and found the Goblin paperwork detailing the contents and accounts with extreme accuracy, and how seized assets from the goblins have paid off the debts incurred from the war. The Wizengamot, however, was going to hold an extensive inquiry concerning the loss of St. Mungo's.

We made it to the bank and saw Kingsley giving a speech, with a distant-looking Harry beside him. I tuned out the speech as I tried to meet my friend's gaze, but there was something listless in him. Eventually the Minister pulled out his wand and severed the gold ribbon, signaling that the bank was now open to the public. There was the expected flash of the photographers for the press, along with a few tabloid-like questions shouted at the sight of us together.

Severus grimaced in the likeness of a smile, and turned us away from the crowd as I ignored the questions that either called me a heroine, victim, or fashion disaster. I hope that they grow tired of this and find a new thing to prattle on about.

"How have you dealt with this constant attention, Sev?" His arm tensed at the familiar tone in my voice.

He shook his head barely. "We aren't on a first name basis, Miss Granger." I scoffed audibly at that.
"Don't be so formal Severus, we go back decades. I need my best friend." As I said that, I knew that it wasn't right.

"I am not your best friend. You are simply experiencing Narcissa's memories and it makes you think of me as she does. In a week's time I'll be your Headmaster at Hogwarts and we'll have to comport ourselves accordingly."

I took my hand out of his arm. "Then don't use me as your beard." Beard? What does that... oh, fake companion so as to avoid uncomfortable questions.

"I apologize, Hermione. I'm still adjusting to the fact that you have Narcissa's memories, including her insight to me."

"I do, but I don't have insight as to why she..." She what? Tricked me?

"You believe she betrayed you." 

"Well, yes."

"And somehow you believe I'm her best friend."

"You are." I replied automatically.

"Do you honestly think I'm going to take either side in this lover's quarrel?" I shuddered at his word choice. Lover's quarrel?

"Excuse me?! She betrayed me! Set me up to... to love her. Sev, I gave myself over to her completely, do you have any idea what that is like?!! There was a glint of fury in his eyes that hit me like a swift backhand. He spied on The Dark Lord for years all in Lily's memory.

"Quite. Pray tell, Hermione, what has changed? What has truly changed between you two in the past month?" I met his eyes defiantly, and it was like part of the fight was knocked out of me. The anger I had held onto wasn't as strong as it had been before.

"Knowing how and why we started." I was still upset, and could get myself to be angry... but looking at him and knowing what he went through during two wars as a spy, watching two loves of his life be buried, made me feel insignificant.

"And somehow, you have seen through all the chaos of war and resolutely determined that you won the duel solely because of Narcissa's intervention?"

"YES! I mean, I think so. I used Legilimancy and she fought against me." I shuddered as I remembered tearing into her memories. I won't feel guilty for wanting to know the truth... "She fought me because she was guilty and was hiding the truth."

"What she did saved your life." You ripped through her mind like Voldemort would, and you know it, Granger. I felt uncomfortable at that, and it fueled my anger even more.

"Well I don't like being manipulated!" Severus let out a sharp bark of laughter.

"Oh, then you must really hate Albus..."

"Professor Dumbledore? I don't know what you're talking about!" What on earth is he talking about?

"Your first year, Potter and the Weasley boy just so happened to be the first ones to come looking
after you. Albus was really good at being the hidden puppeteer; making me confront Quirrell, nudging people's actions from afar. Honestly, in a school full of teacher, prefects, and ghosts, only two first-year students arrive in time to assist you with a fully grown troll. Come now, use your skills of deduction, Miss Granger.

"In your second year, you were granted access to the Restricted Section on behalf of that blonde charlatan? The entire faculty was tasked to supervise him to ensure nobody got hurt. I just happened to win the pleasure of assisting his little dueling club. Your third year, you were granted a time-turner at the age of thirteen. The Ministry doesn't lightly hand out a time-rewinding, 'undo button' to children, even if they have decided to play the part of Harry Potter's bodyguard."

"I had..." I thought those exact words, back when I read about Sirius Black's connection to The Dark Lord...

"Then immediately after his death, he left the Horcrux books in his office, warded so that only you could summon them. Then bequeathed you his personal copy of Tales of Beedle the Bard." Merlin, if this is true then I've been played since my first day here...

"Well, it doesn't matter. I was going to do all that anyways." Just like I might love my wife anyways. "I just... I cannot trust Narcissa nor have a marriage with her based off of lies."

"Trust is something that you may rescind some day, however love... love is something you have no control over."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." I shivered slightly, uncertain as to why I was feeling cold. "How goes the search for Bellatrix?"

He shifted just enough for me to know that the question rattled him. "She seems to be acting unusually intelligent and rational." Unusually rational?

"What do you mean?" He scowled, and I noticed that he seemed more open with his emotions as of late and was relieved to quit having to hide behind the stony facade he took years building.

"Any normal witch who goes insane is quite easy to find; look for accidental magic and she will be in the middle of the large, smoking crater. She's being... unusually quiet for herself. On top of all this, she masquerading as you, the war heroine, in order to bypass travel restrictions."

"That is... unnerving. Any clues at least? She could be out there right now, committing atrocities and people might see it and blame me instead..."

"Anyone well-enough versed in magic knows how to wipe their trail, excluding Gryffindors. That her own personal downward spiral towards mental instability has made her... higher-functioning than ever before is... most disturbing. I've had zero cases of unstable magic reported, which prompts me to conclude that she is truly untraceable and up to something." He wasn't saying something on purpose.

"I know that look, Sev. Spit it out." He glared at me, and I met his gaze resolutely.

"This is not fair; you have Narcissa's memories and skills." It was subtle, but I knew his tells now. "The lack of Dementors is quite unusual. They have been driven completely off our lands, yet they persist across Europe and Asia."

"How is this a clue?"

"There is a void, stretching from Moldova to the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea."
"A lack of Dementors says what? Lots of Patronus Charms, Light magic being done?"

"The Patronus Charm is quite difficult, and that there's a void suggests that whatever Bellatrix has done, has scared the Dementors away."

The atmosphere on Kings Cross was subdued as Cormac and Justin were the visible security there, and Viktor would be riding the Hogwarts Express all the way to Hogsmeade. I was lucky enough to get a private train car with Luna and Cho, though none of us really spoke about how our summers went.

My eyes popped open as I bolted awake, face pressed against the glass and vision blurry as I took in the sight of Viktor Krum with a handkerchief in his hand.

"Hermione, we are entering Hogsmeade and you have.." he pointed at my mouth, and I realized my mouth had been open and drooling. I gracefully accepted the handkerchief and wiped my mouth as Viktor cleaned the window with a silent scourgify. I shot a glance to Luna saying *how could you leave me like that?* only for her to smile back calmly.

"You seemed quite peaceful, Hermione. Besides, you needed the sleep." I frowned at that, but got distracted by a feeling of unease as I saw Hogsmeade as the train slowed down. *The town seems deserted.* The streets were completely empty, and Undesirable posters were half torn down while graffiti on the walls proclaimed it to be Pureblood Free Zone.

*The rebels who defied the Ministry had taken this city entirely over.*

Viktor was also looking out the window. "Don't worry, the problem has been contained and it will just take a bit of a clean-up to get Hogsmeade back to normal." There was a hum of magic that felt familiar yet foreign to me, something that was growing stronger and I couldn't figure it out.

The train finally stopped and we all got our luggage out of the upper racks. It wasn't until I got off the train at Hogsmeade station that I realized what was causing the unnerving niggling at the back of my consciousness: the area was still held by the anarchist wizards and were sealed in a blood circle as a type of siege until they surrendered. The likeness of Kingsley Shacklebolt was burning in effigy while the locked-down area was covered in anti-Ministry graffiti. Harry Potter was on the other side of it, his face patient and searching as if he were seeking the Snitch in Quidditch. *Brutal yet pacifist,* I realized, glad to see Harry keeping the peace.

The rebels inside were occasionally throwing rocks and spells at Harry, but nothing passed through the barrier. Harry turned and waved in our general direction as Viktor called out to the students to keep on the trail and to not interfere with Auror Potter.

The students made their way past the edge of the barrier and I noticed a few extra runes carved into the ground at Harry's feet. *He had to have been helped to do this,* I mused, *because I cannot even hear the people inside.*

Viktor saw what I was looked at and grinned. "The barrier repels everything, and lets nothing out. We don't have to hear or fear them. We estimate it will be only one more week until they run out of food and surrender." My jaw dropped at that. Viktor nudged me to continue on to the edge of the Black Lake. We made our way down the path as the students ahead of us began to spread out and talk about what they had seen.

"First Years! To me!"
The trail ended into patchy grass and there was Hagrid, along with Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Vector. They all had smiling faces for the students, though they were poised for battle should the worst arise. The boats were mandatory for the First Years, though it was now also an option for those who were uncomfortable with the thestral-driven carriages. Judging from the panicked reactions of the students, a lot of them have seen death this past year.

I took a carriage and was grateful to share it with Luna and Cho again. Dennis Creevy was also there, but thankfully, we all seemed to want to ride in silence as we took in the view of the repaired school grounds and castle. It seemed smaller and less majestic than the first time I came on the boats, but there was still the creeping excitement of the new, albeit final, school year ahead for me.

I glanced at Cho, who seemed to have aged a bit too much in the past year whereas Dennis' face took on angles that were never there before. It was Luna's face that shocked me the most; she seemed exactly the same as she used to be. Her eyes seemed distant and dreamy, pleasant as if she had overdosed on a calming draught.

"What is it, Hermione?" She asked as I realized that I must have been staring at her.

"Um, sorry." I muttered, "Everything is so different, and yet-

"What is different?" she asked sincerely, and her words felt like a balm to me. Yes, a lot of death and Darkness ran rampant over the country, but should I dwell on that, or embrace the now? I took in the surroundings again; I'm back at Hogwarts, I have friends here, and this is my final year, culminating with my O.W.L. exams. Embrace the positive.

I smiled at that. "I think this is going to be an amazing year."

Dennis timidly raised his hand to ask a question. Cho shook her head at him kindly, stopping him. "Dennis, we're not in class right now. What do you want to say?"

He gulped, but braved on. "Is it true, we're to have a Veela teach this year?" He seemed fearful, so I replied and did my best to reassure him.

"Yes, it's my friend Fleur, you'll like her. She's fiercely protective like any Gryffindor would be." Our carriage came to a stop, and we all filed out to be met by said smiling Veela, who was hovering in mid-air above the students. I was glad to see her wings were working fine, and that she wasn't trying to hide it either.

"Welcome to Hogwarts! Since you all have been here before and don't need sorting, please follow me to the Great Hall." I could hear gasps of surprise and wonder from the other students, and few of them seemed fearful that my friend could no longer look human. Students called questions out to her all the same.

"What are the changes to the curriculum this year?"

"I'm an Eighth-Year, is it true that I won't have a curfew?"

"Can I have a pair of wings, too?"

Fleur chuckled at the questions, but waved them off. "Headmaster Snape will answer most of your questions, but no, you can't have wings. Sorry."

We made our way up the trail and past the greenhouses, when I saw the backside of the most stunning witch in silvery-blue teaching robes ending mid-calf with matching heels, golden hair trailing down in delicate curls as she looked into a mirror before turning to greet us as we entered the
castle. My heart went from elated to being drenched in ice-water as I noticed streaks of black sifting through them as she turned her face towards us, and I realized who she was.

It was my wife, Narcissa Granger.

Draco had read the Daily Prophet as well as the muggle paper the Financial Times, and he still couldn't figure out how to fill his day running Granger Enterprises as his father had with his company. *Maybe he did spend most of his day drinking and whoring, when he wasn't scheming to destroy others.*

He did, however, find the black book which detailed which politicians were bought, and which had been coerced through blackmail to support his father's schemes. *Some of these may still pan out to be worthwhile,* he mused. Though Viktor Krum being crossed off as a burned resource bothered him. *I knew he and Father had a falling out, but what?*

Herpy cleared her throat politely. "Young Master Granger, there is someone at the door." Draco turned to face the elf.

"Why? Mother is at Hogwarts, tell them to go away."

Herpy frowned at the command. "The Auror is here to see you. Shall I contact the solicitor and hide the entry to the dungeon and research lab?" *There is a research lab?* Draco shook his head, knowing he was promised immunity from the war.

"Wait, do you mean Harry Potter?" The elf nodded. "Herpy, he's my friend. It's okay." Draco went to the door and opened it, and understood why Herpy was worried. Harry looked disheveled but was wearing the Auror robes and had his badge of office out and visible. *Official business. Bugger."

"What the fuck, Harry? Herpy, go do what you said." Draco then realized that it was just the two of them, and Harry didn't have his wand out, but instead a single roll of parchment. Draco swiped it, his hand crumpling the parchment in his fist.

"The Wizengamot's full inquiry into St. Mungo's is apparently enough for them to forget about your immunity. They aren't going after anyone else, and I think it's because of your Dark Mark. You're being charged with ' undisclosed war crimes'; meaning you were on the wrong side of the war and someone has a vendetta. I mean, I know some people deserve to be locked away forever, like Umbridge, but this is shite."

"And you're being their errand boy."

"Better you got it from me than some owl, I reckon."

Draco nodded at that. He did feel better getting it this way. "Thank you."

"That's it? Aren't you more worried about the trial?"

"I have arguably the best solicitor money can buy, and I helped kill You-Know-Who. This is just top put something else at the top of papers for now. I'm not scared of this."

Harry frowned as he forced himself to ask the next question. "Hey, Draco... Is Ginny okay?"

"I don't want to be the informant, but... she's happy. She's in need of happy, drama-free, shining on her own merit time. She's lived under the shadow of her family, then as the girlfriend of The Chosen One. When I've seen her, I don't bring any stress and she's thankful. She knows it won't be this way..."
forever, but for now it's helping her."

"What can I do?"

"Stay away. Don't try to ride to her rescue; she's still a Gryffindor and doesn't want to be rescued. Just give her space for her to want to come back. She'll rescue herself."

"But, I have to... want to do something."

"And that would be the fastest way to scare her off. Sweetie, I know you want to be her knight in shining armor, but she's just like you. Do you want her to rescue you? Wouldn't it feel like a blow to your ego?"

Harry shook his head. "It... yeah, I understand. It's just that-"

"-nope. No trying to excuse it. Just accept the situation and move on from there."

"But you can see her." Harry sounded petulant there and Draco winced at it.

"And every sentence I spoke there was about her, quidditch, and overall - being positive. It's what she needs right now."

"What do I need right now?"

"Honesty. Simplicity. And comfort." Draco leaned in and kissed Harry, glad to feel his boyfriend melt in his arms. As they stood close, the pressure that he was being held with told him exactly how much comfort the Auror needed.

"Draco, I should go. I just want to close the door, ward it shut, and drop you to your knees before me." Their eyes met with a nervous energy as the Slytherin smirked and pulled the Auror inside.

"Okay."

As the students filed into the Great Hall, and the First Year students were still clumped together with Hagrid and Minerva, I turned away and went towards the hallway down to the dungeons. I thought I'd be rid of or at least free of Narcissa while I was at Hogwarts! My anger and energy wrapped around the words I muttered under my breath, "She had better give me a good reason why she is here!"

I saw motion in my peripheral vision, and a pain-stricken look was on my wife's face as she was hot on my heels. I spun round on her, not caring that we were still by the Grand Staircase. "WHY ARE YOU HERE?! Spying on me personally now?" She flinched at the words, as if she was ready to cower at me. Slytherin's Snake, I'm not about to backhand the witch!

"I'm doing a favor for Severus." Sev would just happen to ask her to teach when I'm here for my final year of schooling? I didn't believe her, but stopped myself from pulling the truth out of her mind myself.

"Likely story. Tell me, when you were with Odette, did she have any say in the relationship, or did you entrap her with lust potions, blackmail, and circumstance?!

A hard smack filled with pain crossed my face as my vision swam in tears. As I looked back at Narcissa, I saw she was doubled over in pain, face bruised in the same place she struck me but it seemed to be magnified. The bruise was already forming as she touched her own face gently and
winced. "Worth it."

"GRANGERS!" The deep voice cracked through the air, and the two of us instinctively backed away from each other. I turned to be surprised by the billowing black robes of Headmaster Snape.

"Ladies, I could hear you two bickering from the lectern at the Head Table! Narcissa, you're a Professor now, you should not be striking a student, even if she may deserve it."

I straightened at that, "Sev-"

"And you, Miss Granger, will refer to be as Headmaster. Anyways, you should be happy because you can actually take her classes now!" I looked at him in confusion as my wife went from shock, to surprise, to horror.

"Hermione, how could you?! How could I what? ...you divorced me?" Her eyes threatened to tear up as it hit me. We were legally separated, but I just used the Compulsion to force her to come to my side.

"Don't blame me for this!" Our eyes met, and her look of being betrayed was like a dagger to my heart. I didn't do this though!

Severus cleared his throat, and we both turned to him. "The Wizengamot has, in their... less than finite wisdom... decided to use their Emergency Powers to pass an act designed to 'breed out' the remaining Purebloods. This so-called 'Protection of Wizarding Families Act' defines marriage as only having one Pureblood between the witch and wizard. All other marriages are to be considered null and void."

They just happened to pass some sort of shite marriage law to annul ours. Bastards!

"They cannot just divorce us against our will!" I spat, surprised to see anger in my wife's eyes.

"Wasn't this exactly what you wanted before?" Cissy spat as I sneered at her accusation.

"Damn it, Cissy, I wanted a say in the matter, that was my main issue. This, however, will also break up the Weasleys."

She paled at that. "...and the Parkinsons." Of course, the first thing she would think about is her precious Odette...

"Oh, going back to your ex girlfriend, then?"

Narcissa clasped her forehead with her hands in sheer frustration. "Goodness, woman, you're the only witch I want!" Severus cut us off, probably to stop the bickering.

"...likewise most families that were on The Dark Lord's side in the war will be legally separated. That they phrased this act just so in order to separate you two was no accident."

I scoffed at the idea. "Well that's just unnecessary, though."

Cissy's face cell as she figured it out. "Slytherin's Snake, there's more." Severus nodded sadly.

"According to my sources, the objective is to breed out the Pureblood lines. Marriage will be made compulsory for witches and wizards of child-bearing years. They will be requiring pregnancies to bolster the birthrate of half-bloods, quarter-bloods, and so on. They hope the forced mixing of muggle-born and Pureblood lineages to foster a future peace."
I couldn't control my breathing as it hit me. "I'm going to be the broodmare to some Pureblood."

Narcissa bit out a sharp bark of laughter. "The irony isn't lost here, my lo-"

Severus cut in again. "Actually, Hermione, you're allowed to marry any wizard you wish. Purebloods such as Narcissa are simply forbidden from marrying other Pureblood individuals. Meaning Odette is doubly banned."

"Do you think it could get repealed?"

Severus took a step back. "I came to break up a row, not act as your legal solicitor. And as you two know Teachers and Pupils are not permitted to quarrel. Cissy, do not strike her, nor attempt to have her reputation ruined in any way. Hermione, under no circumstances are you to lead Narcissa into a trap that will leave her traumatized like you did with Umbridge in the Forbidden Forest. Nor imprison her in a jar for any length of time. Nor get her to curse herself and be scarred forever." He let out a breath of frustration. "You two are uniquely suited to each other, you know that?

"Hell may have no fury like a woman scorned, but I have a Fury on staff in case you two can't work things out. I happen to know the Compulsion is still in effect with you two, so don't let it twist the love it wants to foster between you two into greedy possession. I can't bear to see either of you suffer like Cissy did with Lucius. At the least, I want a truce between you two."

"And at best?" I asked, unsure of what he'd say.

"You two are still Bonded, as far as the castle and the wards matter. What two consenting adults do is of no consequence here. Besides, I'll be grading your work for impartiality. Now if you two will excuse me, I have to go make a speech as the headmaster. I believe you two have much to discuss, so don't bother coming in behind me."

I stood there in the hallway that went down to the Potions class and to the Slytherin Dungeons, trying to ignore Narcissa's eyes on me. This was the hallway we threw the garroting gas in to protect ourselves from the post-battle looting. She seemed to recall it as well, and both of our minds flashed back us having sex on the potions table. My body betrayed me as heat pooled in my quim, my insides tightening in needy desire. I distracted my building libido with the rage that seemed ever-ready and wanting to be released out into the world.

"You kept me in the dark, Cissy." My wife frowned at that, and though I was overcome with the urge to cup her cheek in my hands to kiss and forgive her, I forced myself to fight it. I knew exactly how her lips would taste, and how good it could feel, all I had to do was let myself free to... NO! That's the Compulsion! I raged at myself, stamping down any feelings of desire or arousal that I had.

"I can explain."

"-Don't! I'm tired, and obviously you didn't want me to know."

"Mione."

"I'm going to my room!" Bloody hell, where is my room? "Were not... roommates, are we?"

"Goodness no. Eighth year students are going to room separately from their houses."

"Separately? How come?" Narcissa's smirk told me she knew, and it was a bit more playful than the one Draco had.

"I'll tell you as I walk you to your room." She held a slight smile as she held out her arm, taking the
Wizard's role in Pureblood etiquette. *She is being completely polite, while I'm being painted as the arse here.* I knew better, and could behave in kind.

I sighed, automatically putting my hand into her arm. I bit the inside of my cheeks to hide the waves of pleasurable relief that the smallest touch gave me. "As it pleases you." It was a polite jibe, I knew, and she seemed to take the insult in stride. "So what should I know about the changes this year?"

"First off, Eighth Year students are technically adults and therefore they will be housed separately, because you do not have a curfew. You still have access to your house's common room, can earn and lose points for your house, but the restricted areas are still restricted for reasons that are obvious to everyone but you and Harry. As you saw, Hogsmeade is still closed due to the rebellion, but travel restrictions will be lifted once that is settled."

"I saw Harry's handiwork. How is that going?"

"He's eating ice cream in front of them, says he's channeling his inner Dudley. It might actually work, since he's promising anyone who surrenders will be granted clemency, provided they didn't kill anyone and undergo a full screening for the Imperious Curse. He's taken Severus' advice to heart to not trust anyone, particularly since a few of Proudfoot's sleeper agents were confused and tried attacking Ministry targets, thinking that they were Death Eaters."

I shuddered at that. *The Imperious Curse was one hell of a gamble that Scrimgeour took.* "Any casualties?"

Narcissa shook her head. "He's been lucky there. Now to keep future Dark Lords from rising, Severus has masterminded more inter-house unity. Common rooms of all four Houses will be open to all on the weekends, and each month, a different House will have a social event there for the entire school."

"A party? Severus intends to make people go to different houses for some sort of... mixer?"

"Those who attend are exempt from curfew that evening, and he hopes to have the four Houses compete in throwing the best social. He's also scheduled a Quidditch scrimmage against Beauxbatons and Durmstrang later this year, which means all four of our Houses will come together to make an all-star team. Imagine, for one game of Quidditch, we can have a Slytherin beater protecting a Hufflepuff seeker as Gryffindor and Ravenclaw chasers work together to score against a different school."

*That's kind of brilliant.* We turned down the hall on the second floor and there was a door I had not recognized before. I opened the door to find a bedroom all to myself, and my jaw dropped. It was furnished just like the dorm rooms in Gryffindor Tower, but I had a queen sized bed, bookshelves, my own writing desk, and a perch for an owl. Crookshanks was already sprawled out on the bed, dozing comfortably.

"This is all mine? How is there enough space?" I felt dumb as soon as the question left my mouth.

"It's still a magic castle, Hermione. But you are sharing the bathroom with your neighbor. Miss Chang, I believe." *Cho?*

"Hmm. I would have thought she would have been paired up with Luna."

"Not at all, this is all about mixing the houses when possible. She's paired up with Hannah Abbot." Narcissa's lips pressed into a shy smile. "So you didn't ask for a divorce or annulment?"

My stomach dropped as I pulled my hand out of her arm. A coldness washed over me, like having
your favorite warm comforter pulled off of you on a cold morning. "Well, to be honest, I didn't think I could."

Her smile fell. She must have felt a similar coldness wash over her. "Well I guess you got your wish, then." She said dejectedly.

I grunted in annoyance. "Dammit Cissy, this is not what I wanted." She looked at me incredulously.

"Do you really think life is all about getting what you want? Sometimes it's about making do with what you have and doing what you can for a better tomorrow!" That's all I had been about with S.P.E.W. and helping Harry fight The Dark Lord... She thinks I'm being self-absorbed.

"I... that's not what I meant." I was frustrated at not explaining myself right.

"Then what did you mean? What do you want?" I could hear the exasperation in her voice. I didn't like how she was looking at me when she said that, as it made me realize she would go to any lengths to make me happy and I wasn't used to that level of devotion. I always took care of myself and my boys; there wasn't anyone there whose purpose was to just make me happy. It felt odd, because she was doing all this out of love while I wanted us to be separated.

"I want... I want to finish my childhood. I want to finish my schooling. I want to not have the weight of the world on my shoulders anymore."

"I'm sorry, but I can't undo the past. And you're friends with Harry; I don't think you'd know what to do with yourself if you didn't have an enemy to fight. Besides, as Severus said, the Fates are in play."

"But what does that mean?"

"It means that things might get more interesting. Or at least we'll figure out what the hell's been going on with my arithmantic equations."

My eyes met hers, and I told her what has been plaguing me. "I still don't trust you Narcissa."

"After all that we've been through together? I rescued you in Australia!"

"You did, but Rita made a really good argument suggesting that you set me up all this time." Her loud, sharp bark of laughter woke Crooks up and he padded over to wrap himself around her ankles. Thanks for the loyalty, cat.

"That makes no sense. I did not get you into my house. I did not know you would be set aside from Harry and Ron. I sure as hell did not plan to have my insane sister torture and carve you up. I had no idea that Dobby would show up and rescue you. I'm surprised that they got away but you got left behind. I think the Fates were after the Elder Wand to be used more."

"Well it was. And here we are." I gestured to us, realizing the awkwardness of our relationship. Are we a thing or aren't we? The Ministry refuses to recognize us, but Hogwarts and the Compulsion say otherwise.

"We are, indeed. Now what are you going to do from here?" Her eyes were beseeching, and I couldn't keep contact with them. I knew, however, that whatever course I took she was willing to be by my side if I let her.

"I honestly do not know."

"I love you." It hurt to hear her say that, because as she said it, I knew it to be true for her. She
accepted me as a partner and the Compulsion between us only made things easier, with more clarity, and she embraced the love and the benefits from it all. But I couldn't. I would analyze this and pick it apart and dissect every nuance to try and understand it. Why it happened, why it works, why me, why it fell out of fashion, how it can be stopped.

"I know you do. And there's a part of my heart belongs to you too. I just don't know if it's real." As I said that, her face closed down into icy neutrality and my heart ached for her.

"I guess it's a moot point if the Ministry wants us married off to make lots of babies." That damned Protection of Wizarding Families Act.

"You know, Cissy, we've fought The Dark Lord, Inferi, Goblins, and those creepy-unnatural Inferi together. Fighting this new law can't be much harder, can it?"

A corner of her lip curled, then went flat again. "But I thought you didn't trust me." Though she tried to look uninterested, the glint in her eye told me she would march into hell with me.

"I have to start somewhere, and we are still magically bound to each other." Our eyes met, and she licked her lips nervously. It was enough to draw my eyes there, and I could have sworn she had been leaning towards me as a flapping sound startled the two of us. I looked over to see Crookshanks had pawed open the window, and an owl dropped a scroll off to Narcissa before turning back and leaving. I wasn't certain, but I could have sworn I had seen that owl before.

"I ought to um... go take care of this." She said, her voice trying to hide the wavering of emotions. She turned and walked away as I closed the door and tried to come to terms with what just happened. My heart was thudding away in my chest as I was almost certain she was going to kiss me, and my body ached in need for it.

Take a cold shower, Granger. This is going to be a long year.

Chapter End Notes

The Fates are in play.
Narcissa went up the stairs towards her room to read the scroll in private, but her mind was still on Hermione. She loved the warmth and softness she felt around her, but knew she was only teasing herself to think this marriage could be reconciled. The damned Wizengamot decided to meddle out of a need to preserve 'Wizarding Families'. What is Tiberius up to with this? She knew the threat that she and Hermione symbolized to traditional Pureblood values; that you could be a good person and not heterosexual. That innate goodness wasn't measured by having a large family but by one's actions. *I don't care what Rita says, I'm still a good person, dammit.*

"Professor Granger!"

Madame Pomfrey's voice broke the silence and the Slytherin turned guiltily towards her. "Narcissa, you keep ducking out even after I said I wanted to see you. I want to see what that Muggle cast did to you."

The Slytherin rolled her eyes at that. "I'm fine, really."

"I won't take no for an answer." Cissy knew the mediwitch was right, and followed her into the Hospital Wing.

Once they were both in the Hospital Wing, Narcissa sat in a chair and looked around at the potion stores. "You're fully stocked up now, correct? I'm glad George and Ron were able to help with the basic potions; I'm not so certain Hermione and I will be brewing together anytime soon."

She looked to the witch, gaze heavy with concern as she took in the layers of diagnostic spells that were being cast upon her. *This is a bit excessive for just a broken arm...*

"Misses Granger, when was the last time you... how do I put this... had your monthly visitor?" *My what?* Narcissa couldn't even think of when her last period came...

"What? I um... just had it..."

"Are you sure?" She couldn't remember, but this happened before just after Draco was born.

"No, I didn't. Stress of the war must have made me skip."

"You didn't skip a period." The Medi-witch's wand arced around and flicked out another spell that detected a second heartbeat from Narcissa's abdomen.

"Well I must have, because I can't be... Merlin's whore..." *I'm pregnant. I'm going to have another child, after I was told it would be impossible.*

"Just confirmed it. You're going to be a mother again."

"How... how far along?"

"Why, four months, I believe. It should start to show any day now. Forgive me for saying this, but I'm grateful that Lucius is gone and won't try to raise him into another Death Eater."

Narcissa's knees went out from under her. She had not had sex with Lucius since March, leaving the paternity of said child crystal clear in her mind. *Nobody can know this.*

"Poppy, I wish to keep this a secret for now."
"Surely the Headmaster should know -"

"...Not even him. I'll be employing glamour charms to conceal it; it will not affect how I'm seen or treated, is that clear? Not even Severus." the Mediwitch grimaced at the last part.

"You will need to come in for checkups and potions if I deem it." Narcissa nodded her concession.

"Thank you, Poppy. I just... don't want or need this getting out to the papers, or worse, Rita." Cissy got up, and was already being handed pre-natal vials. The Pureblood nodded her thanks and slipped them in her pocket.

There was a wooshing sound as the fireplace roared to life, and Severus' head popped in through the flames. "There you are, Cissy. Order meeting, please walk through to my office."

Severus looked around his office to the reformed Order. It was a precarious mix of people, but they all had pledged to help make the Wizarding World better. *If only they could all agree on what that meant.*

Kingsley and Minerva stood in the middle of the room, as Narcissa came in through the floo and found herself next to Harry and Fleur. Molly, Charlie, and George were at the other end of the room, shooting them glares of disgust. Viktor and Filius Flitwick were off to the side, confused as to the drama that was prevalent here.

"Alright, Sev, why did you call this meeting?" Kingsley asked.

Harry cleared his throat and spoke up. "Actually, I called the meeting."

Narcissa folded her arms protectively as she looked around the room. "Why isn't Draco here?"

"That's part of the reason for this meeting. Where is Arthur?" Harry's eyes met Molly's, and Severus was glad to not be on the receiving end of that icy glare.

"He's indisposed." Molly said coldly, and Severus knew exactly what she meant. Arthur was legally single again and was drinking himself into a stupor to forget his life. *It would only be a matter of time until he sought comfort in another witch's bed.*

Severus decided to break the tension. "First order of business is that I will require one guard by the Shrieking Shack for Lavender Brown on the full moons. Filius will work out the schedule. Now, Tiberius Ogden is abusing the emergency powers act and is effectively running the Ministry without oversight." Fleur's face reddened in anger.

"That makes no sense, though! The EPA was supposed to put the power into the Minister's hands." Severus avoided meeting Fleur's gaze but nodded his agreement.

"It was, but Kingsley had refused to follow the Wizengamot's advice and therefore Ogden used the crisis to put himself in charge, to make the decisions that Kingsley refused to. POWFA had nothing to do with the Goblin rebellion; this is blatant punishment to Pureblood families."

Molly looked like she could bite her tongue no longer, and snapped at Severus. "Well I'm glad regardless, since it will make the Carrows and Goyles have to accept Muggle-borns into their bloodlines. Too bad we didn't let Perfect little Hermione homewreck her way through the rest of the Pureblood families."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed in fury. "Leave my wife out of this."
"Well, she's not your wife anymore, now is she?"

Minerva interjected as Molly said something about keeping Draco away from Ginny. "Severus, why isn't she here?"

"Harry and I agreed on no students." Harry nodded in agreement.

Cissy shrugged. "Doesn't really matter, she will have my memories through the Bond, now that I strengthened it. She knows everything that I know. How you treated me and Odette, and it got both of us married to monsters."

Severus looked at her and did the slow blink to send a mental message to her, only to have his attempt parried. She's employing Occlumency now.

Molly looked smug and not at all upset that outing the Gryffindor girl got her married off to an abusive homophobic Pureblood. "So Hermione knows Rita was right all along; you groomed her to be your pet assassin."

Severus was done with the bickering. First Hermione, now Molly? "ENOUGH!" Severus' eyes fixed on Molly as her eyes bulged in panic. As he looked back at his friend Narcissa, he saw her arms folded defiantly.

"Now, where were we?" Molly looked fit to burst yet her mouth was wrenched shut. He looked back at Narcissa and her face looked far too innocent to be real. She has the gall to cast Langlock in front of everyone?

Harry continued for him. "The Wizengamot is charging Draco for his involvement in the war; trying to blame him for the destruction of our only Hospital. They won't come after me, though."

Kingsley agreed. "This is madness; they enacted the emergency powers and refuse to take responsibility for the fallout."

Severus looked to the Minister. "Who made the order to torch the place, to ensure all of the quickened Inferi were neutralized?"

Harry cleared his throat. "I did; the simultaneous attack on the Ministry was a feint and the D.A. was able to easily dispatch them. Cormac told me that the Inferi they faced were the traditional kind; slow-moving and the recently slain didn't automatically turn. But the... quickened Inferi, is that what you call them? Fire was the only way of ensuring they died."

Albus' portrait spoke up. "That's because the Goblins were using the Resurrection Stone as a weapon."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Yes, we already knew that. But if the Fates are in play, are they after the Deathly Hallows? Headmasters, do any of you have any information on this?"

The portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black waved for attention. "If you believe this, Headmaster Snape, you may wish to increase the security for the Department of Mysteries."

Harry perked up at the familiar voice. "What? Why? What do you know?"

"Nothing for certain, and even if I were, I couldn't say."
I'd say I woke up, but for that to be accurate, you'd have to fall asleep first. Crookshanks had curled up and purred on my chest, a favorite spot that would put us both to sleep easily. *But the bed felt empty and cold, didn't it, Granger?* I rolled onto my side and cried most of the night, wishing that the kiss had happened after all.

The alarm charm went off, making my wand vibrate and clatter enough for me to reach over and clasp it, disabling the charm. I was groggy and knew I'd need coffee.

"Herpy? Any chance I can get coffee?"

The door to the bathroom opened, and Cho Chang stood there with a toothbrush in her hand. "Did you say something, Hermione?"

I was about to reply as the House-Elf popped in and had my coffee ready for me, and put it on the nightstand. "Here you go, Master Granger. Your school robes are pressed and ready and hanging on your dresser."

"Thank you, Herpy."

Cho's eyes bugged out in surprise. "You have a house elf, Hermione?"

I shrugged, enjoying the coffee as I got out of bed. "It came with the marriage. Oh, did you want some coffee too?" Cho shrunk back and seemed to feel awkward.

"Um, not this morning. See you at breakfast?" She closed the door to the bathroom and I heard the tap run a bit more. *Herpy, are students allowed to have their House Elves here?* The elf shook her head.

"No, Master Granger. The House Elves in service to Hogwarts refuses to allow other elves to serve the children here. You, however, are of-age.

I got up and went to the bathroom, towel in hand and looking to use the shower. Cho was dressed and doing her makeup in the mirror, but left the bathroom as soon as she saw me.

"Cho, I'm just going to take a quick shower." She was already back in her bedroom when I heard her call back.

"Yeah, um, that's fine. I'll do my makeup in here." *What's the matter with her?*

"Okay, then. I guess I'll see you at breakfast." I recalled how silly it seemed as my roommates all wanted to walk down to the Great Hall together in the morning and chat about the latest gossip, when I just wanted to read as I went down the lengthy staircase.

I showered and got ready for the day, opting for a basic cosmetic charm instead of using muggle cosmetics which would take more time. Putting on the school robes again felt almost odd, seeing the skirt hit knee-length with the dark leggings I always opted to wear. *Parvati and Lavender always shortened their skirts and went with the nude leggings, now I think I see why.*

I looked back in the mirror and took myself in. My hair was long enough that the curls were manageable without excess potions or gel, and my body had filled out and developed over the past year. I turned to the side and actually noticed my bum. *Okay, I don't mean to sound narcissistic, but I can see why Cissy found me attractive.* A few flicks of my wand later, and the leggings were see-through and the skirt was a bit shorter. It wasn't scandalously short, nor was I doing this intentionally for others to ogle me; I just want to look good *for me*. As I took in my reflection again, I realized I wanted just a little bit of color around my eyes and charmed that on as well.
When I was done, I had to imagine what my first-year counterpart would have said if she saw me now. *Slightly tarted up, but tasteful compared to the slags who don't pay attention in class.* I cast a quick temus charm and saw that I was running late for breakfast. I summoned my books and grabbed them as I hurried down the stairs to the Great Hall.

Narcissa was at the Head Table, seated to the left of Severus and was thankful to have Professor Vector on her other side. As Headmaster, he got to assign the seats and though tradition meant he had to have Minerva by his side, he chose well enough so as to keep the din to a minimum.

"Cissy, you never did say why you were in the Hospital Wing." She turned away from Severus' question, her fingers scratching at her neck nervously as she thought about her son's upcoming court date.

"Oh, basic checkup since I had to resort to muggle medicine for my arm." She looked out towards the tables. They were no longer sorted by House anymore, but the students still seem to gravitate to certain tables due to the Sorting from last night. *I guess some things won't ever really change.*

Minerva spoke as neutrally as she could. "Hermione, I mean, Miss Granger hasn't made it down yet. She was always so punctual."

Fleur's eyes scoured the crowd. "Should I go check on her?"

Severus stopped that with a simple raised hand. "That will not be necessary. She's a grown adult and we should respect her privacy." The professors all seemed to accept that tentatively, because they all knew the girl she once was and how she would have refused their pity. *The problem is though that they all knew exactly how much she had gone through as well.*

"Cissy," Severus whispered, and Narcissa noticed that he had cast the muffliato charm, "is she okay?"

"How would I know, Sev? I haven't seen her since last night."

"There are other ways for you to know this. Or have you gone and blocked her out of your mind entirely?"

"Damn you, Snape." The Slytherin witch took her goblet to her face to hide her moving lips.

"What on earth are you trying to conceal from her?"

Professor Vector spoke loud enough to break past the Muffliato charm. "Oh there she is! Oh goodness, I do believe she has modified her school uniform slightly."

Severus cancelled his charm and looked at the girl entering the hall blandly. "Nothing worse than Parkinson or the Patil twins have done before."

Narcissa, however, nearly choked on her morning juice. She had never truly gazed at her wife's (*ex-wife now*) legs in such a skirt, where each step made the material swish just enough to catch her eyes to focus on the pale, toned muscles of her thighs. She turned as she looked around and couldn't find anyone she knew at the Gryffindor Table and quickly darted to a different one as someone waved to her. *And that arse is perfect for grabbing hold to...*  

"Miss Black?"

"Oh, yes?" She realized that someone had been trying to get her attention for awhile.
"She's still a child!" Professor Vector admonished, but got glares from both Narcissa and Severus. It was Minerva, however, who came to the rescue.

"She has always been one of the most mature students we have, and she is turning 19 this month. Add that to her use with the time-turner, and I'd wager she's past 20, and mentally in her mid-twenties."

Fleur made a harsh sound that reminded Cissy of a chirp. "The war aged a lot of them too much; Dennis grew up after he lost his brother Colin."

"I should mention that even though the Ministry is no longer recognizing our marriage, the Compulsion is still there and as strong as it ever has been." Narcissa stated, "but I can be trusted to behave with the utmost discretion."

As the professors all turned to look at the Headmaster for confirmation, Narcissa held her wand under the table and cast an eavesdropping charm that she and Severus designed to test out the muffliato charm.

"Honestly, I might like men and women like Hermione does, does that change our friendship, Cho?" Luna sounded assertive yet polite as she said it.

The next voice she heard she had to assume was Cho Chang. "I guess I have to adjust to having you as a suitemate. I've never met a... bisexual before. I'm sorry, Hermione."

Her wife spoke up, and Narcissa felt slightly bad for having done this charm now. "Well you definitely aren't my type, Cho, so don't worry about it. Besides, I was in a bad situation, and so was she. So we did our best to get out of it."

"Well it sounds like the Ministry is breaking you two up since you're both women. What are you going to do?"

"Fight this law, because the Ministry is meddling in affairs that they have no business in."

Cho looked confused as she replied. "But you're only married to her because you meddled in her marriage with Lucius." She looked at Luna and paled. "Not that Lucius was a better option, sorry."

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Luna asked, "What's going on?"

Cho apologized. "I'm sorry, it's just that with all that you went through-"

There was a rustling of paper and Hermione exclaimed in shock. "What the hell! 'Chosen One Chooses Bachelorhood'? I would expect this kind of tabloid stuff in Witch Weekly, but not the Prophet!"

"What was that, Hermione?" Cho asked.

"Hold on, I'm still reading it... 'Harry Potter, having seen the defeat of You-Know-Who and landing his dream job as an Auror, seems to be reveling in his new-found freedom. Sources state that he and Harpies rookie Ginny Weasley have split up...' Why on earth would he do that? I need to send her an owl..."

Narcissa terminated the eavesdropping charm, feeling slightly ashamed for listening in but glad to see Hermione interacting with friends and not becoming a complete recluse as she herself had done after she was married.
Narcissa remembered all of the rules of Pureblood etiquette as a way to focus herself and stand tall as her NEWT class came in. It was cramped since this was turned into a mandatory class, but merging the sixth and seventh year students made sense considering the coursework would be the same.

The students came in and found their desks to sit in, again seeming to clump together by their houses. Slytherin, of course, was huddled in one corner while the other houses were less hostile to each other.

"Come in and sit down, you are not expected to segregate yourselves according to your House." In fact, I'd much rather see you all mingle and learn from each other's strengths.

"Welcome, everyone, to Defense Against the Dark Arts. I'm Narcissa Gr... Black, and this year we'll be focusing on your NEWT exam as well as combative dueling: when you should, how you should, and recuperating from using magic upon another person. A lot of you had to fight in the war, while others are suffering from psychological trauma from the war. This class is intended to inform you and to help you reconcile any strife you went through during the chaos.

"Unlike Lockhart's pathetic attempt at a dueling club, we will be having outright duels and battles in this class. The walls of this classroom have been warded with safety in mind, and we will make every attempt to keep this as safe and as real as possible.

"So wands away for now, and allow me to explain to you the importance of dueling. When a magical duel ensues, the wands can recognize this and there can be consequences resulting from whomever wins that duel. 'Wands choose the Wizard' and all that."

A student raised his hand, and Narcissa was ready to ignore him except that Hermione barged through the door, looking sheepish. "Sorry, Professor Black, I was sending an owl."

Cissy frowned at that. "Next time I take House points. Please have a seat." Hermione took the only seat available, which was by the Slytherins. The boy still had his hand up politely.

"Yes, your name?" She asked politely.

"Terry Boot. I wanted to ask if that's how you wound up as Mrs. Granger."

The room had been quiet, but that had made it silent. Clearing her throat, Narcissa nodded.

"Yes, magical contracts can be amended, cancelled, or transferred by various methods. It's why you should never make an Unbreakable Vow, and why professional duelists have the ritual salute and bow. It signals that the duel is only for practice and not to be seen as a fight to the death, so that the wand need not change its loyalty if it is defeated."

She looked to the class, and could tell that they wanted to know more about it.

"The nature of my marriage is of public record, one that has since been invalidated by the Ministry. During the war, Herm... Miss Granger found herself dueling my former husband Lucius Malfoy and slew him while on his own property. Because of this, she inherited the estate and his wealth because she was his prisoner and he was dueling to kill.

"But beyond that, my Bonding to Lucius was done in the Old Tradition. It treated me like little more than his obedient property and broodmare, meaning that I was one of Lucius' possessions that also transferred to Miss Granger."

"That's why my mum refused to do that kind of Bonding." Cho replied, loud enough that her voice carried in the room.
"Miss Chang, please do not speak out of turn again, raise your hand if you need to add to the conversation. Now, are there any more questions about my personal life, or may I move on to conflict resolution?" There was no sound. "Good. Now, conflict resolution, better known as 'should I whip out my wand?'

"I'm certain there have been times when you think it might be easier to just pull a wand out and hex someone rather than have to deal with them." She looked around and almost nobody wanted to disagree with her. "But you didn't, why? Because you'd lose house points? Get caught or hexed back?

"No, you should all know not to hex someone just because you can because it's inherently the wrong thing to do."

"Except for Slytherins..." Terry scoffed, and students around him laughed in agreement.

"Detention, Mister Boot. I think re-indexing the detention cards from Hogwarts around the first Wizarding War might give you a better perspective on things. See, back in my day, it was the Gryffindors who were known as the bullies, and the Slytherins went around offering protection from the so-called 'Marauders'."

Hermione's jaw dropped at that as she put her hand up. Cissy nodded to her to go ahead and speak.

"You mean Harry's father, Professor Lupin, and Sirius Black?" Narcissa nodded sadly.

"It was, along with the traitor Peter Pettigrew, though he was mostly a bystander. Headmaster Snape was one of their biggest targets because he just seemed to 'look evil', whereas I was bullied and harassed by the Weasleys because I fancied witches. As you can assume, once Severus was being constantly attacked by two or three Gryffindors at once, he retaliated with stronger hexes and curses, exacerbating the situation and dividing us in ways we couldn't even fathom at the time. Life is more than just Good Guys vs. Death Eaters, so when someone decides to call you a name, or laugh at your misfortune, stop and think if it's a good idea to whip out your wand.

"Don't think how they started it, or how they deserve it, but rather on how this will end. How it would truly end, and if you're comfortable with that kind of ending. More than likely, you're not, and you won't pull your wand just because you want to. Two wrongs do not make a right."

Lavender had her hand raised. "Professor Black, what about if they hex you? Are you saying we shouldn't defend ourselves?"

"Not at all, I'd never say you cannot defend yourself. What I am saying is everyone is responsible for not making a dispute worse. If I asked you right now, you wouldn't retaliate a tripping jinx by slicing them open, would you? But while you've been hexed and angry, you might think about it. Now, about this class..."

Narcissa went on and explained the schedule: every week would have two days of magical theory, one day of practical defensive spellcraft, one day of recognizing dangerous creatures, and fridays would be dueling practice. Safety equipment would be used and duels would begin with the clear recognition that this is for learning purposes only. Each week, there would be a different objective, and teams would consist of people from various houses.

The students seemed nervous yet excited about the class as they all stood up and began to leave, save for Luna Lovegood. She had gotten to her feet only to put on a pair of spectacles, and her eyes were transfixed on the wall and wide in fear. Oh bugger, she recognizes the wards... Narcissa wasn't certain if approaching the girl would be a good thing, considering it could trigger her to react
violently.

As the students began to leave, Hermione was almost out the door until she heard her friend's panicked whimpering. The remaining students shuffled out even faster, uncertain as to what was going on. Moments later, Hermione was by her side and trying to get her to leave. "Luna? Class is over, time to go."

Her voice was hollow, as if she were down a long and empty corridor. "I can't ever go."

Cho was there as well, hand upon her friend's shoulder. "It's time for our next class."

Luna's eyes fell to her arm, and she had her wand-tip pressed into her wrist. Crimson exploded from the contact, and blood poured down the girl's hand and onto the ground. The blonde Ravenclaw traced the wand-tip up her arm, vacant eyes looking as she sliced her arm open to bleed out.

Narcissa's wand was out in a flash, charming the girl unconscious as she slumped into Cho's arms. The Ravenclaw couldn't hold the weight but settled her friend flat upon the floor. Hermione panicked as she groped the inside of her robes for a vial of blood-replenishing potion.

"Cissy! What happened?! We need potions now!" Hermione called out as Cho screamed out loud.

"Hermione, bind her down tight, I'll sing the skin back together. She won't stay out too long; when she wakes back up, it could get a lot worse. Miss Chang, secure her wand." The two girls did as they were told and Narcissa kneeled over the Ravenclaw and started the chanting.

"Vulnera Sanentur. Carnem Corrigendum. Sanguis Restitutus. Vulnera Sanentur. Carnem Corrigendum. Sanguis Restitutus..." Narcissa repeated the spell like a mantra as her wand began to help the wound seal, sucking back in the lost blood. Cho looked at her Professor in awe and fear.

"Hermione, what's she doing?"

Hermione's wand was lowered as she raced to translate the spell. "Wounds Healed. Flesh Mended. Blood... refilled?"

Narcissa made a quick smile as she corrected her wife. "Restored." Ten points to Gryffindor, as well as Ravenclaw for the quick thinking.

Luna's eyes opened groggily to see her friends Cho and Hermione leaning over her. "Did I faint?" She looked over and saw the concerned look on Narcissa and shrieked in terror, body fighting the restraints put against her. Her eyes were wide in panic, like a spooked horse that's ready to bolt off in fear. Her wrists and legs bucked futilely against the restraints which only served to increase her panic some more.

"MALFOY! MERLIN, NO! NO MORE! LET ME DIE, LET ME DIIIEEEE!" Luna struggled helplessly as she was pinned to the ground by magical ropes. The sharp tang of ammonia hit the air and Narcissa understood what had happened. Poor girl lost control of her bladder in fear. She spelled the girl unconscious again and did some quick thinking.

"No time to explain, she will be back up in a few minutes. Hermione, undo your binding spell, and let's sit her back in her desk. I'll do the memory charm. Cho, can you get her spectacles? If I'm right, she saw through the cloaking spells and panicked at the wards in here."

Hermione understood but Cho was still confused. "What kind of wards would scare her?"

Narcissa was concealing the short-term memory of the past 5 minutes as Hermione solved the
question. "Life-preserving curses. Did Luna ever talk about what happened to her during the war?"

Cho shook her head. "No, all I heard was that she was taken off of the Hogwarts Express, but she seemed just like she always did."

Hermione winced at that. "She was held captive by Lucius; she must have blocked the memories of his dungeon. He had anti-suicide wards there, didn't he?" She glared at Cissy, who was backing away and sending a Patronus.

"He did. Now, Hermione, pocket her spectacles for now and let her think she fell asleep in class. Apparently she's not ready to remember whatever my former husband did to her." **It was bad enough that Luna would have rather died. She might never want to revisit that.**

Fleur's classes had gone well so far, having explained the necessity of the Humanities course, and covering the different traditions between Pureblood and muggle-born cultures. Sometimes the traditions overlapped, though the idea of a dowry has fallen out of vogue in muggle marriages while they are still hotly negotiated over within Pureblood Bondings.

It was her afternoon class with the OWL class that brought the more interesting questions. She called on the Slytherin boy who raised his hand politely, and looked like he hadn't slept well in a month.

"Yes, Mister Harper?" He flashed a nervous smile as all the eyes on the room were on him.

"Um, well.. what about arranged marriages?"

"You may not have known this, but I'm a Pureblood. Just not a pure Veela. I was supposed to be in an arranged marriage, and had I dated him too, but our arranged marriage was cancelled when it came out that he was involved with another wizard."

"Were you upset?" She smiled to Harper as she realized that the Slytherins were grouped together but sitting alone in the room. **They really have been the outcast group all this time.**

"That he was gay? Not really, I wanted to see him happy, and that meant he wanted a Wizard in his life. I was his beard, a pretend-girlfriend, while we were in school together. Really, I just didn't want to be told who to marry because of a familial contract. He still turned out to be a good friend after all."

"So you disagree with what the Ministry is doing now."

"Sometimes you have to drag society to accept equal treatment of others over the collective tantrum it has. I think the Purebloods and the Muggle-borns need to learn to coexist and understand each other. But the Ministry's law breaking up Pureblooded marriages goes way too far by meddling in someone's personal life choices."

"This year, I hope to expose you to a perspective different to your own, for only by challenging your own views, can you truly accept and defend them. We'll be reading literature and learning skills necessary for life, so you won't have to resort to magic nor feel awkward in muggle society. Any questions? If not, let's start with the book Of Mice and Men. I want the first fifty pages read by this time next week, so we can discuss the characters and the themes within it."

I needed time alone, away from the glares, stares, and whispering about me. 'That's her, the Girl who
Killed.' They thought they were being sneaky about it, pointing when my back was supposedly turned, or I was looking away from them. *I still have my peripheral vision, and you lot become silent as soon as I turn towards you.*

That's why I was in the Restricted Section. As an Eighth Year student, I was no longer a minor and didn't need permission to be here. Also because this was the first week of school since a horrible magical war, nobody else wanted to be near any Dark Tomes. I was reviewing the text on advanced magical theory and spatial spells; I was able to affix wards on a single location to build a null field in one spot, so why couldn't I do the same wards onto a movable object? *And in time, affix location specific wards onto a person.* The spells were complex for setting up a ward on a static item such as a wall, but if I could pull this off, I might be able to negate the Compulsion on myself permanently.

*Maybe then I'll have a clear mind to figure all this out.* An owl perched on the window where I was and I opened it slightly, ready to roll my eyes at the latest Ministry reminder that it was my civic duty to marry a Wizard and raise a family together. I was fairly certain I could keep ignoring these while I was still in school though. Unrolling the scroll and enlarging it, however, told me it came from Ginny Weasley.

~

_Hermione,_

_Boy am I glad you wrote me. Between practice, training, and photo-shoots, I really haven't had much time to sit down and process all that has happened. I tried my best, but somehow the press got wind of the breakup. Harry just showed up and said we were over, and that this would be for the best. When he dumped me before, I knew it was for his misguided attempt at being noble, to supposedly keep You-Know-Who from targeting me. Maybe this is just his over reaction to what happened with Neville, where he wasn't certain he could save me? Either way, I know it's just a matter of time until he comes to his senses and asks to get back with me, you know?_

_I could really use a distraction, and guess what? YOUR BIRTHDAY IS COMING! So I asked Coach, and she's giving the team the night off! I remember you telling me about that club you wanted to try, Candy Bar, so a few of my teammates are going to come along too, if that's alright. Just so you know, it's okay if you want to invite Harry. I'm not about to make you choose between him and me, and I'm certain I can behave myself and not cause a scene. Anyways, we'll meet you at the castle gates just after dinner on your birthday, okay?_

_See you soon!_

_Ginny_

~

I smiled at the letter, glad to hear she's being positive about all this and for being able to come celebrate my birthday. *Maybe I ought to invite other 8th year students as well?* I penned a reply, and a few other invites for Cho, Luna, Harry, and George. *I haven't heard from Ronald in... how long has it been?_

My memory seemed fuzzy around him, and I couldn't figure out why. I knew he and Harry had a falling out since he refused to help fight in the Goblin Rebellion, but had he been avoiding me? I've been busy myself but he could have thought I was avoiding him...

"Who is back here?!" The light voice of Fleur whispered into the silence. I froze, feeling like I just got caught before I realized I could be here now.
"Fleur, it's just me, Hermione. I wanted some peace and quiet." I yawned, exhausted yet knowing sleep wouldn't come easily.

Fleur saw my yawn, and took in my ragged appearance. "You really need to get some quality sleep, not just potion-based dreamless sleep. From the look of it, you've been relying on those potions pretty heavily, haven't you?"

"I can't sleep, Fleur. Some nights I just close my eyes to see Inferi killing my friends to make them rise and come after me. I'm burning the shambling bodies of Harry, Ron, my parents... other nights I can't stay asleep for more than 3 hours at a stretch."

"Have you thought about going to bed with Narcissa?"

"She's my Professor!"

"It helps me. I mean, not with your wife-"

"-ex wife." I amended, unsure how I felt about that.

"Oh quit with that, you know you two are still bonded. I meant, I sleep with Severus." Wait, what?

"He lets you?!" I was legitimately shocked at that. I couldn't even fathom what that could even look like. Does he still wear long billowing robes in bed?

"We both need the cold comfort. So why are you here on a Friday evening?"

"To get a good night's sleep. Read until I'm exhausted, maybe put my head down and hope to get some decent rest."

"Like I said, go sleep next to your wife. I'm fairly certain the Compulsion will be stronger and kick in with direct touch." I wasn't certain I could touch her and keep it from becoming more, even if she wanted me there in the first place.

"What? No, I can't do that."

"Because it's inappropriate? I'm not saying you should shag your wife, as horrific as you might find that..." I don't find it horrific, though.

"Yes, well, no... we've shagged, so simply sleeping next to her is fine, unless she thinks it means I want more than just sleep... I just can't use her like that."

"You think you're doing the noble thing by foregoing the chance at decent sleep rather than forcing her to sleep next to you. You have to realize she's also not sleeping well, and if you remember the first time you woke up in bed next to her, you didn't realize she was next to you but you felt incredibly refreshed, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"No buts, Hermione. She's scared to approach and ask you for this, considering the recent past. I think you should try for it. Even if it's just on the weekends, because right now you're effectively forcing her to have horrible sleep because you're stubborn."

"I am not being stubborn! I just don't..."

Fleur's gaze was strong enough to cut me off.
"I'm not stubborn." *I was entirely too stubborn.*

"Your wife is suffering just like you are because you're being stubborn. Do the right thing for her, and for yourself."

Severus and Minerva were in the Headmaster's office having their customary Thursday evening tea. It was a tradition started many years back, though it was discontinued halfway through his first term as Headmaster. She had tried to keep up the niceties in hoes to protect the students, but was unable to keep pretending to be nice to the man who killed Albus Dumbledore.

So it was a surprise when he saw her barge into his office earlier tonight and ask, "Where's the damned tea? We have much to discuss."

"Hang onto your tartan, you old bat. I'm not certain you can handle the caffeine anymore."

Minerva chucked at that. "The day I quit drinking tea or scotch is the day you best end my suffering." She froze at her words, eyes looking up in horror to Albus' portrait. "I'm sorry, that was inconsiderate of me."

Albus just laughed at it. "Life happens. I'm glad to see you two are playfully sniping at each other again."

"So, what are the reports from the Prefects and the Head Boy and Girl?"

"Everything we expected; hallway scuffles, students having flashbacks from the final battle, overreacting to small things like the trick step in the staircase turned into a full-out duel. Students going to the Hospital Wing for Dreamless Sleep either out of exhaustion or nightmares stemming from survivor's guilt... We prepared for all of this and I think Narcissa will be able to encourage the students to face the demons of their past and learn to cope with them."

"With the exception of Miss Lovegood's adverse reaction to the DADA classroom."

Minerva frowned at that. "She blocked out the memories of her captivity, more than likely she tried to kill herself over and over in that dungeon and realized she couldn't, of course she was going to panic! Though Professor Black has modified the memory and will attempt to befriend her and ease her into reconciling her past trauma so that it doesn't trigger another event. She said she'll need to use the Pensieve so she can hold her hand as she approaches and can guide her through understanding what happened. I don't think I could ever do that for a student."

"I trust her in knowing how to reconcile with pain of the past. Merlin knows I don't need any more problems in this school. I'm getting owls and howlers about Cissy teaching here. I thought that the Ministry's law that legally separated her from Hermione would have quieted the naysayers. I should have known better; paranoid parents are going to believe whatever they want."

Severus picked up a stack of parchment, reading each sheet off. "Mrs. Prang: *Keep that Death Eater scum away from my son.* Mr. Spinnet: *Headmaster Snape, how dare you let that filth near my daughter! If she even touches her I will press charges against you for enabling that pedophile!* Then there is this one, who didn't even sign their name: *If you had a child you'd understand why you must bar these perverts from teaching.* I can't fathom why they would believe I'd allow a pedophile to teach here.

"To make matters worse, the Ministry wants to send a representative here to explain the PoWFA law and to have the students measured for 'optimum pairing'. It seems if you don't find yourself a wife or a husband in due time, they will do the match-making themselves. I, for one, am going to resist this
to the bitter end."

Minerva winced at the vitriol in the letters. "Surely Kingsley can put a stop to this madness?"

Severus shook his head slightly as he sipped his tea. "I believe it will get worse before it gets better."

The Gryffindor set her teacup down rather forcefully. "How could Doge go along with this?"

Elphias Doge was one of the few members from The Order of the Phoenix that held a position in the Wizengamot, but Tiberius Ogden was the Chief Mugwump and it was his vote that matters.

"Fear and power are often disastrous when mixed together. And now we have a public thirsty for vengeance."

"What can the Order do about it?"

"Other than teach the Wizarding World to forgive and forget? Absolutely nothing." What a few Slytherins can do, however, is a lot more. He looked over to Minerva and realized that she was fidgeting. Before he was able to call her out on it, she caught herself and laid her hands flat upon the table, resolved.

"Severus, there's a... more delicate issue at hand that I need to bring up with you. There have been reports of ghosts here at Hogwarts." Why in Slytherin's name would she mince her words about this? I know what a bloody ghost is!

"Ghosts are a common occurrence after a war; I've already been informed that Dennis has run into the ghost of his brother Colin, who wished to remain and watch over his little brother. Or has yet another ghost appeared?"

"It's Tonks." Severus rose out of his seat so quickly the chair toppled to the ground. His wand was out and he moved like liquid ink down the spiral staircase, eyes watering and voice cracking before he could call out Nymphadora's name.

Fleur left Hermione in the library, uncertain if she convinced her friend to do the right thing. They both are suffering and it's idiotic for them both to avoid each other. She knew however that they would not kiss and make up short of using the Imperius Curse. Even Narcissa was turning bitter from their separation, and the faculty seemed willing to turn a blind eye if only she got laid and went back to her more gregarious form.

The Veela went down the stairwell to the dungeon where the Slytherin House was. She felt an odd kinship with this house now, seeing as they were the social outcasts and learned to stick together. They also know I can fling fireballs from my hands in a split second.

As she got to Severus' door, she found the wards up but modified to grant her passage. He must have done this recently since she had been spending nearly every night there for the past few weeks. She had an early day tomorrow, so she went to the loo, changed into her satin pajamas, and crawled into the bed. He wasn't there yet and the bed was cold, so she took his pillow and held it, letting his scent lull her slowly towards sleep.

She had to lie on her stomach due to her wings, but sometimes she could angle herself at the edge of the bed and sleep on her side. She shimmied herself to the edge to let her wing hang over the side when a luminescent figure floated in through the wall. The apparition had short hair, a short jacket that ended right where a pair of denims started, and a washed-out tee that held no color yet still had the outline of 'The Weird Sisters'. 
"Tonks?!" Fleur said, started awake at seeing the ghost. She was sitting up, moving herself so she could cover herself up a bit more with the comforter. *Oh, this is incredibly awkward...*

Tonks turns her head away, her body bobbing up and down at a slow rhythm as she floated in place. "I'm so sorry, I thought I'd find Sev here." The way she called him 'Sev' so casually was a frozen dagger to her heart. *Oh god, oh god, please make this end quickly...*

"He's not here right now, probably off doing a patrol with the Head Boy."

Tonks' ghost looked around, nodding nervously. "So this is still his room." She floated over to a cabinet that had always been locked and her hand passed through it.

Fleur winced as she realized that this was going to turn into a full conversation. "Yes it is, so what are you doing here?" *I'm trying to get some rest, and the last thing I needed was his dead ex showing up.*

"Oh, right, I just... didn't think someone else would be here. How long was I gone for?" *She didn't know what the date was? Had she just arrived from... wherever?*

"Um, the Battle of Hogwarts was 4 months ago." Tonks seemed even more shocked by that admission.

"Wow, he moved on real fast." *He? Severus?*

"What? No, that's not what's going on! It's... it's not what you think." Tonks' expression dropped into disbelief.

"You're in his bed, wearing lingerie." Fleur winced at that. *I guess she saw that before I covered up with the comforter...*

"Um, it's just what I sleep in. Having a warm body next to me in bed keeps the nightmares away."

"Aren't you married, though?"

It was a sucker punch to her stomach. *Bill, forgive me.* "I was, he died just before the final battle. That's the nightmare I see every night."

Tonks smiled, but it didn't look like a happy smile. "Hmm, pretty fast. Well, it looks like he opened up to you more than he ever did with me."

Fleur didn't know why, but she felt the need to defend him. "Snape doesn't love me." The words cut as she said them.

A single sharp laugh cut into the night. "That's how we started; we could die at any moment, he was spying for Albus Dumbledore right under Voldemort's nose, and I had lost my ability to shift hair colors. He taught me the self-control I needed for my metamorph abilities, and one thing lead to another... Remus wasn't happy when he found out about us and did just about everything he could to convince me that he was evil. Then when Dumbledore died, I couldn't believe it and just fell into Remus' arms."

"Severus truly was on Albus' side; the man had a terminal injury and he was ordered to exploit it to secure his position among the Death Eaters. I'd have taken the quick and painless death too."

Tonks nodded. "I had heard that he was never physically brutal to the students in Hogwarts, and went out of his way to stay the Carrows' sadism." She seemed to cry shining tears. "I should have
known better; I shouldn't have let Lupin's hatred blind me from the truth that was staring me in the 
face."

"Severus had to keep up his appearances. If you stayed loyal to him, both of you would have been 
killed. Besides, you and Lupin were a wonderful couple."

Tonks cackled bitterly. "He 'nobly sacrificed himself' to be with me so that I'd not be involved with 
Severus. I'm not even sure if he ever loved me."

Fleur felt uncomfortable at this. "But he married you, gave you a son."

"Sev made me feel alive, desired, wanted... When Lupin found out I was pregnant? He ran away."
Her voice shook with anger. "I couldn't believe he abandoned me like that; Merlin, tell me he's at 
least taking responsibility by raising Teddy!"

The bedroom door closed with a slam as Severus Snape looked on at the pair of them with a arctic 
fury. "Your mother and Harry Potter are doing a fine job raising your son, Nymphadora. Lupin fell 
in the final battle." He turned to Fleur, his eyes blazing with restraint. "Fleur, if you would excuse me 
for a second, I need to have a private word Nymphadora here." The Headmaster turned and stalked 
into the bathroom, closing the door behind him as the sulky form of Tonks floated behind him.

"Sev, I didn't know."

"You. Did. I stalked all over the castle here looking for you; where we first patrolled together, where 
you asked me to help you change your hair back, where you fell in the Final battle, and every place 
we fucked in this castle."

"Well obviously not every place..." she tilted her head towards his four poster bed. Severus could tell 
she was angry and venting at this point, something that he did not deserve. "She know what you're 
into? What sick, disturbing things you did to me that made you hard enough to slide your cock inside 
me as I bled?"

"You enjoyed every minute of it, and loathed every second of Lupin's half-hearted efforts to get you 
off. Now, as for Fleur, she and I are not involved. At all."

Tonks scoffed at that. "Sure you're not. You just let any witch into your bed who can transform their 
looks. I didn't know you were into the Veelas' war form, though. I could have made my face all 
beaky if you wanted. Shame she can't shift her hair ginger, I guess you'll have to find another way to 
make her into your precious Lily!"

Severus' face closed down as he always used to do with The Dark Lord, pouring his wrath and rage 
into the bottomless well in his heart. Nymphadora went translucent, possibly how a ghost would pale 
in fear.

"If you're attempting to hurt me with your words, know that anything you say will never hurt as 
much as when I found out you married and mated with the werewolf that nearly killed me at 
Hogwarts."

"We all thought you betrayed the Order, Sev."

"It was a necessary evil, Nymphadora. I am only sorry that you didn't survive the battle as well. I 
would have rather died by Nagini's bite than be in this world without you." He felt his eyes water 
again. "Instead now I see you here, out of my reach, knowing you're truly gone? This is my hell."
"Wha? You don't care about your new witch in there?"

"As I told your aunt Cissy, my heart has broken twice now, and I shan't be risking it a third time. Now, either you can find your inner peace and move on, or at least quit being so meddlesome in my personal affairs, else I'm going to have your exorcised from the grounds and have your remains desecrated so that you're nothing but a feeble wraith; an empty shell unable to remember anything about your former life."

Tonks backed away, fearful at his threat. "Whoa, I'm sorry. You don't have to go that far with your threats, Sev."

"I just want us to be absolutely clear." He replied, opening the bathroom door and stalking back out to his bedroom to change.

"Yeah, crystal clear. I just... I got jealous because I still love you." Severus doffed his teaching robes and put on a pair of black satin boxers. He had just given Fleur an eyeful and didn't care as he slid into his bed.

"Leave, Nymphadora." Severus said coldly as he turned off the lights and lay down on the mattress. The ghost turned and floated out through the door, sulking.

In the darkened silence, Fleur heard the nearly silent sobbing and pulled the Headmaster into her embrace.
I woke up that Sunday morning with a few deliveries already piled on my desk for my birthday. My parents sent me the usual birthday card along with a photo of Rowin Atkinson as The Doctor as a part of my usual birthday present being a donation to the BBC's Comic Relief Red Nose Day. I remembered how a few years ago I had dissuaded them of trying to buy me presents and said that I’d feel happier if the money they were going to spend on me did more good for someone else who was in need.

I saw the stack of presents from others and just sighed, knowing that I’d have to accept them all. Narcissa gave me a spellbook that appeared to be a Black family heirloom, while Harry presented me with a muggle book-reading light that had been designed to work magically so it wouldn't need to be plugged in.

Ginny's present, strangely enough, was a makeup set with the attached note 'Because sometimes you have to just feel pretty for yourself'. I was touched at the thoughtfulness, since she knew that I didn't make myself up to look good for others. Next was a manila envelope with my name written in Draco's handwriting. It was a finance report, detailing the acquisition of Malfoy Industries was complete and that Granger Enterprises was now a half-million Galleon company and that my own net worth was just over a few hundred thousand Galleons. Draco's gift to me was financial stability for our family.

Luna had given me what appeared to be an antique silver sneakoscope, with an engraving that was almost worn away but I could read "To Lucretia with Love." The note attached to it told me that Luna thought I would be in greater need of her mother's Dark Detector than she would be, and to keep up the good fight.

Ronald had given me a Daydream charm from his joke shop, with a note that said I should take my nose out of a book and put them in the clouds for a bit. I could tell that it was off-the-shelf and that little thought had gone into it.

The next present was school notes from Minerva and a compendium of theoretical transfiguration, though the attached note put ice into my heart: "There must always be a lioness to stand guard over Hogwarts." Maybe she's looking to retire? I knew she was up in age, but did she think she was nearing the end of her life?

I shrugged off the nervous feeling as I picked up a copy of the Daily Prophet, unhappy to see the upcoming trial of Draco Malfoy and hoped that our solicitor would be worth whatever we're paying her. The Wizengamot might come after all of us, particularly after we start fighting to repeal the PoWFA law and rescind the Emergency Powers...

I wondered about that as I brushed my teeth and got dressed. I was nearly done when there was a knock at my door. Who is calling on me this early on a Sunday? I zipped on my hoodie and looked in the mirror, wondering what I'd wear tonight for the club. The knocking repeated and I opened the door with a wave of my hand, just to make it stop.

"Yeah, what is it?" I said as I looked to see a bouquet of stargazer lilies in a vase. They were expertly arranged, and it was only when I heard her voice that I looked up to see Cissy's face smiling at me. She was in a slate grey dress that hugged every curve of her body, lifting and framing her cleavage that left me slightly breathless. It was tasteful but just suggestive enough that I couldn't help but glance down at her. Damn can she clean up well.
"Happy Birthday, Hermione. Might I put these on your desk by the window?"

I nodded, thanking her. "How did you know they were my favorite?"

"Just had a hunch. Like I'm certain you know I love roses, particularly the ones that look like parchment but have red at the edge of the petals." I smiled at that as I stood by her, my fingers trailing through her hair.

"You're all about the two tones, aren't you?" I said as my fingers trailed the side of her neck. She closed her eyes and turned into it, moaning softly. Had I crossed the room just to be next to her? What am I doing? I pulled back as my body was still wanting to draw itself towards her. The pull was almost magnetic, and my fear of it was enough to keep me at bay.

"What did you do, Cissy?" I asked, voice breathy as I fought my desire to hold her in bed and wake up every morning by her side. Fleur said sleeping next to her might give me the rest I've been needing.

"Nothing, baby..." she whispered, her eyes half-lidded as she came out of it. Narcissa realized what happened, and cleared her throat politely as she re-composed herself as the Slytherin Ice Queen. "It is family tradition to go out and have a fancy dinner for someone's birthday. However, because of Draco's upcoming trial, we can't leave the country. So that limits our choices to The Ledbury or Marianne."

"Oh, I um... I didn't plan on that. Those are muggle establishments, aren't they?" I asked her as she put the flowers down and looked over my bookshelf.

"They are; I took the liberty of inviting your parents as well. I will ride with them once we picked out a restaurant and meet you and Draco there." Her fingers trailed over my hardcover collection of poetry from Emily Dickinson and Maya Angelou.

"Oh, you... didn't have to do that."

"Of course I did, they are family. Now do you prefer chicken or fish?"

I was taken back by that. "Wait; I haven't agreed to this." Narcissa seemed to not even hear me.

"Oh, we'll just meet at the Marianne around six, I have class in the morning and apparently you're going out with your friends to a bar. Just remember to not apparate drunk; you can always call on Herpy for a lift home."

"...okay." I said, watching her turn and leave. Wait... "Hey, Cissy? I um, have you slept well, as of late?" Ugh, I'm sounding like a shy berk.

She turned back around to face me, and it was like she dropped a ten stone bag off of her shoulders. "It's been absolutely horrible. I stare at the ceiling hoping to keep the bad dreams away. Crookshanks came in one night and that sort of helped-

"-why was my cat in your bed?" I replied, uncomfortable at the mere thought. Even Crooks knew what the answer was.

"I'm guessing Fleur talked to you as well." Narcissa said, looking to the ground. "My uh... my door and wards will open for you. Anytime."

But you're my professor. But it's inappropriate. But I might not be able to restrain myself and want more.
I just nodded as I bit my lip. "Okay, thank you." The pause between us went on too long; both of us wanted to other to say something, to end this standoff... and I'm a bloody coward.

The door closed shut without another word said.

Severus woke up, bleary-eyed, but fully rested. It was a new luxury that he had, now that the decades of war and hiding were over. He could smile, laugh, and be openly happy for once in his life and not worry about losing his cover. Of course, it would help if there were something to make me happy.

His mind raced over the details of the night before. Nymphadora was back, as a ghost, and haunting his school. He thought he could have handled that, except for the fact that she ran into Fleur first and assumed the worst. He looked over to see her laying face-down into a pillow, her golden-blonde hair streaming over his dark emerald sheets.

A part of him wanted to lean over and kiss her cheek to wake her up, but he dismissed the thought immediately. You're not a tender kind of person, don't trick her into thinking that. His personal House-Elf brought him the daily paper as he got up and fixed himself some Earl Grey tea. He was reviewing the latest policy changes when his companion finally stirred.

"Do you want to talk about last night, Sev?" He bit the inside of his cheek.

"Never call me that, Fleur."

"But I have before-"

"-respect my wishes or get out."

"Je m'en fou!" Fleur snapped, tossing the covers as she got out of the bed.

"Ta Gueule!" Severus replied in kind, and immediately he felt guilty for losing control. "I did not expect to see her again."

"You loved her, Severus. I get that. I loved Bill. It's just... life goes on. There is no measurable quantity of pain you have to go through in order to be ready to let someone go and move on."

Severus recoiled at that and lowered his paper. "Move on?" What on earth is this woman talking about? "I was at her funeral and saw her buried. Trust me, I let go. But there is nothing for me to move on to."

"Severus, I know it's difficult, and I want you to know I'll be here for you. If you need to talk, or vent, have someone hold you at night when you need a good cry..."

"I did not cry."

He could sense that she stilled herself, and was thinking very carefully on what to say next. You did indeed cry; why the hell are you putting her through this? She's not your masochistic punching bag, and she sure as hell didn't sign up for you to be emotionally sadistic to her.

That's when it hit him; he desired her. And that was something that could never be. I do not want this.

I had spent most of my Sunday studying in the library until Draco showed up and tsk-tsk'ed at me.
"Honestly, step-mum, you did remember we have plans this evening?" I cast a tempus charm and was taken aback.

"Draco, it's only 4 in the afternoon. I have time to get..." He cut me off with his laughter.

"Two hours? Look, I know you're going out afterwards, so there's going to be an outfit change and you'll want a more nighttime look with your eyeshadow."

"How do you know all this?" I asked, surprised. **Why would I need an outfit change?**

"I had to help Pansy with her makeup sometimes while trying to pair outfits so I wouldn't clash with Blaise nor make him think I was copying his style. Like I ever would."

I put away my books and got up. "Fine, let's go back to my room, I'll conjure a room divider so you can see what I'm wearing." **Two hours in advance to get ready?**

"Good, because I brought some family jewelry for you to use too."

"Um, exactly how nice is this restaurant we're going to?"

Draco shrugged. "Remember David, the stylist? About that level." **Oh, Merlin!**

"Okay, now I'm feeling nervous. I mean, I know my manners and all, but- how much is this going to cost?"

"You own about ten percent of the restaurant through holding companies. Don't worry. "I own ten percent of this restaurant? "Remember how I said we'd diversify into the Muggle world? Mild rejuvenation charms in their Hors d'oeuvres makes the customers happier during their meal, meaning better tips and repeat business." I frowned at that. "What about the Statute of Secrecy?"

"People are happier and it's laced back to the butter and oils they use in preparing their food. It's a charm and not a potion so it's undetectable, non habit forming, and the Statute doesn't apply."

"This doesn't sound legal."

"You're thinking like a Gryffindor. A Slytherin would see this as a modification on an ingredient and not an added potion, so it isn't illegal and that's completely different." I winced and tried to think about it. **If it was a temporary sense of youth and vigor, and that was it, was it all that bad?**

We got to my room and he saw the white dress and matching heels and gave an appreciative whistle. "Okay, that's shorter than anything I've seen you in. Trying to get picked up?"

"Hey!" I said, playfully slapping his arm. "That dress goes as low as my running shorts do."

He winced as he looked it over. "Yeah, but it's different when a dress... eh." He rifled through my closet and pulled out a crimson-colored satin cocktail dress with an a-line skirt that fell to just an inch above the knee. "You can wear that white dress out to the club, but this would be better for the dinner. Last thing we need is for my mother to look at you like you're on the menu in front of your parents. Besides, I have jewelry to go with each outfit. Now, where are you putting your wand?"

I pointed to my closet. "In my purse over there."

Draco frowned. "Your purse doesn't match." I rolled my eyes at that. **Why does my purse have to match my dress?**
"It doesn't have to match." I explained as he looked at me like I were a dunce.

"Trust me, you'll wind up on Witch Weekly, and if you look as good as we can make you, designers will ask you to wear stuff for them and do endorsements. Remember that daring backless gown mother wore to the awards banquet? That was a free gift from a designer."

I was stupefied. "You mean to say I'll just be given outfits to wear for free just for the publicity?"

Draco nodded, smiling.

"Most of my suits and wrist-watches come from designers. Pity I don't have my ears pierced, I could get some amazing sapphire studs..."

"Are you sure you're a heterosexual man?" Draco clutched his heart with both hands, in mock horror.

"Oh my stars! Never have I been so insulted!" His voice was campy and I couldn't help but laugh. "I thought you knew I fancied both men and women?"

I shook my head as I grabbed the dress for dinner and changed in the bathroom. "How was I supposed to know?" Once in the dress, I opened up the door and banished the pile of clothes to the hamper. Draco's head peered in and nodded appreciatively. Draco pulled out a small box from his pocket, enlarged it, and fished out a ruby teardrop necklace and matching earrings.

"I'll have you know you shouldn't assume a person's preferences. I never thought you only fancied blokes."

"Most men think two women together is hot, so that doesn't count."

"Trust me, I'm not most men. Besides, now that you're married to my mother, the last thing I want to do is imagine you in any kind of... amorous embrace." I looked at him and my eyes met his for the briefest of seconds, and I saw that he had accidentally walked in on Cissy and I in the Potions lab. We both blushed furiously and turned away. Oh my god, he saw that?! I realized that he's just going to pretend that he never saw that, and I could do the same.

I put on the earrings as Draco helped me into the necklace. Change the subject to anything else, Granger. "So if you also fancy men, how does that work?"

Draco seemed to hedge his response. "How does what work?"

"Wouldn't the guy or girl get jealous or feel inadequate if you're attracted to men and women?"

Draco checked his watch.

"Hey, I still need to get into my suit, can I trust you to do your own makeup?" He smirked to help convey his sarcasm as he made his way to the door.

"You're avoiding my question. Why?"

Draco stopped, and frowned. "Because honestly, that's a question for my boyfriend Harry. Meet me at home, and don't use the floo. You'll never get the soot out of your dress." I gaped at him as he got Herpy to disapparate him.

Narcissa was well-received by her in-laws as she looked forward to riding in a muggle vehicle to their destination. When she had mentioned it to William, he had seemed shocked and decided to give her a brief explanation on why he purchased the Vauxhall Astra.
Jean tried to rescue her from the car talk, "Don't let him build steam, dear, he thinks he's Jeremy Clarkson!"

"Top Gear should never have been cancelled, I don't know what the BBC was thinking." He retorted playfully.

Narcissa just laughed quietly at that. "We learn to accept their hobbies as a part of them, don't we?"

After a few minutes of him explaining the mechanics of an internal combustion engine, Jean was ready and the three of them got into the vehicle and she told them that they were going to Marianne.

"We can get there in no time, take the Westway to the Great Western Road." Jean said helpfully. William agreed as they pulled out of the driveway. Narcissa was in the back seat and figured out how to use the buckle.

"How were you able to get a reservation to this place?" The father asked.

"Oh, your daughter has invested a significant amount of capital into it. Draco is managing Granger Enterprises for now as she finishes her last year at Hogwarts." Narcissa replied pleasantly.

Jean, however, turned to see her in the back seat. "But aren't you teaching there as well?"

"I'm the most qualified person they could get for Defense Against the Dark Arts, namely, dealing with the repercussions of the war and the Dark that was used. I won't go easy on her."

William seemed to want to stay out of this. "That school ought to teach civics, muggle science, and mathematics as well."

"I could not agree more, hence why the Muggle Studies class was discontinued for a Humanities course. There were so few truly pure-blooded students, it was essentially a blow-off course. It's a start, at least."

The conversation died down as Narcissa tried to look aloof but panicked slightly as a car switched lanes and got close to them. I guess the Muggles know to stay between the lines to avoid collisions... She wasn't sure she would trust a complete stranger in another car to not hit her.

"Narcissa," William began, "I just want to say thank you for inviting us out to dinner for Hermione's birthday."

"Of course, you're family now." Cissy replied, expecting it to be obvious.

"Well that's just it." Jean said, and it was apparent that William was cringing at what would be said next. "We get the Daily Prophet now. The Ministry has passed a law that invalidated a lot of marriages, including yours."

"Jean-"

"No, William! I just need to know why we're not bringing this up if they are essentially divorced."

"Despite what laws may have passed, the Ministry cannot undo the Bonding between us." Cissy replied, "Including that damned Compulsion. This marriage law is going to force her to marry a man and have children, against her own will, which has been her biggest concern so far. She was actually livid at the idea that a bureaucrat could legislatively separate people who want to be together."

"Jean, you know she's right. How long have Richard and Hunter been together? Would we stand for it if some MP tried to make their relationship illegal?"
She shook her head at that. "We both think people should be allowed to marry whom they want, dear. It's just strange for me to see my little girl married to a witch my age and a war hero."

"I can understand your reticence, Jean. But she's a brilliant woman whom I think you've raised right, despite her living in such a different world now. She wants to fight this law and I'm going to stand by her side in this. Now let's go celebrate her birthday as a family."

Draco was seated at the table with Hermione, perusing the wine list as she waved down her parents. Their conversation at Granger Manor was incredibly stilted and awkward, though Hermione wasn't being homophobic as much as still trying to wrap her mind around the concept that Draco and Harry were an item now. She had said that as long as Harry was treated right, she could accept it. *Note to self: never piss off the wielder of the Deathstick.*

"First, 'Mione, put your hand down. The hostess will bring them to our table. Secondly, I'm going to have to suggest you order a bottle of the Corton-Charlemagne. It's a white wine that isn't on their list, but I wager they have it. Even if they don't, it will give them a good impression since you're so young yet financially backing this establishment."

"Is that wine any good?" She asked Draco.

"At 20 galleons a bottle, it had better be." He could see the whites of her eyes as they shot open.

"That's over a hundred pounds!" She whispered. He shrugged back.

"Then you just order whatever is mid-range or better, I'd stick with white and French." He muttered back as he stood to shake hands with Hermione's father.

"Mister Granger, good to see you."

"Actually, it's Doctor Granger, but call me William," he replied, squeezing firmly. Narcissa came around to sit next to Hermione and Draco could almost see her panting at his mother in her cobalt blue halter dress. Narcissa bent over, lightly placing a kiss on her wife's cheek while giving her an eyeful of cleavage. Draco distracted the parents by deftly handing them the wine list he was looking at.

*Bloody hell, the tension is so thick between them you can cut it with a knife...*

"I think our waiter will be back shortly." Draco said politely as he looked to his right. "Do you like this place, Hermione?"

Hermione turned to him, blinking a little too quickly. "Uh, yeah. I like it." Cissy was attempting to not blush while Draco noticed the subtle hand-holding underneath the table.

The waiter arrived and handed out menus to the parents as he sipped his water. "Oh, now that the parents of this lovely couple are here-"

Draco coughed, sputtering water out his nose while Hermione tried to correct him. "I'm not with Draco here, that would be extremely awkward." Narcissa raised their clasped hands from under the table sheepishly.

"Draco is my son."
The waiter cleared his throat in apology, clearly flustered. "Very well, um, I deeply apologize for that misunderstanding. I'm Craig, would you like some bread? I can go get bread. Bread is good." Craig left the table, apparently to get some bread.

Draco caught his breath as he dabbed his mouth and nose with his napkin. Jean winced at the exchange.

"See this is what I've been worried about. I don't want you to have to deal with being a pariah." Jean said tenderly.

"Oh, 'Mione here was going to be one even before the war; Slytherins didn't take kindly to her being muggle-born, Ravenclaws didn't like that she was smarter than them and in Gryffindor, and Rita Skeeter..." Draco said proudly.

"Oh, that bint reporter that did nothing but disparage your personal life in your fourth year? She got fired for her last piece, didn't she?" William asked.

Narcissa raised her glass of water to him. "She did indeed; apparently the advertisers propping up the paper had enough of her character assassination. Hermione isn't alone and without support, you know." She turned and winked at her wife.

"Cissy, you didn't tell me you were behind that! No wonder she's going after you now on that wireless show!" Her parents looked at her, confused. "um, it's a type of wizarding radio."

"It was to be expected; but she is a termite to my granite. She won't be taking me down."

The waiter returned and took our orders, and Draco wasn't surprised that his mothers both ordered the same meal and that Cissy approved of the wine choice. The appetizers were perfect until the conversation turned on him.

William looked directly at Draco in a way that felt like Legilimancy as he asked what he was about to be on trial for.

"Well, they aren't telling me directly what the charges are as of yet, but seeing as I was given the Dark Mark like every other Death Eater-

"They aren't telling you the charges yet?" He asked incredulously.

"The Wizarding World is a bit... archaic when it comes to their laws. I know what they legitimately can charge me with, and my only real defense is that I was under duress for the lives of my family. I made sure I failed, though."

"Failed what?"

"Assassinaton. Sent a cursed necklace, poisoned a bottle of mead, all things that wouldn't have killed Albus had they gotten to him. Even joining the Death Eaters was at wand-point; Father knew it was the only way he'd get back on The Dark Lord's graces."

"Goodness! Was anybody hurt? Do you need a solicitor?" William asked, "I'm guessing the laws are different, too."

Narcissa nodded. "We have a family lawyer on retainer. That firm has been representing the Malfoys for decades."

Jean frowned at that. "And now they will represent you? Hermione inherited that, didn't she?" Draco
Hermione spoke up as the first course came. "I'll also be using her to fight this so-called Protection of Wizarding Families Act. If it wasn't bad enough that they want to intervene in my marriage to Narcissa, they are also breaking up the Weasleys and want us all to remarry in order to bolster the birthrate."

Jean was shocked at that. "Why would they want to break up Arthur and Molly? They were absolutely sweet people!"

"They both were Purebloods. This new law will essentially end Purebloods and force them to marry muggle-borns." Hermione replied.

"I wouldn't consider Molly a nice woman, Doctor Granger," Draco replied, "she hated my mother for liking women even before the first Wizarding War with You-Know-Who."

"Maybe she was just raised old-fashioned and doesn't really know any of them first-hand..."

"Albus Dumbledore was gay, mom. The Weasleys seemed very willing to ignore that as if it would go away. And I'm..." Hermione hesitated, letting out a breath as she gathered her courage. "I'm bisexual."

The table fell silent as Hermione waited for a response. Both of her parents put down their utensils as they absorbed this revelation.

Draco lifted his glass of wine towards her in salute. "Me too. Salud!" His grin was enough to grab Hermione's attention and smile in return, clinking her wine glass against his.

"And we, of course, will still love and support you, Hermione." William said gently.

"As long as I have grandchildren." Jean added.

"Thanks, mum." Hermione said, trying to ignore the hurt feelings. The conversation died awkwardly as they continued to eat.

"So, what are you doing tonight?" Narcissa asked as the final course came to us.

"Oh, um, Ginny's coming into town and we're going to hit up the club Candy Bar with her teammates." Hermione replied awkwardly.

"Well, I hope you have a good evening, and like I said, don't apparate if you're drunk. Just ask Herpy for a side-along." Cissy replied coolly.

"Oh, you're welcome to come-" Hermione blurted out.

"Thank you, but no. I've got an early day tomorrow; considering the last time I went out to a disco was in '79 with Severus... fairly certain it's not my thing anymore."

I was back in my room at Hogwarts, sitting on my bed as Ginny stood over me with the cosmetics. She was in a sleeveless little black dress that clung to her body, completely different from her regular quidditch gear.

"Honestly, Hermione, we're going out to club tonight, you're allowed to tart yourself up a bit." What if I don't want to be tarter up?
"I'm not used to having to do a 'club' look. Are you certain this will work with this dress?" I asked as she looked me over.

"Yeah, it will work, guys will be all over you regardless. Any you don't want you can just send over to me, okay?"

I smiled and agreed to that. "Done. Send me over the women, then."

"Not a problem. So how was dinner with your family?" Ginny asked, "Close your left eye." I closed as a brush went over my eyelid and I wanted to flinch away from her.

"It was no big deal; we went to a fancy muggle restaurant, I told them about life here, came out to them as bisexual... took them a moment but they said they accepted me. Why are you hiding the fact that Cissy and Draco were there, too?"

"Was there ever any worry? I mean, your parents are Muggles. Switch eyes." I closed my right eye and opened my left and took in Ginny's contemplative expression as she worked on me.

"Yeah, well, it was still scary. I wouldn't want to get disowned by them. How are things between you and Molly?"

"I'm still avoiding her, and she hasn't messaged me. I don't think I've been disowned, though. I just don't have a room at home for now."

"So if there was a tapestry of the family on a wall, like the Blacks?"

"My face would be covered up by a picture of anything else instead of blasted off. Anyways, I think I'm done with your makeup. Have a look." Ginny said, handing me a mirror.

As I took in my reflection, I couldn't believe that was myself in the mirror. I'm hot! Ginny had simply added a bit of color to my cheeks before, but it was the black-smoky look to my eyes that made my eyes pop out more than I had ever done with my normal complexion charms.

The two of us made our way down to the front of the castle where Luna met up with us. "I've always wanted to go to a muggle club; I even had a few Galleons exchanged into Pound-notes for this! Wow, you look beautiful, Hermione!" Luna was sporting Chuck Taylors, denim jeans, and a blue tee that clung to her and brought out the icy blue in her eyes. How was it she was so good at dressing in muggle clothes?

I blushed at the compliment. "Thanks, this was Ginny's work though." I reached into my purse and pulled out my wallet. "They are going to want to check you for identification." I had my Muggle ID in one hand, and cast a duplication charm on it, then modified the new ones to look like Ginny and Luna.

"Oh, brilliant! I didn't even think of that!" Ginny said, pocketing the new card. Stowing my wand, I took the two girls into my hands and apparated us to London.

Once inside the club, I nearly had a panic attack. Who on earth makes every wall PINK?! Ginny was flagged down by girls who must have been her teammates as Luna and I made our way to the bar. The bartender had short, spiky hair with heavy eyeliner framing a pair of eyes that seemed to be undressing me as I took in her white tank top...

"What will you have?" she asked, apparently again.
"Gin and Tonic." I replied.

"Appletini for me, please." Luna added.

"That will be five pounds for the the pair, beautiful." The bartender said to me. I couldn't help but have my face turn deep red. "Aw, first time here?" Her nose crinkled slightly as she smiled.

"Hermione!" Ginny said, joining us at the bar with a beer in her hand. "Did you know what kind of place this was?"

Luna took her drink in hand and sipped it as she took in the crowd. "There are no boys here, just cute girls who look slightly boy-ish." She purred quietly as she stalked away, apparently on the prowl. *Luna seems to fit in here better than I do. Huh.*

I turned to the small dance floor, took in the rainbow-colored neon signs, and the community event board that said tonight was some fundraiser for NAT. *Merlin, I'm in a lesbian bar!*

Two brunette girls came up behind Ginny and pulled her away from us, cackling and pushing us towards the stage. "Come on! The show is about to begin!"

I paid the bartender for the drinks and followed the quidditch players to where the crowd was forming. A raven-haired beauty who looked ripped out from a 1950's pinup calendar, complete with victory rolls, was holding a microphone and welcoming the audience.

"Welcome, ladies, to the Second Annual Burlesque Benefit. All donations made go to our local AIDS charity, NAT. Our first performance tonight is... a little risque, if you think you can handle it!" The audience cheered her on. "Now, without further ado, Cherry Rage and Denton Divine!"

A red-haired little person was in a drab brown suit that seemed familiar to me as she was put out on the dance floor in a bar stool, hands bound in rope before her as she wore a blindfold, feet wrapped around the legs of the stool to keep balance. The woman who brought her out was a gorgeous blonde woman in all black, a dressage jacket that was an inch longer than the micro-mini skirt she had on, black patent leather pumps on her feet, and her hair tucked into a black officer's cap that made me realize what the costume would be as she turned around. *She's dressed up like a bloody Nazi.*

As she faced the audience, the cheering fell to dead silence as the music began. The way she smiled knowingly, the glint of mischievousness in her heather grey eyes... the rest of the world fell away and I knew I was captivated by her. There was a riding crop in her hands, the other end slowly trailing up the curve of her calves and thigh. My eyes were affixed to it as it trailed up, over the knee, and up the inside of her thigh until her jacket got in the way...

*I was angry when I met you
I think I'm angry still
We can try to talk it over
If you say you'll help me out*

Denton Divine, the Nazi-costumed girl, stepped away from the crowd and turned to her red-haired captive. She moved like a cat circling her prey, using light strokes of her fingernails to caress Cherry's face as she flinched, turning towards the long tongue that flicked over the cupid's bow of her lips. As Denton's tongue touched the edge of Cherry's mouth, the blindfold was pulled off to reveal the look of lust and fear towards the crowd.

*Don't worry baby (don't worry baby)
No need to fight
Don't worry baby (don't worry baby)
We'll be alright

Denton stood behind Cherry, her hands running up and down the jacket as I recognized it as a replica of the British women's army uniform from WWII, unbuttoning the brown jacket and taking off the top button of the blouse underneath. Cherry's eyes closed and head tilted back as her hips rolled on the stool, as Denton began to unbble the shoulder belt she wore diagonally over her jacket, dropping it to the floor and kicking it to the back of the stage area with her feet.

This is the noise that keeps me awake
My head explodes and my body aches
Push it, make the beats go harder
Push it, make the beats go harder

Denton winked to the crowd as she pulled her service cap off, bending forward so she could flip her hair back, letting the golden-blonde hair cascade over her uniform, tossing the hat into the crowd and I caught it while still holding my gin and tonic in my left hand. Ginny congratulated me on the seeker-worthy catch and we clinked our drinks in victory. As I looked back up to the stage, Denton had her crop out and was playfully swatting Cherry with it, before dropping it just outside of Cherry's reach.

I'm sorry that I hurt you
Please don't ask me why
I want to see you happy
I want to see you shine

Denton pouted sadly to Cherry as if in apology for having hit her with the crop, caressing her cheek in her hands as Cherry's tied hands worked to unfasten Denton's jacket. Judging from the body language, it was no longer certain who was the prisoner and who was being seduced, and the crowd started cheering for them.

Don't worry baby (don't worry baby)
Don't be uptight
Don't worry baby (don't worry baby)
We'll stay up all night

Denton turned away from Cherry, and looked out to the audience, opening up one side of the jacket playfully for a second, then the other, then closed her jacket and pretends to be shy about showing herself, though her smile says something else entirely.

This is the noise that keeps me awake
My head explodes and my body aches

Denton shrugged as she whipped off the jacket, tossing it out into the audience again, over where Luna and her new friend were at. Luna was seated on a stool with her arms around the a shy brunette, who had a pixie haircut, femme look, and a rainbow button on her shirt to advertise that she was gay. Well, looks like Luna found someone already. Good for her. I turned back to Denton to see her in a white blouse, black tie, and the black skirt that was as short as it could possibly be.

Push it, make the beats go harder
Push it, make the beats go harder

Denton pulled Cherry off of the stool, pulling her tie off and stuffing a part of it into her captive's
mouth as she is shoved to the ground. As I watched this all happen, I kept thinking of how I could do stuff like this with my own wife, and how she would love it. *No, Hermione, you're not supposed to be thinking about how you want to seduce her...*

*C'mon push it, you can do it*  
*C'mon prove it, nothing to it*  
*C'mon use it, let's get through it*  
*C'mon push it, you can do it*

Denton slowly arced her leg over Cherry's head, showing off the shapeliness of her longer-than-life legs and toned thighs as she pushed Cherry back onto the ground, taking a long step to straddle over her and to sway her body in time to the slow music as Cherry's bound hands stroked up either side of the leg that was standing by her head. Denton put on a show of mock surprise and shyness as she realized Cherry was looking up her skirt, stepping away as she tries to tug down her skirt a little bit.

*Don't worry baby (don't worry baby)*  
*Don't be uptight*  
*Don't worry baby (don't worry baby)*  
*We'll stay up all night*

Denton's coy look goes back to one of carnal knowledge as the refrain began again, unbuttoning her white blouse as Cherry pulls the tie out of her mouth and starts to work on the ropes binding her wrists with her teeth.

*This is the noise that keeps me awake*  
*My head explodes and my body aches*

Denton rips her white blouse off and spins it in the air, tossing it out into the crowd amid whistles and cat-calls. Beneath the white blouse was a lacy white bra that held in an amazing pair of milky-white breasts.

*Push it, make the beats go harder*  
*Push it, make the beats go harder*

Cherry loosens one of the wrists enough to get a hand through, and uses the free hand to pull the rope off of herself completely, 'surprising' Denton by getting free. Both of them see the riding crop on the ground and dive for it at the same time.

*This is the noise that keeps me awake*  
*My head explodes and my body aches*  
*Push it, make the beats go harder*  
*Push it, make the beats go harder*

Denton and Cherry struggle for the crop, and as Cherry takes the crop and tries to back away, Denton is able to grab the jacket by the collar and Cherry pulls out of it in order to stay free, waving the crop at her in playful victory.

*This is the noise that keeps me awake*  
*My head explodes and my body aches*  
*Push it, make the beats go harder*  
*Push it, make the beats go harder*

Denton lunged to get the riding crop back, but Cherry ducked, using the moment to give Denton a loud smack on her ass with it. The two of them face off and Denton tries again, but Cherry is able to
grab hold of Denton's mini skirt and rips it off of her. *Velcro tear-away black mini skirt. I want one of those... Hell, I want her.* The audience cheered wildly as Denton was wearing a matching set of white lace panties and raised her hands in surrender to Brit Army girl Cherry.

*Don't worry baby*
*We'll be alright*
*Don't worry baby*
*We'll be alright*

Cherry points the crop threateningly at Denton, who has her arms crossed in front of her and is shaking her head, eyes wide in shock that she some how lost. Cherry gestures at the bra, and the audience cheers them on as Denton demurely takes off her bra, exposing a pair of tasseled nipple pasties to the crowd as she shimmies her body to make the tassels spin in circles.

*Push it*
*Push it*
*Push it*
*Push it*
*Push it*

I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn’t see anything in front of me. They felt extremely dry and red, so I clenched them shut in hopes unstick them. I couldn’t seem to remember much except for getting a second gin and tonic with Ginny and her teammates... *and then there were the red jello shots...* No wonder why my head was throbbing and killing me. I took a deep breath and smelled lavender and roses. The scent hit me and my mind jerked awake, and I took in more of my surroundings. I was in a bed, on my side, and quite possibly suffering from my first hangover. Oh, and there's a body spooning in front of me too. *Good going Granger, first time you go get yourself pissed and you go home with someone.*

I moved my hand slightly, letting their hand slide off of my forearm as I felt soft skin as my fingers traced over a breast. *Oh shite, this is real. I'm in bed with a girl.* I shifted my weight in bed and realized that I was only in my panties here. I cussed silently as I wound up in the one position I had hoped I’d never be in. *Okay, Granger, just sit yourself up, find your clothes and get dressed, and get back to your room at Hogwarts.* As I pulled away from her to sit up, a wave of nausea and vertigo hit me and I was back on the pillow. I looked at the backside of the girl I was in bed with, and through my blurry eyes, she didn't seem too unattractive. *Why am I checking out the girl right now when I need to be getting out of here?*

As I tried to piece together the night before in my head, I took a moment to wonder if something had been slipped into my drink. *Don't be ridiculous, nobody would do that at a lesbian bar. How many drinks did I have last night?* I wasn't certain of what may have happened, but it didn't feel like I had spent last night having sex. *Though that doesn't prove nor disprove anything.* I gathered my courage and spoke up.

"Hello? Are you awake?" The woman who had been in my arms made a cute protesting noise as she tried to ignore me and stay asleep. The blonde hair reminded me of the burlesque performance from last night, where she had the other girl tied up and stripped on stage. *Did I go home with her last night? If so, at least she is gorgeous.*

The tiny sound of a popping apparition behind me caught my attention and I turned away from the woman beside me, feeling the room spin and my stomach clench as I saw Herpy there with a cup of
"Herpy thought Master might want her coffee this morning." *Shit! There is a muggle behind me!*

"Shh! You can't be seen, Herpy! Get me back to my room, please!" *What about my clothes, and I'd have to unlock the door on my way out or raise suspicion...* "Wait, no... just get me a hangover potion." The elf popped away, leaving the warm, fragrant cup of coffee on the nightstand.

"Coffee?" The groggy voice croaked out, and I froze with my back to her. *Shit, shit, shit!*

"Um, you want some?" I asked, ready to offer it to her and lie that I got it for her. She cleared her throat as her hand rested on my small of my back. I stiffened at the touch, not knowing this girl but her touch made this seem very intimate. I bit back the shudder of pleasure in me as I realized exactly how pent-up and horny I've been as of late. *Either I didn't get laid last night, or I've been really needy and want more...*

"Hermione?"
Severus woke up at around four in the morning, and as much as he tried, he wasn't able to get back to sleep. After an hour of fruitlessly staring at his ceiling, he gave up and got ready for the day, deciding to take a walk around the castle to get away from Fleur. *I don't want to give her the wrong message by staying and cuddling in her arms once I'm up. This is just a platonic arrangement.*

As he meandered through the hallways, he found himself at the one place he had been avoiding for over a year. This was where the deed was done, and the Dark Mark was launched over the castle.

The Astronomy Tower. Nymphadora's place of refuge when she was a student. Her words echoed to him as he made his way up the stairs, fighting his own fears every step of the way with the memory of her voice.

"*I used to sneak up here when I was a student... I would just sit here on the balcony, with my legs dangling over the side and watch the stars, listen to the sounds. The water lapping by the lake, the animals calling from the forbidden forest; it all seemed so wild, yet peaceful, magical. Although, I was always worried I would get caught.*"[1]

Severus remembered their night in the Astronomy Tower with Nymphadora; she was blindfolded and bent over the railings as he dripped cold water onto her naked flesh. He reveled in the memory of his nipple clamps swaying in the dark of the night, glinting from the nearby torches on the battlements. They made that night, and that was the one memory that kept him sane and gave him hope after he had to betray the Order to secure his place among the Death Eaters. He remembered every time he used his toys on her, spanked her with his hand, paddle, even the canes once. Severus knew he had made a mistake when he realized that he had fallen in love with her, and he couldn't tell her that it all would have to come to a bitter end. *All because I made that fucking promise to a dying man in the memory of a dead woman.*

Now Nymphadora is dead as well. He had known that in the back of his mind, but having lost her for so long before made him trick himself into believing she was just 'away'. It was torture to know that he had pushed her into Remus' arms, since he was too much of a coward to truly love her as he had. He knew how his Nymphadora liked it; she was an adrenaline junkie who came the hardest once she was panting and flogged to the point of bleeding. *Lupin would have found that disturbing and probably thought I had been dosing her with some sort of love potion to trick her into my arms.* Severus forgot whose idea it was to have sex here, bending her over the railing just before sunrise. The memory was tainted since it was the same place he killed Albus, where the body fell and broke upon the ground far below.

What made all this even worse was that he remembered and used all of this as he killed Albus Dumbledore, his anger and disgust at having to break Nymphadora's heart, making her believe it was all clever deception fueled his killing curse and sealed his fate. He knew he'd be celibate during the war, unless made to engage in the Dark Revels as they once had. Severus knew he was a fool to expect the same from her, though. But to marry the werewolf on the rebound? No, he never saw that coming.

"*Your neck looks like shit.*" The familiar voice said in the pre-dawn. Severus didn't bother to turn to face the ghost, he wasn't certain he could look at her.

"*You should have seen it a few months ago, Nymphadora; my voice sounded like I gargled with...*"
battery acid."

She sighed, and it was like a salve to his nerves. "At least you kept that big beautiful nose." A corner of his lip turned slightly, it was his version of an honest smile.

"Always knowing the right thing to say, Nymphadora." He loved her name and was the only person she granted him use of it, after he told her about the beautiful Greek meaning behind it.

He turned to her and saw her face light up with her own toothy smile. "There's that smile of yours. When's the last time you did that?"

"I don't really know. And I was out of line last night... if I walked in on you chatting with Lily's ghost, I'd be upset too." And just like that, they were good with each other again and they knew it.

"You know, I always wondered what she'd have to say about you. I'd probably tell her she never knew you like I did."

"But Fleur... she makes things hurt less."

She nodded in understanding. "So did Lupin."

Severus deflated as he stood at the railings. "Are we really going to do this? Sit here and compare wounds as if there can be a determinable victor?"

Tonks shook her head at that. "Considering I'm dead and you're still alive? No. I don't want your pity, Sev."

"Then what do you want." Snape said, resignedly.

"Peace. I want to know we won, that my son is okay, that it's all going to work out in the end."

"Everything is going to be fine, we won, and the Warlock put his hairy heart back into his chest and married the maiden." His voice was dry with sarcasm.

"You know what I mean, Sev."

"Well, we won, Teddy is doing well, but the Ministry is under an anti-Pureblood backlash and being run by the Chief Mugwump. Your least favorite aunt is on the run, the Goblin Rebellion was put down with massive casualties, and I have a creeping suspicion that Trixy is involved with the void of Dementors in eastern Europe."

"Aunt Bella had a talent both for Dark Magic and the dead. Be careful out there, okay?" Severus nodded as the sun broke over the horizon.

"Oh, and your Aunt Cissy is now married to Hermione Granger. They seem well suited to each other, strangely enough."

Narcissa thought she had been dreaming; up until she actually felt the warm skin under her fingertips, she was ready to wake up in an empty bed and feeling cheated of sleep yet again. When Cissy realized she had smelled coffee and recognized Hermione, she used her free hand to grab her wand and cast the glamour charm over herself and stayed on her side in order to hide the growing bump with the sheets.

Narcissa illuminated the room with her wand, the brightness making her wife lay back down in bed and cover her eyes.
"Cissy? What did... did you do this to me?" Hermione was completely hung over, wasn't she?

"I did nothing but come to bed right after dinner. I'm guessing you got so knackered that you asked Herpy to take you home, right? I was already asleep when you came in."

"I'm sorry... ugh, how did I... Herpy. Hangover potion, please Merlin tell me we have some."

Narcissa smiled, remembering the times she had to go to Severus for a hangover potion and felt sympathy for her. "Don't apologize, wife, I said you're welcome here. Best sleep I've had in awhile."

Hermione tried but couldn't sit up. "I need the throbbing to stop before I vomit." Narcissa frowned slightly at the sight before her.

"Just lie back; quit fighting to get up and move. You'll just make it worse." She conjured a damp washcloth, hit it with a cooling charm, and put it on her forehead.

"Sorry for groping you." She said as relief flooded through her. Sorry? Does she think she did a bad thing?

"Don't be; honestly, it's nice to be touched by someone you love."

"Cissy, I can't..." She let out a long breath, unable to finish the sentence.

"Actually, you can. You just won't."

"Cissy, that's not fair. This is complicated."

"No it's not! You said you'd fight for us. And that we'd fight this stupid marriage law together. If you think this is complicated, then make it un-complicated."

"Huh? That makes no sense. I need my clothes. I need to get up for breakfast." Hermione tried to sit herself up, only to fall back on the pillow, moaning in discomfort. "Never drinking again. Maybe I'll just skip breakfast."

"I told you not to 'power through' it. Listen to someone with experience; your head is suffering from the dehydration. Next time you drunk this much, have some water between each alcoholic beverage. And try to not drink wine, liquor, and beer in the same evening."

Herpy popped into the room, shuffling her feet and looking distraught.

"Master Granger, Herpy is very sorry, but we are currently out of the potion. Mistress has been in need as of late."

Hermione opened one accusatory eye at Narcissa.

"Damn it, Cissy. Herpy, can you take me back to-"

"Hermione, you really don't want to do that in your state."

"And I'm really not happy with you right now, considering you polished off the one potion I need this morning."

"Next time I'll check with you first and see if you're off to have a bender! I know you've been surviving on the Dreamless Sleep potion. Look, I can help you with your hangover, but you'll have to trust me."

"How?"
"I'll use our Bond to help you share the burden for the rest of the morning. Just... try to imagine the discomfort, headache, nausea, and focus it in one spot for it to be leeched away. Focus it all on your mouth."

"That's where it feels like it's going anyways... This is going to suck, isn't it?" She said, and Narcissa shrugged noncommittally.

Cissy rolled over, straddling Hermione with one knee on either side of her hips. "I'm going to draw from you so you can get back to your room and change."

"You're actually naked right now, aren't you?" Hermione's eyes were locked onto Cissy's. Oh, now she focuses on this.

"Yes. My room, my bed, my choice. It was hot last night. Now, get ready to let go." Narcissa lowered her head and kissed her wife, focusing on drawing out the headache and discomfort from her as she felt lips part and mouths open. Teeth moved out of the way as her tongue snaked in and found her counterpart, the tips stroking each other as they both found each other wanting and needy. Gods, why is this so good...

Cissy felt Hermione's fingers weave through her hair and grab her head, kissing her back... I should stop. I'm not going to push things; the ball is in her court.

Narcissa pulled her mouth away from Hermione's, her bottom lip and jaw quivering as her restraint was tested. Her head felt foggy and her stomach queasy, but other parts of her were sharp and clenching in need. She knew it worked instantly as her wife's eyes focused more clearly and she seemed a bit more alert. As soon as she's gone, I'll frig myself good and proper. She rolled off of Hermione, putting her back to her as she tried to calm her own libido.

"Narcissa?" Hermione asked, breathing heavily.

"Yeah, 'Mione." She replied, clenching her thighs together as she felt herself grow wet.

"I um... feel loads better. Are you okay?" As if 'okay' were the magic word, the migraine slammed into Narcissa's head and she whimpered as the backlash ensued.

"I will be. Just takes a moment for it all to kick in." She couldn't keep the strain out of her voice and she mentally kicked herself for exposing the weakness. Cissy pulled the sheets back over herself in order to remove any more temptation. "You should get up," She swallowed down her desire, "dress and get back to your room." Narcissa cast a cleaning charm all over herself, and thought about putting her wand-tip on her clitoris as soon as she could. Please, get out quickly, Hermione... the sooner you are the sooner I can handle this migraine.

"Are you okay, Cissy?" Hermione asked, worried. She was sitting up in bed next to her, and could see the minute shudders that the blonde was trying to hide under the sheets.

"I will be, just go, please..." Narcissa pleaded.

"No, you're not. Tell me, why are you trembling?" Hermione pulled her own wand to cast a diagnostic spell, but Cissy lowered her wife's hand.

"Fine. That was a really good snog. And, with you here, all... naked... and in my bed... well, one thing leads to another. I'm restraining myself."

Hermione laid back down on the bed on her side, sliding under the sheets and facing her wife as she kissed the back of her neck. "Oh thank Merlin, I thought I was alone here!" Hermione ran her hand...
up and down Cissy's arm, grabbing hold of her wrist. She bit her bottom lip nervously as she pinned Cissy's wrist up over her head, rolling her onto her back. "Besides, isn't restraining you my job?"

Narcissa's head and eyes snapped towards her wife. "You sure about this? Weren't you just saying you want to be normal and young this year while we take it slow?"

Hermione shook her head. "Am I sure? No, but I wanted to go out last night, and being young means being impulsive for my birthday. This is me... being impulsive and wanting a birthday shag from my wife."

Cissy smiled at Hermione's smirk, feeling breathless in need. *Gods above and below, that smile is infectious.* "What about breakfast?"

"Sod breakfast; Herpy can bring us food from the kitchens." Narcissa beamed at her as she caught her wife in a passionate kiss, teasing her wife's folds with the lightest touch possible.

Cissy moaned at the touch, rocking her hips into it. "You won't be needing those right now," The Slytherin said, vanishing the last of her wife's clothes with the wand in her free hand, leaving them both naked in bed. Hermione flinched at the spell at first, then straddled her wife's leg to put their pubic mounds up against each other. "Oh, you'll love this." This time Cissy cast a shaving charm and vanished the removed hair.

"You didn't get it all, I have a bit of stubble..." Hermione said, her words cut on sharply as Narcissa rotated in a small circle on her. "Merlin, that's... just right." She fell forward and resumed kissing her deeply as the short hair gave just enough friction to counter the slickness between them, turning the frottage into a really good scratch at the same time.

Hermione went contemplative as she remembered something from the night before. "I think I was talking about scissoring last night at the bar to that girl..."

"Not the time to talk about that."

"Well, I had wondered what it would be like if I added this..." As soon as Hermione pulled out her wand, Narcissa's hand was there to bat it away.

"Not that wand, please."

Hermione stilled, leaving them both wanting and whimpering. "Why not?"

"Because it's the Deathstick? I don't care if it makes for the best magic ever, I don't want that on my nethers. Use my wand instead." As Narcissa handed over her wand, she hoped that her glamour charm would hold up as Hermione set it to vibrate powerfully between the two clitorises. A moment later, the Slytherin was unable to think of anything else as they rocked into each other, lips locked as moaning turned into screaming and the pair had orgasms shudder through themselves at the same time, making their kisses taste all the sweeter.

What must have only been moments later, Hermione and Narcissa were opening their eyes as they lay spent, the Gryffindor with a leg and arm thrown possessively over her wife. *It felt like we had slept soundly for a week, though.*

"Pretty sure we missed breakfast and it's time for the first class of the day." Cissy said, a warm chuckle in her throat. "And you're out of uniform."

"Class? CLASS!... Herpy, any chance you can bring me some clothes for today? Fresh undergarments and my school robes?" Hermione asked as she sprung out of bed, casting cleaning
charms and giving up on her hair for today. "Ugh, and my hair looks like a mess."

Narcissa was equally light on her feet, cleaning and dressing herself into teaching robes as the House-Elf popped in. "Master and Mistress Granger, here are some croissants and juice for you." Hermione took the food and thanked the elf.

Narcissa chuckled at the breakfast Herpy served. That damned House Elf knew we wouldn't be needing coffee to get up after all, it seems. She turned to see an only slightly disheveled Hermione Granger in her school robes, and couldn't help but stare at the shorter-than-regulation skirt that showed off the curve of her spectacular arse.

"You know that skirt is not within regulation." Narcissa said teasingly as her wife opened the door to leave.

Hermione played along as the hum of a good and well-needed orgasm coursed through her. "Yes, isn't it? I think my detention should be with the Headmaster, where he teaches me to make some more of that potion of his. I think it's high time we turn the tables and I find out what you're like inside me." She winked at her and turned into the hallway, where the startled voices of Horace and Fleur could be heard.

"Miss Granger, you missed breakfast! Why are you in the Professor's corridor?" Slughorn asked, obviously confused. Poor girl can't suffer this walk of shame alone, Narcissa thought as stepped out into the hallway beside her, face neutral and proper while Hermione's red face betrayed everything.

"Oh, um, I just got lost. I should get to Transfiguration." Hermione said sheepishly. Fleur, however, was beaming at the pair and had her hand up for a high-five in congratulations. As Slughorn and Hermione each went their opposite ways, one completely aloof and the other blushing furiously, Narcissa raised her own hand and gave the Veela the hand-slap she was hoping for.

I was sitting in the back of the Transfiguration class, glad to see an unusually perky Luna saving a seat for me. She was wearing a rainbow button on her school robes as she passed me a slip of paper with 'Sam' and a number written on it.

"Hey, what is this? The girl I met last night gave me this along with her button, and laughed when I said I didn't know what it meant." I realized then that the series of numbers were a phone number.

"She wants you to call her, probably has a mobile phone or something. This is her way of saying she wants to see you again. Did you tell her you'd call her?"

"No, but I would like to. I kind of explained that I'm in my final year at a boarding school and that I had to repeat my final year because of some family problems." That makes sense. "So where were you this morning? I almost thought you went home with that blonde girl that you were chatting with all night."

I bit my lip slightly. "I don't recall much of last night, except that I had a really suggestive conversation with her about scissoring. Can you help me remember what all happened?"

"Yeah, you were on your second Gin and Tonic when Ginny and her teammates decided to do some sort of jelly shot. I turned it down since I had a girl on my lap already as we talked about stuff and didn't want to get drunk. You and Denton, however..."

I paled at that. "I don't remember any of that. Tell me I didn't make a fool of myself."
Luna shrugged. "All I saw was you two getting chummy early on in the night; I left just before midnight. Ginny, however... her brave front collapsed after the shots and cried all night about Harry being an idiot and how she wanted to beg and plead for him to take her back. And there was something else about Draco, but I couldn't really understand it." *I knew she was going to crumble in time, but I was too drunk to see it or help her.*

As Minerva kept explaining the theory behind layered magic (something I figured out last year on the run and using the multiple protection charms) something triggered a memory in my mind. My fingers trailed over the back of my neck, and I felt soreness just behind my right ear. *Merlin, I got bit.*

"Uh, Luna, is there a mark on my neck? And, are you a lesbian?"

Luna turned at looked at me, so I turned my chin so she could get a good look. She failed at stifling a laugh. "Oh yeah, it's pretty obvious. As for me, I didn't know before last night that I could be involved with a woman. Well, I knew I *could*, but I never fancied anyone until her last night."

I winced at that. *I've been showing off a hickey all morning, then. Great. No wonder Fleur was giving me a high-five.* I wondered what kind of impression I gave Denton last night, considering how drunk I was. I knew I cared for Narcissa and Draco and consider them family, but was I really ready to be tied down to just one person before I was even twenty? *The Ministry seems to expect everyone to do just that, though. And to have children. Am I even ready to be a mother?*

"Miss Granger!" Professor McGonagall said, frown showing her dismay, "usually you're the first student to perform the Transfiguration perfectly. If you're not here to learn and perform complex transfigurations, perhaps you should leave my classroom."

"Sorry, Professor." I said, properly chastised and paid more attention to the lesson.

Narcissa was famished as the lunch hour started and she was the first professor at the Head Table. Severus wasn't to be found and it was unlike him to not attend meals.

"Fleur, where's the Headmaster?" The veela was picking at her chicken as a mischievous look crossed her face.

"You didn't hear? Right, you were busy shagging a certain Gryffindor. Tell me she earned her Head Girl badge."

Narcissa rolled her eyes at that. "I may have woken up in bed with my wife, wasn't that your suggestion though?"

Fleur waved off the question. "Judging from that hickey you left on her neck, you did more than just sleep."

"What? I didn't-" *What hickey on her neck?!

"-it's okay, we're both adults here. What you do with your wife is fine with me. But Severus is entertaining an envoy from the Ministry. Afternoon classes have been cancelled for the Measuring."

"I don't like the sound of that. What's the Measuring?"

"The Protection of Wizarding Families Act is giving all adult witches and wizards until the end of the year to get married and start having children, and those that don't will be paired up according to whom they would be most compatible with." Fleur said, the look of disgust on her face. "I can't believe they are threatening to do this."
"And, of course, the Minister is powerless to stop them. Isn't Dedalus Diggle in the Order and on the Wizengamot?" Narcissa asked as she took a second helping of the pork and salted it. *Slytherin's Snake, I'm definitely pregnant.*

"He's actually on board with this. He's worried about the low population and the future generation, if we keep letting Purebloods marry and produce squibs."

Horace slammed himself down to the table, fuming with a scroll in his hands. "How on earth am I still eligible? I'm an old man, and do not wish to be chained down with a wife and child! Did you get your letter yet? Apparently we all must do our part for the Wizarding World." He chuffed at that. "I pity whatever witch the Ministry forces onto me. I won't move out of this castle, no..."

Narcissa grimaced as an owl landed in front of her and Horace pointed out that she was to be Measured as well. *Well, this cannot get any worse,* she thought as she unrolled the scroll. Rather than it having the seal from the Ministry of Magic, it had the subtle blood-red fleur de lis seal that she instantly recognized was her legal solicitor. It was a terse, hand-written note detailing that all steps had been taken to deny the allegations but that the normal contacts were no longer responding within the media. It was the last line that bothered her the most.

"This appears to be an orchestrated hit to coincide with Draco's trial; I fear that we won't emerge from this without significant costs and I will be requiring a new down payment."

"What on earth is she on about now?" Narcissa mumbled as a nerve-grating "Hem, Hemm" sound that was supposed to be clearing a throat made the Slytherin's knuckles shake white with rage. *Of all the Ministry lackeys to send here, they sent her?*

"Miss Black. I missed seeing you at breakfast this morning, along with Miss Granger. May I ask where you two were?" Dolores Umbridge asked sweetly.

"Am I being detained or under investigation by the MLE?" Narcissa said the line politely as she had rehearsed it often enough a few years ago.

"Just an innocent question, that an innocent person should be able to answer."

Narcissa smiled as she repeated herself. "Am I being detained or under investigation by the MLE?"

Umbridge tittered a girlish laugh. "I'm not with the MLE anymore, I'm the Director of PoWFA."

"Then I decline to answer your question." Narcissa made a slight tilt of her head. "Respectfully. Decline."

Dolores Umbridge plopped down the latest issue of *Quidditch Quarterly*. Viktor Krum was on the cover, it was an older picture of him from the Quidditch World Cup just after he caught the Golden Snitch and lost the game for his team. The headline was two words in large block letters, and hot bile was at the back of the Slytherin's throat.

**CUCKOLD CALAMITY**

*Was Krum's career killed by the cradle-robbing Malfoy Matriarch?*

Narcissa flipped through the magazine, disgust on her face as the letter from her solicitor made sense. *Not written by Rita Skeeter this time, it seems.*

The article was nothing but insinuations without any proof, asking questions that were never really
answered to the public, like why Viktor's career abruptly ended and speculation that Lucius Malfoy's investments in Krum for sponsorships and endorsements had been pulled after he had been seen alone with her at an undisclosed Wizarding restaurant known for their discretion. It heavily hinted at the idea that Viktor refused to have an affair with Narcissa and that Lucius would destroy Viktor's career if he didn't please his wife. I wanted Krum? Bollocks! I'm a bloody lesbian! They just pulled that shite out of their arses! The photographs of them at charity events, however, were taken at an angle that had her husband out of the frame and had her possessively hovering around him. She had to admit that it didn't look good, and that's when she turned to the center spread from the Yule Ball.

It was a picture at the start of the dance, when the Champions had to begin the first dance and off to the side was herself, looking pinched and furious out towards the dance floor. Lucius had stood me up at the Yule Ball and was stuffing his wand away at the Brothel in Knockturn Alley. Of course Cissy was angry, but in this context the photo made it look like she was jealous over Viktor and Hermione together, and the article went on to suggest that Narcissa had a penchant for younger witches and wizards.

I want to find out who this author is, who paid them to write this, and destroy them. She kept her jaw clenched shut so as to not incriminate herself around the Pink Menace.

Severus sat down for lunch, scowl on his face as Dolores took the Headmaster's seat for her own. "Oh, Severus, silly me, this is your seat isn't it? I guess it's just habit to go back to the last seat you had here, isn't that right?" Severus knew to not take Umbridge's bait as he had expected her to. The biggest chair also has the biggest blind spots.

The sound of hooves clopping on the stone floor made Dolores rigid in panic as Firenze stood behind them at the table. "You sent for me, Headmaster?"

"I did indeed, Firenze. The Ministry has sent us an Envoy to explain the new marriage law that they enacted. I thought you should be here for the Measuring."

"He is ineligible, Severus! This is only for witches and wizards!" Umbridge exclaimed, the false sweetness of her voice gone.

Fleur looked down her beaky face at her, drumming her fingers on the table menacingly. "This involves his students, he has every right to be here. As do I." She looked to Firenze, smiling sweetly. "Are you married?"

"Centaurs do not marry as humans do. We hunt, we fight, and we breed. That is our way." Firenze flicked his tail, making Dolores flinch and get up from her chair and scurry over to the podium, smiling nervously as she called for the room's attention.

"Hem-Hem. As many of you remember, I am Dolores Umbridge, Director of the P.o.W.F.A. and a former Headmistress of Hogwarts." As she smiled sweetly, the floating candles that were over her head fell unceremoniously, knocking off her pink pillbox hat as the students laughed at her.

Hagrid guffawed and failed at whispering to Filius Flitwick, who was seated next to him. "Looks like Hogwarts disagrees wit' that."

"As you know, the Ministry has enacted a program to boost the wizarding population here, and all wizards and witches who are seventeen and older and can conceive a child are to be married and expecting children in one year's time, else you will find your wand snapped and deported from this country. If you have not become engaged by Yule, the Ministry will begin to match people up according to today's Measurement. All marriages can only contain one Pureblood at the most, and
only be of one man and one woman.

"Headmaster Snape, would you do the honors of being the first person to be Measured? All I require is for you to put your hand on a blank page here and state your name clearly."

Severus stood up, biting the inside of his cheeks to check his rage, and shook his head. "There will be no need. I'll be married before Yule."

Dolores simpered at that. "Really? Well, since you are not married nor engaged yet, I'm going to have to ask you to be Measured all the same." Her smile was saccharine-sweet, yet it conveyed nothing positive.

Frowning, Severus stepped away from the Head Table and approached the book, putting his right hand over the blank page.

Fleur stood up, wings spread out defiantly as goblets were knocked over. "I'll marry him! You don't have to do this, Headmaster."

"Oh, I'm afraid he does. And you're no longer human so don't worry, the marriage law doesn't apply to you." As Umbridge said that, students stood up in defiance and anger at that.

"Silence!" Severus said, and the Great Hall fell to silence. BUGGER. The one eligible witch I could tolerate and that... hag... deems her inhuman. He put his hand on the page and said his name clearly yet defiantly. "Severus Snape."

The entire Head Table was glaring daggers at Dolores as the rest of the Professors followed suit. Even Hagrid, who coddled a baby dragon and named her Norbert, had an angry look for her. Mainly because he remembered how Minerva was injured by squad of Hit Wizards as she came to arrest him for trumped-up charges, Severus thought idly. Fleur had remained in her seat and Severus was seated by her, his hand clasping hers consolingly.

"Horace Slughorn."

"Minerva McGonagall."

"Septima Vector."

His childhood friend had her hand on the book now, giving Dolores a challenging glare. "Narcissa Granger-Black."

The little-girl voice of Dolores cut the silence. "The Ministry does not recognize any such union with the young witch and we will not accept that as your name."

Narcissa looked down at the book and smiled. "The book did." As the Slytherin turned and strode back to her seat with her head held high, Severus was relieved to see an equally defiant look on Hermione's face as she began the queue for students.

The last Professor was Hagrid, who looked comedically huge after Flitwick had to conjure himself a step-stool in order to place his hand on the book. His hand dwarfed the book as he made a show of facing Dolores and saying his name directly to her face, cocking up an eyebrow and winking at her. "Rubeus Hagrid... they say opposites attract, you know." Narcissa tittered as Severus figured out that she had put him up to it.

A high-pitched whimper escaped her throat as Hermione took her place by the book. "His wife is going to need a lot of Dittany, both for getting pregnant and giving birth." Most of the older students
laughed at that while the younger ones didn't seem to get it.

Dolores' face went red with anger as she mustered an attempt at her falsely sweet smile. "State your name for the Measurement. No tricks, Miss Granger."

"Hermione Granger-Black." she said, adding emphasis on the last part. She looked down to the book and saw that it, too, had been accepted.

"Thank you, Miss Granger." Umbridge said, face puckered as if she had swallowed something quite bitter. The rest of the students were Measured without great incident, and after the final student was done, Severus checked his pocketwatch and dismissed the students to get back to their regularly-scheduled courses.

His cold onyx eyes remained focused on Umbridge as the students filed out. "Your duty is done. Please leave the castle immediately."

"Now see here, Headmaster, you need not be so rude!" Dolores protested.

"You had safe passage as an Envoy of the Ministry. Once your task is over, I am at liberty to investigate allegations of students being made to harm themselves with Dark, enchanted quills back when you were 'teaching' in 1996. The school charter clearly states that, if no formal investigation is done by the Ministry, the Headmaster has full discretion to convene the Board of Governors and to do their own trial."

"You can't do that!" Dolores said, fear making her voice crack.

"Take it to the Minister. Or perhaps the Chief Mugwump, who has seen the scars on Harry Potter's hand."

"You're bluffing, Snape."

"Am I? 'I must not tell lies', Dolores." Huffing, she turned to the door and made her way out of the castle.

After dinner, and I decided to study in my room rather than try for the Library. I locked and silenced the door so that I wouldn't be disturbed. My eyes glazed over as I realized that I wasn't going to be able to retain anything more, but I wasn't tired yet. I looked at my clock and knew I couldn't justify going to bed before nine. As I sorted out my laundry for Herpy to clean, I heard a light rapping at the window. Who is sending an owl at this hour? I thought, surprised to see Fleur hovering outside.

I rushed over to the window and opened it up for her to come in. "Fleur, what are you doing at my window?" I said, chuckling at the situation.

"You warded the door, and I wanted to come check in on you from this morning. Well, more about last night and that mark on your neck."

I grimaced at that, hand touching the offending mark. "Yeah, I was really drunk and don't recall exactly what happened."

"Well, did you lead her on?"

I shrugged. "I don't know; I'm not really the flirting type. I'm not even certain how to get someone to notice me if I liked them."
Fleur nodded sadly. "I know how that feels."

I looked at her and realized that something was up. "You've been around Severus all this time; I thought that there was a bit of... you know, something."

"No, he's stuck on the ghosts of his past. Literally."

"Yeah, I saw Tonks. You really like him, don't you?"

"I... I'd have never noticed him before; he would have been beneath me. But now that I'm apparently beneath everyone? He treats me the same as ever, and that means so much more than when Arthur Weasley was tripping over himself to impress me."

"That sounds like Professor Snape, all right. I used to have a crush on him myself."

"oh? what changed? the war?"

"I got married." I said, shrugging. So I kind of liked him before, and getting glimpses of his friendship with Narcissa only reinforced my belief he deserved a good partner.

"oh. But you're technically single now, and can give him children..."

"You must be joking; there's no way I could do that. He's the Headmaster. And he'sCissy's best friend. It would be the ultimate betrayal." Like how she set you up to kill Lucius? Okay, 'maybe' set you up... Something about all that still didn't make sense to me.

"I meant to ask, did you sleep better last night?"

"Yeah. Loads better, actually. I wasn't sure I'd be okay with it, but considering how well I recovered from my hangover and didn't feel tired at all today? I won't get that drunk again in the future."

"MERDE! Narcissa took advantage of you when you were drunk?!!"

"No! Not at all; I passed out drunk in bed by her side, sure, but it was this morning when Narcissa and I... you know?"

"...okay so she helped relieve your hangover symptoms by taking them on herself, but how does that turn into more than just cuddling?"

"Oh, she drew it out of me as we were kissing in bed. So, one thing lead to another, and... we had sex."

"Kissing? She could have done that simply through touch, though. Merlin knows how many times I saw my wizard father use a simple touch to alleviate her cramping..."

"I didn't have to make out with her? Why did we..." She didn't have to kiss me while we were naked in bed together? Why did she then?"

"Again I ask, do you think Narcissa took advantage of you?" What? Take advantage of me? That's impossible... or is it?

"Well, no. I mean, she said... I don't recall now. My head throbbed and I couldn't get up at all. We were fresh out of hangover potions-"

"-yeah, she and Horace cleaned out Hogwarts' supply pretty fast, though she went through her own private stock first. I guess she's been hitting the wine really hard in order to sleep."
"Fleur, I know I wasn't *forced* to do anything I didn't want to do, but..."

"...but what? You felt pressured?"

"No, I didn't."

"Do you want to file a report with the MLE?"

"Merlin, no! The last thing my family needs is the Magical Law Enforcement doing more investigation."

"Your family?" Fleur asked, "So the little bit of solidarity you showed with Narcissa wasn't just to piss off Umbridge."

"Yeah. My family. Even though I don't know what to make of Narcissa sometimes. My memory of the attempted escape and me killing Lucius is fuzzy; I can't get the suspicion out of my head that maybe I was set up to kill him for her."

"Draco's trial is set to start soon; the place has been ransacked a few times over for incriminating evidence."

"Harry and I are going to fight to keep him out of Azkaban. Draco is many things, but he's not evil. He did what he had to."

"I know, that's why the Wizengamot is trying so hard because their campaign to punish Purebloods is being stymied by two of the Golden Trio."

"I think I need to be alone right now, figure some stuff out."

Chapter End Notes

Tonks' memory written by co-author Wolfamongthestars in my other story, Dark Devotion. This story is completely different from that one, but it's just a great quote. Used with permission.
The Trial of Draco Malfoy

I found myself falling into a comfortable pattern as the next week of school began, sometimes enjoying a quiet alcove in the Library alongside Cho and Luna as we studied or read *Of Mice and Men* and moved on to *Animal Farm*. I actually enjoyed Fleur's course, as she allowed the students to discuss the ideas and concepts in the book and she simply moderated rather than lectured at us like Professor Binns does with History of Magic.

It was around dinnertime Thursday that I got a pair of owls, one with the Ministry seal that made me look around and wonder what is going on now. I saw that the Headmaster, my wife, and Professor Slughorn has also received similar letters and it made me panic slightly. *What now?*

I skimmed the letter over, it was a summons to appear in court tomorrow and provide testimony in the prosecution of Draco Malfoy. I knew I should have expected this, but it felt odd to see it in writing. I was being required to show up and testify against my step-son. *Can they even do this?* I wondered as Cho handed me a piece of parchment that had a hasty note hand-written upon it.

*Check with your solicitor, but I am fairly certain you cannot be compelled to testify against your own family against your will.* -SS

I breathed a sigh of relief at that and checked the head table, where Narcissa had begun to write on the back of the Ministry document. *She must be forwarding it to the lawyer already,* I mused.

"What's the letter?" Cho asked, her curiosity peaked.

"I'm being summoned to court tomorrow; I believe so is the Headmaster, my wife, and Professor Slughorn so there might be a few cancelled classes." The looks of remorse from them over cancelled classes was something I'd never have seen with Harry and Ron, which oddly comforted me now. *Thank Merlin I have friends who enjoy studying and making good grades.*

Luna pointed at the unopened scroll. My name was hand-written on it, but the writing looked familiar. "I think she meant the other one." I shrugged, unrolling the parchment and took it all in. It was written in Ginny's hand, but it was sloppy as if done in a rush so it was difficult to read. *Was she drunk when she wrote this?* As I kept trying to make sense of it, I figured out that she was upset that Harry had left her and that she wanted to know who had talked him into leaving her for everyone's benefit. *Someone talked Harry into leaving her? I don't think even Draco would stoop that far just to get a bloke...*

"Um, Ginny is upset at her breakup with Harry." I said politely. "It's kind of personal." *She thinks someone had betrayed her, though. Nobody I know would want to make them miserable by breaking them up though.*

Draco was wearing shackles in what could generously be considered a closet as he finally got to see his solicitor. The room was sweltering and stuffy, and he knew that the environmental charms were tampered with just to make him suffer, reeking and sweat-drenched. When she first arrived, her nose twitched in shock at the cloying scent of musk and his cologne. Helena was sporting the same auburn-red hair and highwayman cloak from before, though judging from the fit he knew she hadn't purchased it off the rack for herself, but rather took it off of someone else. *Where did father ever find such a person?*

"Miss Harker, thank goodness you're here! I can't believe their nerve, raiding my home in the early
morning without any warning! They even took my wand into custody." Draco said, frustrated at the fact that his mugshot had him in his pajamas. *Okay, I had some warning, but not to the extent that they went!*

"They have your wand? I'll check on that. Did you recognize anyone from the Auror Office, or the Hit Wizards who came to capture you?"

Draco shook his head. "No, they seemed to avoid using Peasegood or Potter on purpose. Let me guess, they are ransacking the Manor as we speak?"

Helena shook her head, smirking. "No, I nipped that by informing them I'd be observing them execute their Writ of Assistance. That's when one of them accidentally admitted that they didn't have a search warrant. So for now, the Manor is locked down tight until they can get one. Is there anything incriminating against you in there?"

Draco shook his head again. "No, Herpy already took care of that. The only possible thing is father's black book, which won't reveal anything unless you're part of the bloodline."

She nodded with understanding. "Good, well, what's going to happen now is that they are going to interrogate you and attempt to get a confession. They can hold you for a full twenty-four hours without any charges, so you know exactly how long you'll need to hold out before I demand they release you."

"Confession? A confession about what?"

"Whatever you did during the war, I suppose. I'm wagering that this is an attempt to get you to say you're guilty to something so they can charge you with it. I'm fairly certain you'll be charged with trafficking restricted artifacts, attempted murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and taking the Dark Mark. That's just from what I've gathered from various sources. Deny everything but the last one; state that you had no choice and were forced to under threat of your own life and that of your mother."

"But that's the truth!" He objected.

"And if this were a perfect world, that truth would set you free. But the world isn't perfect, so you need to fight this. I have to go catch a meal and reply to your mother's inquiry about something, but I'll be back soon."

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I was back in my room and ransacking my closet, unable to find anything appropriate to wear for the trial. *I packed for classes and for going out, not for a courtroom. I won't let my son rot in prison just because I look shabby and get ignored by the jury. Will there be a jury?*

"Herpy!" I called out, unsure if she could help, "can you check my wardrobe at home for anything I can wear today?"

The sound of a throat clearing got my attention, and I turned to see Narcissa at the doorway. She was in a slate grey suit with an almost too purple blouse, making her look professional while avoiding the classic Slytherin green. "The Manor has been locked down by order of the Ministry, and doubly so by Herpy so she won't be able to answer you."

"What? How come?" I replied.

"It means that the Ministry is trying to search our home for evidence without authorization. She can keep them out... well, forever. But it does mean she's stuck there."
I sighed, looking at my clock. *Not even time for breakfast yet.* "Why are you here this early?" I asked, turning back to my closet.

"Miss Harker knew our predicament and left us a gift." In her hand, she held a suit on a hanger. "Here, we can grab some breakfast in the Great Hall on the way out."

I thanked her, closed the door and changed out of my sleepwear and into the skirt suit. "You've got a great solicitor to have thought this far through."

"Actually, this is our standard protocol written out ages ago, so she's working off of a script. I knew this day would come again, I just never thought I'd have you on my side." I had the skirt fastened and started on fastening the blouse.

"That reminds me, is it normal for us to get such short notice?" It felt like they wanted to blindside us so that we couldn't put together a strategy and rehearse our responses.

"This is highly irregular actually; I think it was done on purpose. We still don't know the charges, but Draco has been painstaking in his methods so he couldn't get convicted for anything he did during the war. And we're allowed to invoke familial privilege so we don't have to testify against him." Narcissa replied, holding the jacket out for me to slip my hands through the sleeves. I nodded my thanks as we found ourselves at an intimate level of closeness. *Did her lips always quiver like this, or only around me?* I wondered as I had to mentally kick myself to pull away from her.

As I pulled away, she seemed to also do the same. The Compulsion was still working at making us want to stay close together, to give each other small caresses of support and encouragement. *It's like it knows what we need right now.* I apologized as a fog seemed to lift from my head, and I forced myself to focus on the things around me. *I'm in my room, Cissy just dressed me for court, we need breakfast...* "We should get downstairs." I said, grabbing my wand and purse. I was at the doorway when Cissy's hand on my arm stopped me.

"This weekend... please stay the night." My hand rested upon hers, and I gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"Cissy, I... I'm your student, and I don't want to make it more awkward by us having sex again."

"I'm not asking for sex though, just your companionship. A warm body that I'm not afraid of next to me."

"Yeah, but remember last time? I asked Fleur; you didn't have to kiss me to heal me."

"I wanted to, and judging from your response, you wanted it too."

"Well I'm telling you now, I don't want that." *Liar.* "I'm saying it now, in advance, that I want to just to sleep and to have some decent rest. Don't take advantage of me like that again."

Narcissa nodded her agreement. "No sex, just cuddling." Then leaned in and gave me a quick peck on the lips. I kissed her back automatically. *She's always going to be a bloody tease, isn't she?*

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Harry knew that his idea to get the rebellion to surrender wasn't going to end perfectly, but he never even fathomed that the final holdouts had some sort of death wish. Though, seeing them leave Pureblood sympathizers from the war impaled on stakes until the trapped birds had their fill of the corpses should have served as a warning. Bob had suggested sleep deprivation and targeted whispering to disrupt their mental states and to sew dissention into their ranks. It sounded too much like mistreatment of prisoners to Harry, and that's when he realized he was essentially in a protracted
The Ministry wanted this over with, and they were done trying to play nice. The Chief Mugwump cited that the security in the Courtrooms was paramount and that the dissidents who were still trapped in Hogsmeade were to be neutralized by any means. He gave them one last chance to surrender peacefully, but only received threats of killing all of the Purebloods and their sympathizers, himself included. Why do they think I'm the enemy?

"M'Laggen, we'll do it your way. Merlin have mercy on them." With that, Harry put up anti-disapparition wards, donned his tactical robes, and broke the circle. A volley of Garroting Gas was followed up by a broadside of stunners as Harry put up shields and deflected incoming spells. A cutting hex sliced through Terry Boot, but Viktor replied with a blasting curse that had chunks of wizard raining down upon them all.

After that, the battle devolved into chaos. Some of them may have been actually surrendering while others were yelling how they would never be taken alive. To make matters worse, the rebels had conjured a dense fog to either neutralize the gas or to obscure their movement. Probably both.

"We're not here to kill you!" Harry called out into the early morning, and was met with hexes being directed at him. Right, tell them we come in peace and they shoot at us. Harry threw cutting hexes and knockback jinxes as soon as he could determine where wand-fire was coming from.

"That is it! Nobody messes with McLaggen's hair!" Harry heard Cormac yell in rage from inside the mist, and he ran back to the edges of the apparition wards as he felt a familiar magic slam all around him. The ground shifted and sank beneath him, and instinctively Harry summoned and climbed onto his Firebolt and flew where he thought Cormac was at.

Viktor was also airborne and stopped him with a finger over his lips and pointed out into the dense fog. Harry was about to ask what he meant when he heard it. It was splashing. Harry lowered his broom and let a foot dangle downwards and he felt water and other thicker things.

*Merlin, he used the Weasley instant swamp charm.*

The fog began to clear as Harry and Viktor flew ahead, looking for any survivors in the marshy wetlands. Harry already knew that whomever had cast the fog must have died, thus ending the spell. A bolt of fire was shooting forward in the distance, engulfing one of the rebellious wizards and immolating him within seconds.

"Cormac?!” Harry called out, uncertain if he should trust his ally after that.

"Yeah, Harry. Wanker got me good, but I killed him." Harry saw him leaning up against a tree on an island, blood pouring down his chest. "Episky." Cormac grated at the pain of the spell, but it closed his wound and stopped the bleeding.

"I need a Healer over here!" Harry called out as Viktor made a sweep overhead.

"I got it, Potter." Cormac coughed, his hand coming away clean. "No internal bleeding. Good."

"M'Laggen, what the hell were you thinking?! Transfiguring the whole area mid-battle?"

"It worked, right?" A Healer was there with dittany, and Cormac slapped him away. "No dittany. Chicks dig scars." Harry rolled his eyes as Viktor touched down beside him.

"Ve are clear. It's finally over. Now go." Krum nodded as Harry and Cormac apparated to the Ministry.
I was in the lift with Cissy, going down to the lowest floor for the courtrooms as I remembered the last time we had been here together. *We hummed and then sang The Who together, the first time I realized we might have stuff in common. I took Narcissa's hand in my own and hummed the opening guitar riff to 'Won't get fooled again."

"We'll be fighting in the streets  
With our children at our feet..."

Cissy smiled slightly, and squeezed my hand in return, joining in.

"And the morals that they worship will be gone  
And the men who spurred us on  
Sit in judgement of all wrong  
They decide and the shotgun sings the song

"I'll tip my hat to the new constitution  
Take a bow for the new revolution  
Smile and grin at the change all around  
Pick up my guitar and play  
Just like yesterday  
Then I'll get on my knees and pray..."

I kissed her hand in mine, reassuring her with this more than any words I could say as we belted out the next line.

"We don't get fooled again..."

I went ahead and hugged her in the lift as we made our way down, a shuddering breath coming out as I got anxious for what was ahead. Narcissa's hand rubbed my back in a comforting circle as she continued the song, eliciting a chuckle out of me. Her smile reached her eyes, and I couldn't help but feel tears start to form in my own eyes by her side.

"The change, it had to come  
We knew it all along  
We were liberated from the fold, that's all  
And the world looks just the same  
And history ain't changed  
'Cause the banners, they are flown in the next war.

"I'll tip my hat to the new constitution  
Take a bow for the new revolution..."

The lift stopped suddenly and the door opened brusquely, admitting the one blonde witch I never thought would get back her press credentials. Rita Skeeter was impeccably dressed for someone I had thought was unemployed.

"You didn't get your job back at the *Prophet.*" Cissy said coldly.

"No I didn't, lover, but it hasn't changed the fact that you two are still making the news all the same." She handed me a copy of *Quidditch Quarterly.* *'CUCKOLD CALAMITY... Was Krum's career killed by the cradle-robbing Malfoy Matriarch?' What the fuck is this?!

Rita's eyes went to my neck, exactly where I had drunkenly gotten a hickey on my birthday. "Bet you had to use one heck of a concealment charm there. I mean, it's not as much of a faux pas as
Arthur Weasley making it on *Witch Weekly* for dating a muggle your age, but a little bird told me the muggle photos of you two will look amazing in the magazine.

I scanned over the article, and the first thing I saw was that the by-line wasn't hers. *So she isn't still writing.*

"I'm here to record audio for my news report on the Wireless. Took quite a bit of convincing, but the people have a right to hear whatever excuses you make for Draco in your words and voice." Rita's eyes didn't hold the smile at all, but the malevolent glint was for Cissy and not myself. *Whoa, what's going on here? I thought she still fancied my Cissy...*

The lift dinged as we reached the bottom floor and we filed out, Cissy's hand squeezing mine in reassurance. "I really need to go to the loo, can you get us seats?" I nodded, jaw set against Rita. Cissy looked at the pair of us uncomfortably, then hurried off to the lavatory down the hallway away from the courtroom. Rita strode off of the lift, turning a lazy eye to me as if checking me out. *It felt creepy to have her leer at me, as if she could see under my clothes.*

"Nice muggle suit, though you still look like a lolita trying to play at being an adult." *There it is, I knew she had something to throw at me.*

I smiled at her, but my eyes conveyed coldness. "Unlike Pansy, I came... willingly." She bristled at the double entendre, her lips pressed thin as my dig hit home.

"Enjoy some light reading." Her eyes flicked down to the magazine she had pushed into my hands. *Rita, you didn't write this, but I can tell that your fingerprints are all over it. What's your agenda here? Why are you going after my wife?"

"Oh, I had nothing to do with that," *I seriously doubt the innocent tone of her voice..."* nor with the reporter that followed Ginny's drunken antics and then captured you cheating on your so-called wife. See, fame gets you attention. And with enough attention, even the brightest shining star falls from the heavens."*Why does she think I'm on some pedestal, and why does she think she needs to push me down from it?*

"Why do you feel the need to destroy -*everything*- you see?" I asked incredulously. "Your life must be very lonely and sad if that's the only pleasure you get in life!"

As soon as I said that I knew I finally struck a nerve. Rita shuddered my comment as I saw rage bubbling in her. Using her wand, she conjured a vial and put the wand-tip to her temple.

"Miss Granger, you are untouchable. I get that. The people love you, and my career was torn asunder because I had a vendetta. Yes, I'm admitting it. But your dear Cissy? I think it's time you learned about who she truly is." Silver gossamer threads came out and filled the vial as she capped it. *She's giving me her memories?!*

"I know my wife is no saint, Rita. But she *has* changed, and I don't care about her past. She's with me now, and her days of blackmail, manipulation, and destroying people alongside you are over. Obviously you're going to try to keep coming after her like a jilted lover would, but you're done. You'll *never* be published again."

Rita shoved the vial into me and I had to take it. "You still worry about her, I can tell. *I know you're too curious not to look. See you inside.*" Rita turned away and went into the courtroom as I held her memories in one hand and an article by someone else suggesting Cissy destroyed Viktor's career for sex in the other. I shrank them both down and put them in my pocket, wishing I could shrink the
nagging doubts that have popped up concerning my wife as well.

My hands were shaking in rage as I read the article in *Quidditch Quarterly*. It was highly speculative, never actually naming any sources as the author only dropped hints of Narcissa's promiscuity and how she or Lucius hovered around Viktor as he did endorsements and public appearances for charity. Once or twice, there was a photo that showed her putting her arm around Viktor and leading him away when questions got too personal or risque, but it was a long stretch to say she was jealous and she wanted the young man for herself and to make Lucius watch the entire time.

*Isn't Narcissa a lesbian though?* I wondered, realizing that she may have been using her femininity to keep him on a short leash. I flipped through the article and went back to the other photos, and saw the unmistakable look of teenage lust in his eyes.

I thought back to the Yule Ball, when I entered and his face fell open in shock as he saw me. *He had been staring somewhere else first, and from this photo, he was looking at my wife.* The next photo was just as damning, when he took me onto the dance floor for the first time, and Narcissa looked at us jealously. It didn't look good, the look of anger and rage in her eyes.

I went back to reading the article, suggesting that having found herself wedded to me means that she enjoys having younger people as her victims. *Of the many things I'd say about us, I'm hardly her victim!* I knew how the papers would cover my birthday shenanigans, though, if this was any measure.

"Hey 'Mione. You're reading a Quidditch magazine?! Sure you're feeling alright?" Ron joked, distracting me as he took the empty seat next to me and looked over my shoulder. Once he saw the picture, he grimaced knowingly. "Oh, that article. You know, it was only a matter of time until the truth came out about the Malfoy's perversions."

"Honestly, Ronald, you believe this shit? Move over, I was saving a seat-"

Ron waved me off. "-eh, Harry can't sit. He's gotta stand over there as a guard."

"She was saving the seat for her wife, Mister Weasley." Narcissa said imperiously over him.

"Oi! You don't have to startle me. Besides, it's first-come first-serve." Ronald leaned back in his chair, defiantly keeping his seat between the pair of us. *What on earth is he doing, other than being a prat?*

"Ron, I wanted my wife by my side." I said sternly.

"Well, she's not your wife anymore." His voice held a mocking tone in it, and I clenched my jaw as Narcissa's hand on my shoulder calmed me down. *What the hell is his problem?* Ron realized he was getting crowded between the two of us and fought to not budge an inch. "You know, I'm fairly certain pedophiles can't grope a girl in court and get away with it."

I glared at him with fury burning in my veins. *How dare he accuse my wife of that!* "She's not groping me, Ronald." I looked past Narcissa and saw a somewhat hunched brunette hiding her face with her hair. I was trying to figure out who she was when a short jerk of her head revealed red claw marks across her face. There was a feral look in her eyes that made her seem more wolf-like than Professor Lupin ever had. *Lavender... Merlin, I haven't seen her since the Final Battle...* Seeing her stunned me, and I turned away so as not to stare. She cowered behind him in fear, and it unnerved me to see someone act like that around me.
"Is... Is she going to be okay?" I asked hesitantly. Ron looked at me, confused, and had to turn around to realize whom I was referring to.

"Yeah, she's fine. I mean, when first saw her in the cage, it was scary as she devoured the raw steaks, but then she slept it off. Merlin knows I've slept off a night of indulging or two."

I couldn't help but chuckle at that. "You sound like Hagrid there, you know?" The boy is just mixed up and stewing in his mother's anti-gay rhetoric at home. Probably should be moving out anyways.

He smiled back at that and shrugged. "Hagrid has a point, Fluffy wasn't too bad of a dog, and Buckbeak just had a bad rap."

I couldn't help but respond to that. "Just like my wife, Ronald." Yeah, but you don't actually trust her, you just want to fuck her when you need to. "Don't listen to what your mother says, look around and decide for yourself if me with another witch is such a horrible thing."

"Hey, Ron, come back here and sit with your family." Percy Weasley's voice called out, and I felt oddly grateful as he left to go join Percy and his mother. Narcissa forced a tiny smile on her face as she sat by me, and Severus swooped in stealthily beside her.

"What took you so long?" I asked my wife.

"Bit of a queue. But I did recognize Katie Bell and I heard Rosmerta's voice in the loo, so that along with Sev and Horace being called to testify, we know exactly what they intend to throw at my son. Speaking of, where is he?"

"No clue; I haven't seen your solicitor, either." Severus said, looking over the courtroom, "Though I doubt she'll be in the solarium."

"Sev!" Narcissa said, tapping his arm with the back of her hand as she repressed laughter. "You're never going to let her live that down, are you?" What's going on?

As I was about to ask what the inside joke was about, when I noticed the lack of a chair in the middle of the courtroom. It had been there for the goblin Ragnok, but now there was just an empty spot on the floor. Except that now the empty circle was opening like an iris, the sound of groaning of old metal gears filling the room as a wrought-iron cage started to erupt from under the ground.

I had read the archives of the Daily Prophet after the fake Mad-Eye was revealed to be Barty Crouch Jr, but the moving photos didn't do the iron maiden any justice when you saw it in person. Each of the inward-facing spikes were there to immobilize the person inside, and even so, I saw heavy shackles on the wrists and ankles of my stepson Draco.

He was sallow, gaunt, and his suit looked almost two sizes too large for himself as if he had been starved and abused while in the Ministry's care. The people in the audience gasped in surprise and sympathy as they took him in, and the loud clacking of heels told me that Helena Harker had entered the courtroom.

There was something about her that commanded attention, something about her presence that nipped at the edges of my consciousness. She exuded a protective maternal vibe as well as tightly-restrained rage that was ready to explode should she be crossed. She shrugged off her Highwayman's Coat and rested it on the railing in front of Cissy, nodding a greeting to us. She was in traditional wizarding robes, violet in color and cut astutely for her body shape to be feminine yet not too suggestive. Her red hair was so dark it was almost auburn, with nearly porcelain skin and green eyes that made her look stunning with the barest touch of eyeliner.
A sharp elbow nudged me out of my reverie, and I blinked a few times as I took in my surroundings again. *What was that?*

"Don't look her in the eyes for too long, 'Mione." Cissy whispered to me.

I leaned back to ask why as Harry Potter came out of a corner and stood protectively between the prisoner and the audience, and something prickled on my awareness as something crawled over my skin and I instinctively brandished my pair of wands, turning my back to Draco and Harry as I formed a defensive barrier.

Narcissa had done the same, though her movements were more liquid grace as she extended her own shield, just in time as a hailstorm of various spells slammed in from all sides.

"HARRY! DEFEND DRACO!" I called out, curious as to why a dozen random people would just all begin attacking at once. *Attacking all at once like they were coordinated to? Oh, no...*

I turned around to see Helena running out of the way, and I was livid that she'd run until I heard the sound of grating gears again. *Quick on her feet, it seems.* Harry, however, was picking off the assailants with disarming spells one at a time as the spells kept homing in... *on him.*

"Bob! Now's a good time to show up!" Harry called out, having dazed each of the disarmed assailants while the remaining few of them hexed wildly at the Auror. *These are Proudfoot's sleepers, going after Harry!*

Narcissa re-cast the shield charm, the effort making her grunt as she kept her wand up in a double-handed grip. "Herm... relashio them..." I ducked behind her, putting away my less-powerful wand and focused on the remaining seven who had stepped up their attacks, making ropes spring forth and bind them down. More ropes shot forth and pulled the wands out of their hands as well, even as they yelled and cursed that Harry needed to be killed.

Not taking any chances, I went ahead and also bound the dazed wizards that Harry had disarmed as Narcissa lowered her shield and panted as if she had sprinted a kilometer. "Thanks." As she lowered her wand, her eyes met Molly's with a flat look as the Weasleys kept their defensive stance, ready to attack if needed.

I kept my wand out as I realized that Molly and Percy's wands were still out but they were trying to stare down Narcissa. Ron, as usual, wanted nothing to do with the fighting. The tension wasn't leaving the room even as Harry and Arnie were levitating the bound wizards to go with Bob, who was going to attempt to de-program them.

The rich, deep voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt filled the room. "For security reasons, we are going to clear the courtroom of all the observers. Unless you're on trial, the solicitor, or on the witness list... get out."

Rita waved her hand in protest, holding her press pass. "What about the press?!"

"You too. I'm not going to take another chance, and I'll personally ward the room against... bugs." the Minister said, smiling brightly. "Molly, lower your wand, the threat is over."

Molly stood her ground defiantly. "No, Kingsley! That rug-muncher raised her wand at my sons!" *Rug-muncher?! I have had it with her bigotry!*

Narcissa's wand was lowered, but her poise was as arctic as ever. "I was defending my own son, along with Harry Potter, you daft bint."
I unsheathed my older wand and renewed the shield charm between us, elbowed my wife to stand behind me as I drew the Elder Wand down on Molly. "You heard the Minister of Magic. Get. Out."

It was then, as she stood in front of her sons Percy and Ronald, that I understood the look on her face. *She truly saw me as the enemy now.*

"I dueled Bellatrix, little girl, you don't frighten me." I smiled and laughed menacingly at that. *Oh, she underestimates me too. Her mistake.* I felt the Darkness within me nudge me to end this problem, to take advantage of her misconceptions, to remove her from the Wizarding World—*No, I won't do that... just threaten her.*

"You're lying, Molly. You're facing off against two-thirds of the trio who killed The Dark Lord."

Ron took the moment to speak up. "Mum, it's Hermione. You know what she means..." *What I mean to him..." She's just trying to defend people, including my best friend Harry!"

"No, Ronald! He chose to side with her, to side with immorality! If anyone ought to be locked away, it's those perverts who are trying to corrupt innocent children like you and Harry!" Molly's face was red with rage, I was shocked at seeing her be this hostile. *I'm glad I kept the shield up now.*

Narcissa spoke up from behind me, and I grimaced as I hoped that she wouldn't escalate the problem further. "Minister Shacklebolt, Solicitor Harker, has she finally threatened me and my family enough to warrant a restraining order?"

Helena apologized to my wife, "Unfortunately not, she would—"

"I can't believe you'd stoop that low, try to make my mother seem like the villain here." Percy cut in, trying to step around Molly.

Narcissa's voice was sweet yet venomous. "Oh, she's no villain. Just an aging woman who couldn't keep her ex-husband from shacking up with someone half her age." *Cissy, what in Merlin's name are you doing? Don't piss her off!*

I noticed a distortion behind them; a ripple in the air that I could saw straight through. It reminded me of seeing the waves of heat bouncing off of a vehicle in summertime, when the air was comparatively thinner. *Was that a disillusionment charm?* Two silent red jets of light later, and I knew it was.

"Oh trust me Perce, when I'm done with this bitch there won't be so much as an eyelash left!" Molly raged, lifting her arm to throw a curse at us.

Severus removed the disillusionment charm as Fleur stunned Molly from behind as well, ending the standoff before it got worse. Harry seemed to still be in shock as he realized that he had been marked for death instead of Draco. McLaggen was quick on his feet and was immediately up there, securing Ronald while the other two were levitated and removed from the courtroom by Severus and Fleur.

Kingsley's chin dropped knowingly, exchanging a look with Helena, who shrugged innocently. "I do believe Miss Prewett, formerly Misses Weasley, has made a credible threat against my client and her family."

The Minister turned to the Wizengamot, frowning yet looking eager as he spoke with a sense of victory within himself. "Chief Mugwump, please enforce a Restraining Order against Molly Weasley, standard 100 meters from Narcissa Granger-Black's person, family, home, and place of business." *But not me.*
"Minister, you can tell that she was provoked-" Ogden rebuffed.

"And. Expedite. It." Kingsley added, making it known that this should be settled and for everyone to move on.

Narcissa turned and sat back down, breathing a sigh of relief as she realized Draco had been safely placed back underground with the Iron Maiden during the attack. "Of course, Minister. Mister Potter, please bring back the defendant." Chief Mugwump Ogden signed a piece of parchment with a quill, stamped it with a quiet thud, and the parchment folded itself up and flew away to be filed in another department. Severus nodded his thanks to McLaggen who left the courtroom to guard it from the outside.

Helena, however, didn't miss a beat. "Minister, Members of the Wizengamot, I respectfully request that this trial continue as a closed-door proceeding, and that Molly Weasley be charged with contempt of court and attempted assault on Ministry grounds."

The Clerk who was recording the trial proceedings leaned over to Ogden and whispered to him. The Chief Mugwump gulped at that. "I agree on the closed-door proceedings, but you do realize that could put Molly behind bars for the rest of her life?"

"Failure to obey a direct order within the court is against the law, and she did intend to assault my client and mete out vigilante justice. The restraining order will help protect my client, but what of the other people who get in her way? There is little difference between her and the rash of Anarchists that had been in Hogsmeade as of late." The solicitor replied cooly. "She ought to be reminded that her vendetta against people she defines as immoral does not make her above the law."

"Neither is your client, now may we begin?" I bristled at that, realizing he was the Solicitor for the Ministry. He wore black traditional wizarding robes, and I realized that the colors here were significant and rooted in tradition. *Just like in the muggle courts we still have the wigs.* He had grey in his hair, but it made him look like an aged warrior, skilled yet dangerous. He nodded brusquely to the Wizengamot, who were to act as the judges here, and turned to make a respectful bow to Helena. She returned the bow, and the poise of the bows reminded me of the pre-dueling bows that I had seen Lockhart and Snape do during the dueling club.

Draco had been afraid as he was essentially a stationary target as the spells flew at him, and saw his lawyer move with inhuman speed. As his cage dropped back down to relative safety he realized that the target had been Harry all along. *Bob is going to have a field day with this; he always thought that I was the target.* The prosecuting Solicitor stood, smoothed out his robes as a latent nervous gesture, and turned to face the Wizengamot.

Chief Mugwump Ogden looked down at Draco, sneering. "You stand accused of taking the Dark Mark of the Death Eaters, participating with said terrorist group, trafficking restricted items and potions, using Unforgivable Curses, attempted murder of Katie Bell, Ronald Weasley, and Albus Dumbledore. How do you plead?"

*Remember what Helena told you. Appear scared yet determined, seem innocent yet knowing, and most of all look the witches in the eye.*

"My client wishes to plead 'Not Guilty', Chief Mugwump." Helena said succinctly.

"So noted. Prosecution, begin your opening remarks."

"Wizards and Witches of the Wizengamot, we are here to be witness to the crimes committed by
"Draco Malfoy-"

"Chief Mugwump, it is a right reserved to my client that he be called his current and legally-binding familial name." Helena interjected, and Chief Ogden nodded reluctantly. The Solicitor gulped and pressed on.

"Draco Granger-Black, nee Malfoy, had conspired and participated in multiple counts of murder during his time with the terrorist cult known as the Death Eaters. He even bears the mark on his wrist still, and helped orchestrate the attack on Hogwarts and the assassination of Albus Dumbledore, marking the beginning of the Second Wizarding War. The facts are as clear as that black that is branded upon his skin. He is a Pureblood that has been steeped in evil, and is on the same Dark path of his Father. Find him guilty, and lock him away to rot next to Dolohov."

Ogden smiled, and it was a slimy thing. He actually seemed pleased with this, and was getting off on the idea of having more 'Dark Wizards' to throw in prison. *Slytherin's Mudblood Whore, I think he's worse than Umbridge.* Helena stood and gave a gracious bow to the Wizengamot, her right hand flexing in and out of a fist, rolling each digit individually.

"Draco Granger-Black was a victim of circumstance. It is known that his father, Lucius Malfoy, was an evil man and avowed Death Eater. It is also known that Draco bears the mark. It should be known that it was forced upon him against his will, before he even came of age. Draco was pressed into service after Lucius' failed attack on the Department of Mysteries, where he was tasked, under pain of death of both himself and his innocent mother, to assassinate Albus Dumbledore.

"It is also known that Draco Granger-Black did not kill Albus Dumbledore. His murderer is none other than Severus Snape, spy for the Order even in the darkest days of our war. Snape has been granted immunity for his actions during the war, including following Albus' plan for an assisted suicide, a merciful death instead of prolonged suffering from a terminal curse.

"As for the charges of trafficking restricted items and the attempted murders of Katie Bell and Ronald Weasley, there is no proof that Draco was even involved with them. We should find and punish whomever is possessing illegal artifacts and poisons. But what should be known, and I will prove it, is Draco's reluctance to kill Albus. That he resisted at great personal risk to himself because he did not wish to harm another. Draco Granger-Black is innocent, and he looks forward to having a lifetime proving that he is not the man that his father was."

Ogden grimaced at that as he looked at the parchment before himself. "Call your first witness."

Narcissa leaned to whisper to Severus as Katie Bell was put under a wand-oath to speak no falsehoods to the Wizengamot. "What did you mean when you said you'd be married by Yule?"

"No matter now, Cissy. I'll need to devise a new backup plan."

"Let me guess, Fleur was suitable enough to be your companion?" Severus gave her a blank look, but that in itself told volumes. "Seriously, my friend, you could do worse than her." Severus set his jaw and ignored her.

"Katie Bell, do you remember the package that cursed and nearly killed you?" The prosecutor, William Coxley, began.

" Barely; I was told it was a necklace inside that cursed me, not the package itself." She replied regretfully, the prosecutor looked confused at her answer.
"Who gave you the necklace?"

"I never saw a necklace." Coxley rolled his eyes in frustration, apparently not understanding that her wand-oath would not let her say anything that was not explicitly true as to her best recollection. *This will get tedious quickly, then.*

"Did Draco give you the package that nearly killed you or not?"

"I never ever saw Draco that day." He smiled, but it looked like he was reigning in his frustration instead.

"Who gave you the package then?"

"I don't recall."

"According to the report, you came out of the ladies' restroom with it at the Three Broomsticks. Did you see anyone in there? Anything you might recognize, blonde hair, a cane?"

"I have no memory of anyone. I'm sorry." William shrugged and dismissed the witness as Helena began her cross-examination.

"Katie, I'm glad you survived that awful attack, but as you've said, you don't have any recollection of who gave you the package, nor what was in it?"

"None whatsoever."

"But you did go into the loo without the package, and came out with the package and the strong desire to deliver it to Albus Dumbledore?"

"I did."

"Did you see Draco in the Three Broomsticks at all that day? Did you see him in Hogsmeade at all that weekend?"

She thought about it. "No, I didn't see him at all."

"No further questions." Narcissa breathed a sigh of relief at that. *Draco may have been forced to try to kill Albus, but he did his best to fail at it while looking like he did his best. And he kept the collateral damage to a minimum.*

As Rosalind Rosmerta was taking her wand-oath, Hermione took my hand and gave a reassuring squeeze. "So far so good, huh?" she asked. *This wizard was the only solicitor willing to do this trial, it seems.*

Narcissa nodded, her mind on something Fleur said earlier. "'Mione, Fleur mentioned a mark on your neck. That wasn't from me."

Hermione frowned and looked away, but Narcissa held onto her hand as she tried to pull away. "Cissy, I was really drunk and don't remember. But apparently I was a bit friendly with a girl at the bar on my birthday."

She let go of her wife's hand, dejectedly. "I see. You're taking this whole 'being young' thing to also be promiscuous, I take it."

"No, I just... didn't you say I could take a furtive lover when we first realized we were trapped in a marriage?"
"That was before I fell in love with you! Besides, I only said that because I thought you wanted a man, something I am not." Severus' shushing distracted her for a moment. "Don't come to my bed because I'm convenient and technically have to obey you, particularly if you want some other woman instead."

Hermione huffed at that. "You manipulated me-"

"-didn't have to go get pissed with some trollop-"

"Ladies? Might I remind you that we're holding a trial?" The Chief Mugwump said, and the pair of them realized that the entire courtroom was staring at them. "Please proceed with the witness."

Coxley nodded nervously, pacing around the witness. "Did you give Katie Bell the necklace?"

Rosalind shook her head sadly. "I never saw a necklace."

He looked like he was ready to snap his wand in half. "The package, then. Did you give Katie Bell the package?"

"I can't honestly recall. My memory is fuzzy, I was told it was a side-effect of the Imperious Curse."

He nodded, eager to pounce on this shred of information. "Who cast the Imperious Curse on you?"

"I never saw."

"You do know you're under wand-oath to tell the truth, correct? According to your statement just after Albus Dumbledore's murder, you said 'It might have been Draco' who cursed you."

"Yeah, that's what Auror Tonks told me happened. Something about Harry Potter being pretty certain Draco was to blame for all this."

"What about the poisoned Mead?"

"Horace wanted a nice bottle of Mead for the Headmaster and I ordered it and held it here until he came to pick it up."

"So you didn't put any poison in it?"

"No! I'm not that kind of person!"

"Did you ever see Draco in your shop when you had the bottle of Mead in question?"

"No, he only came in once at the beginning of the year."

"You didn't see anyone in your store room then?"

"Only the occasional ten year old trying to snitch a butterbeer."

"Do you believe Draco was behind the cursed artifact and the poisoned mead?"

"I do."

"Your witness, Miss Harker."

Helena smiled graciously as she approached the Wizengamot. "There is a difference between what someone believes and what is true. Isn't that right, Rosalind?"
"Yes."

"I mean, I could say that I believe during the war, you trafficked in poisons for the Death Eaters, correct?"

"I most certainly did not! That was Aberforth; and I know most of his poisons were fake. Horace was supplying them and slipping in actual poisons as the antidotes, hoping to knock off a few of the dangerous and stupid Death Eaters."

"My apologies, Madam Rosmerta. What illicit substances were you trafficking?"

"I..." she clamped her mouth shut, but the wand-oath made her blurt it out anyways. "Brimstone Potion. Acromantula Venom. Unicorn blood. Nothing evil, nothing bad... just... restricted items."

"So you didn't sell banebury, bloodroot, or moonseed? All of those ingredients are in some of the worst poisons imaginable."

"The local apothecary shut down, and women still needed their contraception potions. Those plants aren't illicit by themselves, but I also don't have license to sell the potion, so I can get them the ingredients and hand them the directions to make it themselves." Rosalind explained, her voice pleading. "I was doing a good thing."

"You knowingly had poisonous items in your pub. You ordered mead and handed it over to Horace Slughorn, who was going to gift it to Albus Dumbledore. If the supplier isn't in the business of killing its clients with poison, that leaves you as legally responsible for the poisoning of Ronald Weasley."

"You can't prove I put the poison into the mead!" She exclaimed, eyes tearing up.

"No, but I can prove he was poisoned with bloodroot, and you're not supposed to have that in a pub where you serve the public."

"I..." tears rolled down her cheeks, "I was under the Imperius Curse! Even if I did do it, I'm not at fault for it."

Helena frowned sympathetically. "I know. But you weren't under any curse when you started selling contraband and Infernal-class potions. Chief Mugwump, I ask that the court be lenient and exercise compassion when charging her. I'm done with this witness."

Ogden frowned and pointed to Harry. "Please detain her and have her charged for... misdemeanor possession of restricted substances."

Hermione looked shocked. "What just happened?"

Severus spoke up. "Helena just saved her from being charged with gross negligent manslaughter and for trafficking poisonous items. And destroyed her credibility against Draco." Rosalind Rosmerta is a well-respected and well-loved woman, and Helena just gently destroyed her reputation to save my son.

"Harry Potter, you're the next witness." The prosecutor said as the crying woman was lead out of the courtroom.

Harry found himself in the witness chair, having the Ministry clerk wand-oath him to tell the truth to the best of his recollection. He squirmed at that, since he had a lot only on pure belief without actual
evidence. Draco just looked at him lovingly while Harry worried that he would get his boyfriend sent to prison if he were too honest.

"Alright Harry, over two years ago, you were convinced that Draco had taken the Dark Mark and was up to something, correct?" William Coxley looked smug, and it made him dislike the prosecutor even more.

"Yes, but I never saw the Dark Mark until the skirmish at Hogwarts at the end of the year."

"You and he didn't get along that year, did you?"

"No, I almost killed him using an unknown spell when I caught him in the girls' bathroom."

"What were you two doing in the girls' bathroom together?"

"Shooting spells at each other, obviously. I heard crying and went in, heard Draco say something about having to do it on his own, like he was being forced to."

"Then what happened?"

"He heard me, threw a hex at me, and I retaliated. Sliced him open and nearly watched him bleed out if not for Snape."

"When did you know he was behind the poisoned mead?"

"He said he did it when he held Albus at wand-point. But Albus Dumbledore said that it was a pretty poor choice for assassination, as if he wanted to get caught."

"Hearsay from a dead man cannot be admitted as evidence."

"I saw memories where Albus actually planned to die at Severus' hand as a mercy-killing. Maybe you could ask me about that?"

"Mister Potter, I'm the one asking questions here."

"Then you should get back to it, Coxley." Some of the judges in the Wizengamot chuckled at that.

"As I was saying, you were certain he was behind the attacks."

"I only had a theory, actually. I never saw him around either attack."

"Auror Potter, are you trying to get him off on purpose?"

Harry tried to bite his tongue, but the words came out anyway. "No, I got him off earlier."

"I beg your pardon?" William seemed genuinely shocked at that.

"I'd beg for him to get a pardon if I thought it would do any damn good, actually." Harry blurted out, looking embarrassed. Helena stood and cleared her throat for attention.

"I would like to remind my colleague that he has sworn to tell the truth to the best of his ability, and that perhaps he ought to watch how he phrases his questions."

"Got him... are you romantically involved with Draco?"

"Yes." Harry said, giving a brave face as the Wizengamot gasped in shock.
"Then how can I believe your testimony?"

"Because I'm under a wand-oath and I didn't want to have to admit that I'm in love with him and jeopardize my career! Or hurt his chances of being found not guilty because he had acted under duress; being forced to take the Dark Mark before he came of age and having his mother's life held hostage by Voldemort!"

"Mister Potter, that will be all." Harry was on a roll and wasn't about to stop there.

"I was there when Draco would have killed Dumbledore! Not only didn't he, Draco could not get himself to do it. He is no killer, and Severus Snape did it out of mercy because he promised Albus he'd do it to secure his position under Voldemort!"

The prosecutor reeled back, facing the Wizengamot. "I'd like Auror Potter's testimony to be stricken from the record, he obviously is not an objective witness."

Helena countered him. "That is why Auror Potter attempted to recuse himself from testifying in the first place. As did Narcissa and Hermione Granger-Black. I move that his testimony stay and that I get to cross-examine him as well."

"Why? If he's admitted to sucking cock, he's bloody useless for anything else!"

"My condolences to your useless wife, Coxley." Helena replied, facing Harry as the prosecutor sputtered in rage. "You were a witness when Katie Bell was cursed, when Ron was poisoned, and when Albus died, correct?" She asked Harry.

"I was." Harry replied as the Wizengamot began to argue among themselves. Chief Mugwump cast a silencing charm over them all and stopped the questioning.

"Solicitor Harker, it is the opinion of this Court that Harry Potter's testimony be stricken."

"He just admitted to being a witness to all three crimes in question. I believe his testimony would be quite illuminating, if the goal is to find out the truth." She countered, politely.

"His testimony is rejected and should vacate the chair." Harry stood up, glad to be done.

"Will his relationship with the defendant also be stricken so as to not be a besmirchment on his character, judging from the homophobia I see before me." Helena stood firm on that, and the Chief Mugwump nodded angrily his acceptance.

"Noted. Next witness."

William tried to compose himself as he called Horace Slughorn to the chair. Harry began to wand-oath this witness as well, but Ogden objected to this as well.

"Let someone else do this. Bring McLaggen back in here."

Cormac was let back inside, an apologetic look on his face as he relieved Harry of his duties. Harry shrugged it off as he sat next to Hermione, much to the chagrin of Chief Mugwump Ogden.

"Mister Potter, you have no business remaining in this courtroom." He said sternly.

Helena didn't miss a beat. "You heard the man; you're being ejected for no good reason save for being the war hero whose life was saved by the defendant. Give my best to Rita."

The members of the Wizengamot muttered to the point that Ogden had to cast another silencing
charm. "You may stay, Harry."

The prosecutor nervously flashed his smile. "Horace Slughorn, what was your connection to Draco Mal- Granger-Black?"

"I was his Potions Professor and his Head of House last year."

"In your opinion, do you think he could poison someone?" Horace stiffened at that.

"I believe anyone could poison anyone at anytime. It's not a difficult concept to grasp. I've seen a few students accidentally poisoned themselves."

"Did Draco have any problem with Ronald Weasley?"

"Not that I knew of; they were on opposite sides of the war, but it had not started yet."

"Could Draco have gotten a poison into the mead that you intended to give Albus?" Slughorn shook his head sadly.

"No, I got that bottle directly from Rosalind, and I had it in my warded cabinet. There was no way he could have put the poison in once I had it. That's what shocked me when Ron was being poisoned; it could have put me away in Azkaban for even having that."

"So you're telling me there is no way that Draco could have poisoned that mead?" The solicitor seemed dubious.

"No way at all. It had to have been poisoned before she gave it to me."

"Horace, you do realize you're not on trial here, correct?" He seemed to nearly sweat under the Wizengamot's scrutiny.

"Rosalind left the witness chair detained and charged, so forgive me if I seem nervous."

"Did Draco ever seem troubled, did he come to you about the problems in his life? That he was in need of help to kill people?"

"Nobody in Slytherin came to me, because they all thought I was untrustworthy. As for being troubled, You-Know-Who was back, so yes, everyone felt 'troubled'. But he never came to me asking how to off someone, else I'd have turned him in." The prosecutor was looking foolish and he knew it.

"Do you think he did it? Do you think Draco did these crimes he's on trial for?"

"I think he was in over his head because of his father's allegiances and was forced to play along."

"Did. He. Do. It?"

"It isn't my place to judge, now is it? Besides, what I think isn't admissible as testimony. All I can say is that I have no proof that he did those things, save for having the Dark Mark."

"Your witness." Coxley seemed resigned at this, and started looking over his notes for the next witness as Helena cautiously approached the Potions Professor.

"Do you admit serving the mead to Ronald Weasley?"

"Yes, but I didn't know it was-"
"You teach Potions, do you not?"

"I do, but I-"

"So you were either unable to detect the poison, or you knowingly poisoned him. Are you inept or a criminal mastermind?"

"Inept, I guess. I don't have my Mastery in potions like Severus does."

"Does ignorance of the law save someone from prosecution?"

"No, of course not." Horace's face scrunched in thought as he saw where this was going.

"Does ignorance of the poison used save someone from prosecution?" Slughorn frowned at that and shook his head.

"No, it does not."

"I noticed you had your pardon for your actions during the war; namely, trafficking the 'poisons' and restricted items to Aberforth Dumbledore and Rosalind Rosmerta. Quite a few of the worst snatchers and a Death Eater or two met untimely deaths during the war as you profited off of their paranoia, am I right?"

"I... I had to make my enterprise seem convincing, so I had to turn a profit."

"Yet you claim to be inept rather than a criminal mastermind. How much was the bounty for Harry? Or for his friends, Ron and Hermione?"

"I was NEVER going to kill them for profit!" His mouth spat out the answer against his own will. "Ten Thousand Galleons. But I wasn't going-"

"Did you, or did you not, receive a substantial amount of gold just after Ron's near-fatal poisoning?"

"I don't know who left me the Galleons, I assumed it was a thank-you gift because one of my rare Bezoars was sacrificed to save that boy."

"You poured the very drink meant to poison him and Harry. You got rewarded handsomely afterwards. I'm fairly certain you should be leaving this courtroom bound by law and charged with murder for hire."

Horace turned to the Chief Mugwump, tears streaming down his face. "Tiberius, you know I fought against You-Know-Who in the end. Don't do this, please."

"Chief Mugwump, we are currently having a trial against a boy who was barely of age and there is not one shred of evidence that he tried to kill anyone. Professor Slughorn, however, has admitted to criminal activity and serving a poison that would have killed Harry and Ron. He even got paid for this. Drop the charges against Draco, please."

He spat out his reply. "McLaggen, take him into custody. The trial continues."

"I call Ronald Bilius Weasley to testify." The prosecutor turned to the redhead and grimaced as he realized that the young man had been left unconscious from the stunners from before the trial. Severus sighed as he fought the urge to roll his eyes as the trial became even more of a farce than it
was at the beginning.

Harry Potter went over to his friend and called out to the Wizengamot. "I'll go ahead and revive him, Solicitor Coxley, unless you think this is witness tampering?" Severus fought a smirk as Harry's dry humor was the slap in the face that Ogden needed.

Before too long, Ronald was alert and Harry had to explain that his mother had been detained and was having a restraining order lodged against her for threatening to kill Narcissa in the courtroom. Ron seemed annoyed at the injustice of it all, though Harry just shrugged it off and pointed out that Molly should have behaved better.

"Yeah, maybe. But everyone knows she has a temper and didn't mean her threat. She's had seven children, she's a good person, she's my mum..." Ron muttered something under his breath. "At least Draco's getting his day in court."

Severus could see Harry wince at that. Did Ronald not know about them?

Ron was put into the witness chair and given the wand-oath as the Prosecutor seemed more confident with the new line of questions.

"Ronald, you saw Katie Bell get cursed, correct?"

He nodded uncertainly. "I heard something, then I saw Katie levitating, and she looked like a curse was on her, and she fell to the ground. I missed seeing the first part, but saw most of it."

"Good. What cursed her?"

"Well, obviously the cursed necklace in the package she was holding."

"Do you know who gave her the necklace?"

"Harry says it was Draco. I believe him, though I'm not certain how Malfoy there didn't kill himself holding it first."

"What was Harry's proof that it was Draco?"

"Before the school year began, we followed him as he went into Borgin and Burke's. It's a creepy shop, he's a creepy kid. Cursed items, poison in chocolate cauldrons and mead bottles... I mean, I thought he was going off the deep end at first by always saying it was Malfoy's fault, but clocks are right two times a day."

The prosecutor looked over his notes. "Chocolate cauldrons?"

"Yeah, I ate them which was what got me and Harry to Slughorn's in the first place. Apparently they were loaded with love potions and I couldn't stop asking about Romilda Vane."

"So Romilda Vane tried to poison you?"

"Wha? No, they were Harry's, actually. I mean, apparently she gave them to him, and I first thought they were mine, so I ate them... am I in trouble with the law for poisoning myself?" Some quiet laughs were heard from the Wizengamot as the prosecutor shook his head in what he must have thought was a supportive way. Severus would have called it absolutely patronizing.

Ogden waved away Ron's fears. "It's not a crime to possibly, potentially kill someone with a love potion. If that were true, every time I went out for dinner could be considered attempted murder by
some hag witch!" The legality of love potions has always confused me; we make the Imperius Curse illegal but stealing someone's free will with a potion is perfectly fine?

Coxley laughed nervously as if to curry favor with the Chief Mugwump. "So Harry took you to see Slughorn. Then what happened?"

Ron shrugged. "I was really wanting to see Romilda, and I was given a tonic, and when I took it, the love potions were countered. Merlin, I went from flying high to flat on my face in a matter of seconds."

"Then came the mead?" Ron nodded.

"I drank it, I choked, Harry saved me. But I know Draco did it, Malfoy has always been an evil git."

"What makes you say that?"

"Let me see... besides the fact that he's buggering my best friend?" Obviously the ginger boy knows. "He called 'Mione a Mudblood loads of times in school."

Helena interrupted the questioning. "Childhood antics and calling someone a name in school over 5 years ago isn't a crime. Nor are the acts between two consenting adults. I move that the irrelevant information be removed from this trial."

Ogden wore an unfriendly smile as he spat out "Granted."

"Did anyone else drink the mead in the room?"

"No, I slammed mine down like a shot, and they stopped from drinking as the potion took effect immediately. Least that is what I was told."

"Do you believe Draco is capable of murder?"

"Of course, he's a Malfoy."

"No more questions." William's renewed smugness unnerved Severus. Perhaps he's a fool, deluding himself that he's finally 'winning' this.

Helena smiled, her eyes glinting predatorily as she addressed the witness. "Draco's last name is now Granger-Black. You've heard about this, correct?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Once a Malfoy, always a Malfoy. He's got the Dark Mark, he should be chucked in Azkaban and never see the light of day again."

"Your opinion is noted. Now, did you see Draco anywhere near Katie Bell, the Three Broomsticks, or carrying the necklace that cursed her?"

"No, I didn't but-" His face went red in anger.

"Did you see him around Madame Rosmerta, carrying a bottle of poison or a bottle of mead?"

"Well, no-" Ron was absolutely scarlet as he was getting railroaded.

"And we know he didn't kill Albus Dumble, either. Thank you."

Ron blew up at that. "That FAG has corrupted my best friend!"
Harry was bewildered at that. "Ron!" It was like he was seeing him for the first time.

"Look mate, I get that Hermione's in a tough spot with his mom and the Ministry's been decent enough to break them up legally. But how could you let that... monster... put its thing inside you?"

Severus' breath caught as a deafening silence crashed in the room. The trial was essentially suspended as Harry staggered at Ron's words.

"I love him, Ron." Harry seemed conflicted as Ron sat between the two lovers. Ron, you ignorant prat, please shut up...

Ron flinched at that, as his words chilled the room. "You can't stick your cock in shite and call it love!"

Severus knew it was only a second or so, but the silence seemed to go on for an eternity before Helena addressed the court.

"Wizengamot, I respectfully request to have Ronald Weasley removed."

"He's allowed to speak, at least he's making sense!" The prosecutor cut in, and the Wizengamot seemed torn on this decision.

"My client's personal relationship is not on trial, only the crimes he's been accused of committing."

"The fact that he's bollocks deep in evil seems to be a contributing factor!"

Ogden cast a silencing charm that broke seconds later as the Wizengamot kept talking behind him.

"Are you calling Harry Potter evil, or the consensual acts between two adults that is none of your business evil?"

"Both, if they are engaging in sodomy! It is an unnatural perversion!"

"SILENCE! We're going to take a recess, Ronald Weasley may be excused, and I want the next witness on the chair and ready to testify in ten minutes, is that clear!" The solicitors nod their agreement as Hermione and Narcissa make their way to talk to Draco in the Iron Maiden. Ron rolls his eyes at that, grateful to be able to leave.

Harry, however, stands in his way. What on earth is Potter playing at?

"Bloody hell, Harry, get out of my way."

"I think I deserve an explanation."

"Okay. If you two keep going on like this, you're going to destroy our society. Pretty much let You-Know-Who win and render all we fought for in the war moot."

"Me being in love with Draco is nothing like his Pureblood supremacy! I'm not trying to chuck muggle sympathizers into prisons nor round up muggle-borns so the Dementors can eat up all their souls."

"This isn't love, though! What's the end goal, for you two to 'marry' like 'Mione and his mom are? Destroy the institution of marriage completely? I mean, you two can't have children."

"We've barely started seeing each other. But so far, he's great with Teddy."
"Are you going to brainwash that kid into thinking what you two are doing is okay? Harry, that boy needs a mother."

"Andi is around still, and I don't think there's anything wrong with him having more than one male parental figure that loves him." Cormac was by Ron's side, trying to politely direct him out of the courtroom.

"What will you do when he starts to molest the boy to turn him gay, too?"

"You did not just say that. Draco wouldn't… Ron, do you think that's how it works? I'm in love with him, so naturally I must have been molested when I was younger?"

"Harry." McLaggen said, finally interrupting, "we're on a schedule." Severus saw Hermione put her hand on Harry's shoulder for support as Cormac lead a disgusted Ron out of the courthouse.

Hermione held her friend Harry as he quietly let tears roll down his cheeks and he turned into her, and she hugged him as she whispered that it would turn out okay.

Ron, however, never knew the finer points of being subtle. "I swear, it's some sort of curse or potion with Harry. Can we figure out what Draco did to him?"

Cormac just nodded to him as he got Ron out of the courtroom.

I had Harry in my arms, trying to pretend he wasn't crying. I knew to not acknowledge it as we went to sit down, Severus' robes sweeping behind him as he took the witness chair. Please may this go better. Narcissa reached out for my own hand and I noticed that she, too, was stoically trying to hold back tears. I conjured a pair of handkerchiefs and gave one to each of them. They both silently nodded their thanks as the fate of the boy they both loved was still unknown. When we were by Draco in the Iron Maiden, I was aghast at what Ron was saying, while Cissy frowned as if it were an old wound being opened again. I cannot let this hatred continue to thrive in this world. If my best friend is in love with my stepson, and they are both adults, then they should be allowed to be with each other without harassment.

"Severus Snape, you were a Death Eater in this past war, correct?" William said, warming up.

"Kingsley, is my immunity still going to be honored?" Severus asked, turning his head away from the solicitor.

"You will answer my question." He demanded, seemingly affronted that Snape would ignore him so blatantly.

"You know what my word is worth right now." Not much, then.

"I was granted immunity for being a double agent to help bring down The Dark Lord." The prosecutor seemed upset, as if he were hoping to get Severus off the witness chair and charged with a crime before he could be cross-examined by the defense. Is he starting to feel worried he's going to lose this?

"Was Draco ordered to kill anyone?"

"I never knew what The Dark Lord ordered Draco to do. However, I doubt that the Greatest Dark Wizard of the modern age had taken issue with one Katie Bell."

Members in the Wizengamot chuckled at that, fueling his frustration.
"Did you suspect Draco was ordered to kill someone?"

"Are you asking me if I thought that The Dark Lord, who was brought low when he tried to kill a baby, wanted someone dead?" The prosecutor's scowl sharpened as Severus drawled out, "Obviously, I did."

"So you admit that Draco was trying to kill someone?"

"I believe that is what you're trying to prove, not I. I only admit that when Hogwarts was infiltrated by Death Eaters, I walked into the Astronomy tower, and the other Death Eaters were egging him on to kill Albus. Seeing as I had already promised both his mother to protect him and help him complete whatever task The Dark Lord had given him, and promised Albus to ensure his death was painless and not blemishing Draco's own soul, I took out two bludgers with one swing."

"So you're admitting that you killed Albus for Draco's sake?"

"He was already slowly dying of a slow-moving curse that would prove to be as fatal as it would be painful. It was a merciful thing for him, and it secured my position among the Death Eaters and is why I have my immunity." Severus waited a second as if in thought. He turned to face Kingsley. "Minister, might I trouble you for a full pardon? I grow weary of having to repeat myself and my actions."

Kingsley's rich deep voice reverberated in the courtroom. "I'll sign it for you right now if you wish." The look proved that there would be no amicable resolution between the Minister and the Chief Mugwump.

"You cannot be pardoned during a trial!" The prosecutor lashed out.

"I'm not on trial, though. And Pardons are exclusively under the purview of the Minister. Your next question?"

"Don't patronize me, Snape!"

"When I do patronize you, Coxley, I'll do it in such a manner that even you will be able to understand it." Narcissa tittered at this, and I was hoping to see the transcript published in the Prophet. Even Harry smirked a little, happy to see someone else at the other end of Snape's barbed tongue.

"Fine! How did you know Draco was under orders to do something?"

"My first clue was when Lucius was in Azkaban and Draco was left at The Dark Lord's mercy. He had already been forced to take the mark, and I had it confirmed when Narcissa requested that I protect Draco and complete whatever his mission was."

"So you knew he was trying to kill Albus the entire school year and did nothing about it?"

"Of course not. Albus thought that might be the case, but had every head of house make discrete inquiries about the attacks. I was being optimistic and hoped that Draco was there to spy on me and to inform The Dark Lord of my treachery to get me killed faster. I only knew for certain that Draco was to kill Albus when the Death Eaters were in the castle."

"Then why did you agree to kill him before you knew for certain, eh? I always knew there was something fishy about your story!"

"I had concluded that it was a possibility, but the machinations of Albus Dumbledore are best
explained by the man himself."

"Do you expect me to call a dead man to the witness chair, Snape? You ought to know that Inferi can't talk." Well, normal Inferi can't talk, but the ones the Goblins made with the Resurrection Spell could...

"There are multiple portraits of him; I'm certain he can take time out of his otherwise busy day of looking at a wall and pretending to nap." And now he's definitely patronizing him.

"Did you ever see Draco with a bottle of wine or a vial of potion?"

"Of course not, I was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts that year. I would suggest you ask his Potions professor..." Severus trailed off, looking to the doors where he had been carted off and charged. The way he pointed, however, was telling and I realized he was sending a message to us. I looked to my left and saw Narcissa scribble something down on a slip of parchment and hand to Helena.

**Please offer to defend Horace Slughorn, Severus deems it important.**

Helena nodded, handing the slip of paper back to my wife who then erased the ink from the page. *Bloody hell, these Slytherins are smooth.* It took a moment to realize that I was among them now, and the thought oddly comforted me. The Sorting Hat once sang that in Slytherin, you find out who your friends really are. Before I had taken it as a vague threat. Now I see it as their saving grace.

"He's all yours, Harker." The prosecutor snapped as Helena smiled nicely, said she had no questions for him, and dismissed Severus from the chair.

Cissy's emotions had been on a roller coaster today, she had gone from being convinced that Draco was going to be found guilty to innocent, and it was then that it seemed the frustrated prosecutor had decided to throw the entire rulebook out the window.

"I call Narcissa Malfoy Granger Black, or whatever the hell she wants to call herself now, to testify."

Miss Harker was already objecting. "She cannot be compelled to testify against her will concerning her own son." Narcissa silently shook her head, indicating that she wouldn't volunteer to take the witness chair. William Coxley frowned then, pointing at Hermione.

"Fine, I call the witch she's ensnared as a lover, Hermione Malfoy!" He spat the wrong last name venomously, and the blond witch glanced over to see her wife appear frazzled but otherwise calm.

"I claim the same exemption, seeing as he is legally recognized at my son as well."

"The Ministry does not recognize any such union, and he is not a blood relative."

Hermione's eyes blazed at that comment. "The Ministry be damned, he IS my son, and the magical bonding IS in effect!"

"If you're trying to protect him, I will find you in contempt of court, charge that you conspired with him to do those murders, and compel you to testify with Veritaserum as a hostile witness!" Narcissa saw that the prosecutor wasn't bluffing and that the Chief Mugwump had been hoping that it would come to this. *Are they trying to destroy Hermione? Or do they see our relationship as some sort of threat?*

"I must object to this; the Wizengamot cannot compel testimony with Veritaserum, it goes against a
citizens' right to not incriminate themselves. And my client does indeed have a magical binding that recognizes Draco as her son." Solicitor Harker seemed to be keeping a cool head about all this, but Narcissa began to worry about exactly how much she had figured out and could be forced to answer about Draco's involvement before and during the war. **Could they glean enough from her to prove Draco's guilt, and were they really trying to pin the crimes onto her as well?**

"You are treading a very fine line, Solicitor. Now, Miss Granger will testify or be arraigned as a part of the conspiracy to assassinate Albus Dumbledore."

"If that is the crime you wish to put on trial, perhaps you ought to charge the very man who has already been pardoned for killing Albus? Better yet, put Albus himself on the stand, and he'll tell you he conspired to kill himself. And for as long as I've studied the law, not one person was ever found guilty and sent to prison for killing themselves."

"Put someone on trial for having killed himself? That is preposterous!"

"What is preposterous is the legitimacy of this court, going after a boy who has not been proven of doing anything illegal, other than failing to kill Albus Dumbledore while under duress."

"Miss Harker, you are very close to being found in contempt of court!" Ogden declared, "Arrest Hermione Granger and charge her with conspiracy. I want her and Draco under Veritaserum, we will get to the bottom of this now!"

Everyone in the courtroom froze for a second as Cormac glanced back up, hoping he had misheard the Chief Mugwump. Dedalus Diggle looked out to Helena and winked. The solicitor gave the barest nod and looked over to Draco, who stood proud and tall while still within the cage.

"Merlin knows I'm innocent. I will have his judgment, free of the machinations of scheming men. I invoke trial by combat!"
A/N: In case you were curious, I've been using 17th century great britain and their law system as inspiration here. It was invoked but stopped by King Charles I in 1631, and last invoked and judgment passed by death in (naturally, Scotland) 1597. (Prosecutor Adam Bruntfield defeated Defendant James Carmichael for, ironically, murder.) France's Judicial Combat saw its last fight in 1386, overseen by King Charles VI in Paris.

Can you actually do that? I wondered, and judging from the murmurs and the court clerk being sent to grab the lawbooks on it, even the Wizengamot didn't know. Looking at Draco and Helena, I realized that this must have been plan omega.

The Chief Mugwump tried to dismiss the idea entirely. "Harker, nobody has invoked that for hundreds of years, what are you and your playing at with this barbaric attempt to avoid justice?"

Draco spoke up. "Barbaric is setting up a kangaroo court looking to punish a family that opposes your fascist, homophobic, anti-Pureblood agenda."

"Little boy, I fought Grindelwald's forces when your father was in nappies, don't call me fascist!"

"Well, you exterminated the Goblins, seized the bank for the Ministry to own, and you're scapegoating a disliked minority as you pass laws to deal with a non-existent problem!"

"I was merely doing what had to be done! Clerk, what's the ruling on trial by combat?"

"Chief Mugwump, it appears that it is still a valid maneuver, however a sitting judge on the case must allow them to fight to the death."

Ogden cackled loudly. "Well I'm not going to, and nobody else here is going to authorize it either."

Daedalus Diggle spoke up then. "Actually I think I will." Ogden's head spun, fury in his eyes. "One combat for Draco and Hermione, unless you feel the need to see more people die?"

Before he could say anything, I stood, a wand in each hand. "I volunteer to fight for my son. Who has to die now?" I hand the Elder Wand. Nobody could defeat me.

Ogden mulled it over, looking at Solicitor Coxley and wondered if he could defeat the little girl. The clerk spoke up again, voice apologetic for the interruption. "Sir, she is allowed to volunteer. But as the presiding judge, you may choose the weapon."

"I need a volunteer to duel on behalf of the Wizengamot. Anyone?" There was complete silence; even Coxley wasn't that committed to this trial.

Diggle spoke up from behind him. "If you're so certain of his guilt, Chief Mugwump, perhaps you should be the one down there." Ogden’s face went red in rage.

"Coxley, I'll triple your going rate for this, and let you choose the weapon. Make it non-magical, she
seems to enjoy dual-wielding wands."

William smiled as he counted how many Galleons that would be, and shrugged happily. "I get away with killing the Sodomite Slayer of You-Know-Who? Then I choose the Rapier and Main-gauche, since the dyke wants to use both hands."

"Rapier? I don't know how to use a rapier! "Helena, I don't know how to use a sword! What do I do?"

"I can fight in your place, but I will require-" She's bargaining for more Galleons now?

"I don't care, save my son, I'll do anything!" As soon as I said that, Narcissa's hands were covering my mouth and pulling me back towards her.

"Helena, no!" She said fearfully, and I wondered what on earth had her so scared. Helena's eyes locked onto mine and I could have sworn the eyes glowed with dark red embers. Everything is going to be okay. She will take care of this, she will protect you and your family...

"We have an accord." Helena extended her hand to me, and I reached out to shake it. "Don't worry, I've practiced this extensively back at Court." Her wording confused me. 'At' Court, not 'in' court? As she shook, she twisted my hand just enough to make me gasp in pain.

"Chief Mugwump, her wrist seems sprained. As her Second, I will take her place." I hope she knows what she's doing.

Narcissa sat at the edge of her seat, the fate of her son and wife depending on the vampire's agility with a blade. She hated the price she had to pay to bail Lucius out of jail, but would be willing to suffer it again for Draco and Hermione. What about the life growing inside of me? Narcissa wasn't certain what blood loss might do to the fetus, but she couldn't worry about that right now. Helena was telegraphing her moves sluggishly so that her opponent would underestimate her, appearing to grip the rapier in her right hand too tightly while slashing erratically with the main gauche in her left. As strategies went, it was fine, though it did concern her if she could actually win this.

William came at her and she dodged his first strike easily enough; his strike was nothing more than a feint though as his main gauche sliced through her robes, eliciting a gasp from the Wizengamot as deep red spilled forth. Helena seemed legitimately surprised as she turned and slashed back at him, though he parried her blade with his own. Hermione took Narcissa's hand in a fearful grip, obviously nervous about what the fatal turnout would mean for them.

Coxley made another slice at her, which she deftly blocked with her rapier, leaving her side exposed slightly as his main gauche sunk deep into her side. He smiled gleefully as he pulled out the dagger and his hand was covered in black-red blood.

Hermione gasped at the sight of it, burying her face into Cissy's chest. "I can't watch this, I can't see our sons fate decided like this." She held the Gryffindor, lips pressed to her forehead as her eyes were locked onto the deadly dance playing out in the courtroom. Helena spun with an inhuman quickness that shocked Narcissa as her main gauche twisted in the air, deftly cutting across the back of William's right wrist and almost making him drop his arm. The cut had his own blood running down his forearm, but the smile on his face suggested that he thought it was nothing more than a lucky strike. They thrusted and parried, stepped around each other as all four blades clicked and sliced through the air as they tested each other.

The fluid movements became faster, and all pretenses dropped as the movements and blocks began
to blur as Harker realized that the wizard was going to be a challenge to her after all. Neither seemed to be going for the kill with the rapier, but instead used it to get closer and use the main gauche to keep cutting and bleeding their opponent. She wasn’t able to stab him properly as he seemingly kept turning out of the way. *The bastard was obviously trained on this, it seems.*

The metal met with metal as Helena completed a complicated spin, lunging her rapier like a fencing foil and only met the empty air. She had expected to not only hit her target, but was convinced that it would have been the killing blow as she had gone for his heart. A heavy cracking sound filled the air as William’s hand sank viciously and the bottom of the rapier’s pommel crushed her skull. Helena collapsed to the ground, stilled and broken as thick, black blood pooled where her head had been hit at full speed. Chief Mugwump Ogden smiled, his eyes shining with his victory.

"Narcissa?" Hermione muttered into my chest, tears running down between us.

"I’ll ask for leniency, ’Mione." She replied, shocked at her defeated solicitor on the ground.

"Well, well. Good job, Coxley. Looks like I can sentence both Draco and Hermione to-" There was a blur as William Coxley's head was turned with a sickening crunch, his neck was exposed and bleeding freely into the porcelain-skinned vampire's mouth. Less than a heartbeat later, Helena Harker gagged and shoved him away from her, throwing the main gauche to pierce his heart and leave him dead on the floor. Helena gasped and gagged, spitting equally black blood from her own mouth. She was as pale as death as she doubled over, one hand on her knee while the other covered up the gaping hole in her skull so that nothing injured her brain. Her stomach heaved rhythmically like a cat might before coughing up an hairball, and she was fighting it every step of the way.

"I... *glurk...* move for a verdict in my favor." Harker fell to her knees, coughing a wet, viscous sound as if she were about to vomit up her organs. Her bleeding ceased, but the wounds stayed open as rolled onto her side and curled into a ball, seizing profusely as her undead body worked out the toxins.

Ogden was left speechless as he hoped that Coxley would get up and finish her, shocked that his fortune reversed so quickly. "How did... this..."

"Buggering... brimstone addict." Helena coughed again, leaving a spray of black and red blood in front of her in pin-thin lines. "The ruling, Ogden?"

Narcissa’s relief was reflected in Hermione as she turned to take in the gore herself. Harry was cautiously approaching Helena as McLaggen checked Coxley for vitals and shook his head. "Proven innocent by combat. Draco and Hermione may go." Tiberius Ogden looked thoroughly disappointed.

"Clerk, I’d like a copy of... ruling." Helena got herself back up to her palms and knees, swaying as she tried to stay upright. The stunned clerk nodded as he cast the duplication spell, holding it out awkwardly as Draco was released from the Iron Maiden and collected it from him.

Narcissa’s arms were outstretched as Draco ran to embrace his mothers while Helena finally got up to her feet.

"She’s a vampire!" Hermione said, realization finally sinking in. Narcissa held them both, relief on their faces as Draco thanked the fates one more time.

"Why yes, she is... she mistook Snape for one once and he gives her endless grief for it."

The three-way hug ended and a ragged looking Helena had a sickly sneer on her face.
"I have been gravely injured and require payment now."

Hermione looks on confusedly while a cowed Narcissa gathers her courage and hands her wand and personal possessions to her. "I'll be back in a few hours. Have some blood replenishing and dreamless sleep ready, Sev." She couldn't hide the haunted look on her face as Hermione understood what the price was.

"No, you can't!" She exclaimed, seeing the memory with Lucius in her mind all over again.

Helena's eyes seemed to burn with need as her fangs shone prominently. "You made a bargain, and that is my cost." The glamour she uses to pass for human is slipping, she's losing what little control she has left.

Narcissa put a hand on her wife's shoulder to calm her. "It's okay, 'Mione. I'll be fine." Helena turned her head back and forth slowly as her eyes lingered on Hermione hungrily.

"Actually, I'm more into... veal, Cissy. You were wonderful before, but..." the fingernails from her free hand swept back hair, exposing Hermione's neck, "I hear '79 is a great year..." Narcissa felt only a sliver of relief as she realized that she wasn't on the menu.

"Don't ruin her, please." Narcissa begged as Helena's expression seemed to ask why. "She's my wife; I love her."

"It will hurt her more without... the distraction." Narcissa shook her head at Harker's objection.

"I vehemently disagree." Hermione, the embodiment of Gryffindor bravery, put her arm around the solicitor and helped her out of the courtroom.

I apparated the pair of us back to Granger Manor and tried to figure out where to do this. Helena seemed mostly out of it, drifting in and out of consciousness as I situated us in an unused bedroom that was next to the nursery.

"Herpy, I'll need a pain-relieving and a blood-replenishing potion here, okay?" I called out, setting the near-dead vampire into horrid chintz armchair as I stripped out of the blood-smeared jacket and pulled the collar of my blouse away from my neck.

If the chair gets destroyed or covered in blood, I could look forward to burning it at least.

Helena seemed to be between purring and growling, like a drunken feral cat who couldn't decide between attacking or falling asleep. "Rrrrr... redd." She's slurring her words, will she be able to feed from me?

"Red? Helena, what do you need me to do?" I asked, uncertainly.

"Read...dy?" I nodded, my breath shuddering in fear. She must have smelled it, because she looked up at me and her eyes shone at me, the pupils gone from red to bright gold as I fell into them, my own gaze locked into hers as my body was seized and held fiercely. Relax, all is well. I was warm, soft, and blissful as I felt lips meet my neck and teeth graze as her mouth opened around me. Fall into it, you know you want to.

I melted into her embrace, moaning softly and begging her to do it as the teeth bit and sharp pain spiked through me, my eyes shot open in surprise. Everything that had been soft and wonderful was now harsh and painful. I struggled to get away, but the arms had an iron grip on me. Helena's purring growl was even louder now, a feral and inhuman sound as I could feel the jaw working on my neck, her mouth sucking on my lifeblood as my heartbeat pumped away into her.
Get out, shove her off, run away! My mind and body were spiking with adrenaline and I needed to escape! I wanted to survive this! She was so far gone she might not stop!

"Harker!" I called out, wriggling my legs and arms ineffectively as I realized I was pinned to the ground, "stop... please..."

She kept drinking away, moving her grip to let a hand claw and rip open my blouse, claw-like fingers hooking around my bra and ripping that apart as well. I screamed in fear, feeling exposed as her hand gripped my breast firmly as she pulled her mouth out of the wound on my neck.

"I want more. More!" I crab-walked away from Helena, who was stalking me on all fours and ready to pounce me again.

"No! Please!" I pulled out my wand to repel her, but my vision went grey as she turned into a blur before me. The room went dark again as I felt another bite, but much more painful on my neck, as I fell unconscious.

Narcissa and Draco went home as quickly as the Ministry would allow them, grateful to find Severus already there and tending to Hermione. Helena had her fill and left, looking somewhat aggrieved over the scars that she left on her client.

"Sev?" Narcissa asked, fearful at the sight of her unconscious wife.

"The vampire regained enough of her wits to immediately bandage the wounds, then dosed her with the proper potions, so she will be fully healed in due time. The scarring around her neck should fade in a fortnight." Severus flicked his wand out and cast the ennervate charm. A shaky breath later, the Gryffindor fought to get her eyes open.

"Hermione! You're okay!" Hermione seemed seriously dehydrated and worn out, like she had lived a decade in the past hour. Hermione's voice wavered slightly as there was a rasping note to it now. Her vocal cord was injured. It would heal in time, but until then she'd be reminded of the horror of it all. Narcissa saw scar tissue healing on either side of her neck, and some sort of wound under her left beast.

"I didn't sign up to be her snack food." Between her scraggly hair, dead eyes, and her flat-empty voice, Hermione seemed to be missing something. Cissy couldn't figure out if it was a spark of her youth, or the last shreds of her innocence.

"Well, wife, you kind of did. Never say that you'll do anyth-" The coldness in her glare was perfect for a Malfoy, and Narcissa knew to heed her.

"I want you to listen carefully. Pack up my stuff and have Herpy deliver it to my room at Hogwarts. I don't want to see this house again." What about us?

"Are... are we okay?" Narcissa mumbled, fearful of seeing her off. Hermione's hand painfully twisted to check her pocket, pulling out the vial she got from Rita.

"I'm going to get some doubts cleared. Confirmed. Whatever. I'll need a penseive too. But so far, I've have to give up my free will, my future, my virtue... now I have sacrificed whatever was left of my innocence for you. So, please... leave. me. alone."

"Hermione, I'm s-"

"Alone." There was a finality in that, and the Compulsion picked up on it like an order.
Narcissa nodded as her eyes reddened. "Thank you for saving our boy."

Narcissa was stunned at the pronouncement, her face slack as Herpy dutifully moved Hermione entirely out from their home.

"Severus? What if she was the one?" He brought her chamomile tea to soothe her frazzled nerves.

"You tried your best to do right by her, but some sins of the past don't wash off completely." She no longer trusts you, and wonders why she ever did.

"I tried to show her that I love her, that I changed... But, life got in the way. Sev, I wish I could convince her that this is real, that we are really happy, that the opinions of others don't matter because they don't really know what's going on between us..."

"But here you are. With an empty home. Wondering how it can get worse."

"Damn it, Severus, now's not the time to rub salt in the wound!"

"You want to know what salt in a wound feels like? Getting an Order of Merlin for my service in the war. I asked Albus, begged him, to save Lily when I heard of the Prophecy. When I realized The Dark Lord wouldn't try to save her, I offered to defect and stand sentry over her. I was willing to give up my life to protect her!

"Instead, he said he had taken precautions and that my place was to stay by The Dark Lord's side." A grim look went over his face. "I had to play the part of a loyal Death Eater, and pretend that the plans to kill her son didn't bother me. I still had to go on raids. I avoided killing people if possible up until then. But in the final days, nothing was sacred anymore. I had my part to play. Do you know how many innocent people I had to kill to ensure my position to protect Lily, James, and Harry?"

"I... I didn't know."

"I'm a decorated war hero now. I have witches trying to throw themselves at me, while people recoil in fear at Fleur because she apparently looks evil. The irony isn't lost on me, Cissy, as I now cannot even marry her to avoid getting captured by some glory Hound who loves the idea of having me without having the faintest clue about me as a person. You want to speak of love? I was helpless to protect Lily, then Nymphadora rejected me and let her heart turn to stone. While I can only visit their grave stones, Hermione is alive and well. You would do well to remember that."

"She's going to have to marry some wizard and have children with him and not me. How am I supposed to feel about that? Thank Slytherin she doesn't..."

Severus wanted to spit out something venomous, but swallowed it down instead. "You know the muggle saying. 'If you love her, let her go. If she comes back, she's yours forever. If she doesn't; she was never yours to begin with.' Perhaps you should heed those words now."

"But she doesn't know that I was letting her go so she could realize what I already have and come back. She can only assume the worst from our past and and is probably grateful to be rid of me."

"You don't know that. However, this is a path she has to take to come back to you. It is her choice now."

"But will she know she can come back? Does she know there is a choice?" That I want her back more than anything? That my life is a cruel kind of purgatory while she's gone?
"She knows she has a choice, and right now she has to think about herself and her own needs. There's a lot going on with her, and you just need to be patient." *I need patience*?! 

"Me, patient? Not all of us have the luxury of time to keep spurning women who love you."

"What are you talking about?" Severus asked, but Narcissa's mind was only on Hermione.

"She is going to marry some bloke because of a Ministry mandate rather than let Umbridge pair her up with someone. Then we're over."

"That's not what's on your mind." Severus closed his eyes and replayed the memory of the Measuring. "You never got a letter from the Ministry about the PoWFA law."

Narcissa shrugged. "Owls get lost, you saw me put my hand on the book and be Measured."

"The law only applies to witches who can get pregnant... Cissy, what did you do to yourself?" He looked at her more curiously now, realizing the occlumency she had stayed to employ was there for a reason.

She looked away shamefully. "Nothing. Just... I didn't want to put another child at the mercy of Lucius, and I'm glad I didn't have a second child forced to take the Dark Mark."

Severus' hand lifted her chin so that their eyes met. He didn't even try to enter her mind, it was silently written on her face. Severus looked alarmed, and she wanted to flinch away. "What did you do?!"

"Banebury! And Bloodroot. Little bit of moonseed."
Regret was in her voice, and she continued quickly, as if warding off his anger. "Not enough to kill me, just enough to keep my womb sick."

"And you did this for years." Severus' voice conveyed soft horror. "Why? You should have said something to me..."

"I couldn't trust anyone during the war, and after that he just assumed I was barren as he enjoyed other women instead. Besides, I wasn't about to tell you about my..." she cringed at the next part, "monthly visitor."

"And you're barren now because of it." Severus wanted to comfort her as he realized this, but something was niggling in the back of his mind. "No, that's not it. You quit taking the potion months ago, after The Dark Lord took away his..." he didn't want to say that out loud, "but then your bond transferred to Hermione, and you strengthened it after St. Mungo's... the latent healing should have repaired your womb as well." Severus raised his wand to cast a diagnostic charm, but Narcissa put her hands upon his.

"I was, Sev." The damn of emotions she had finally broke. "I'm pregnant."

As soon as I set foot in Hogwarts, Poppy had me in the hospital wing to treat my blood loss, severe dehydration, and kept me overnight for observation. Since I nearly bled to death, and because Severus insisted I stay as well, I didn't argue and fell asleep quickly.

My dreams that evening were surreal; I had been chased by a masked figure who blamed me for ruining everything, and my wand kept turning into a snake that bit my right wrist, pumping venom into me whenever I did magic. Eventually the masked stranger caught me, and his bone-white mask resembled The Dark Lord, though the hair sticking out around it had the dark and unruly curls of Bellatrix. Apparently she was still looking to find and kill me.
Rather than using her wand, she rushed in close to me, clasping my face with superhuman strength; her clawed hands digging into my flesh and making me bleed as she leaned in to give me the Dementor's Kiss. I had no time to grab my wand as I flailed my arms in fear, fingers touching the edge of the bone mask, nails catching and pulling just to have something to do before the masked face touched my own.

The sound was thick and slimy, but when the bone mask pulled away, I realized it was Voldemort's own skull. It had been steeped in Dark Magic, judging from the runes carved on the inside. My eyes went back up to meet Bella's face but I was surprised when I saw red eyes, slitted like a goat's, on my very own face. I was killing me. I was evil under it all.

I bolted awake, body sluggish as my arms tried to flail in protest as daylight and my son sat by my bedside.

"Just a bad dream, Hermione. You're okay, you're safe now." I panted slightly, remembering where I was. I gulped and took a slow, calming breath.

"Why are you here?" I asked, seeing a basket of fruit by me along with flowers and cards.

"Thanking you and sending you my regards and a speedy recovery. I'm told a fruit basket is the way to go. Harry took one apple already, said it was for luck." Draco shrugged as it put it on the table next to me.

I took a look at the label. "Figg's Grocer? You have something to do with this, don't you?" It's probably a good thing for us to have a grocer running again for the magical community.

Draco grinned at that. "Actually, you do. I heard you took mother shopping in a muggle grocer after the Wizarding World lost theirs at the end of the war, so I looked for a way to help everyone out. Arabella Figg's got a good head for business... you know, breeding Kneazles for profit... well, your parents let slip that she had a network of squibs who all had to run out of the country before. So, I pitched the idea that she corner the market, advertising it as completely Squib owned and operated. It would draw in the muggle-born and Pureblood alike, employ and give visibility to the squib community, and help us all see that we're all still people doing day-to-day stuff."

I didn't believe him. "And you just gave her the idea out of the goodness of your heart?" Draco had the audacity to look offended.

"Yeah, I mean, I also gave her a start-up loan with a 5% continually compounding interest rate that comes due in two years, but I also gifted her the land it's on so she never has to lease the building from someone or pay rent."

I scoffed out loud at that. "So we're silent partners and will be rolling in the Galleons all because people would prefer to shop for their groceries in the magical world?"

Draco nodded. "Yes! Owning a House-Elf is still a mark of prestige, and they couldn't send their elves off into the muggle world, now can they?"

I let out a breath of exasperation. "Draco, I don't like the idea of House Elf Slavery!"

"I know, neither does Arabella, but we can't just stop it immediately so we might as well exploit this. The grocer's mark-up could and should have people shopping in the Muggle world, but they'll just send their elves and the surcharge we take in will go to efforts to reform the conditions of House Elves."

I thought about that for a moment. A surcharge for exploitative working conditions for the House
"Elves? "I uh... I just don't know."

"Look, 'Mione. This is one of those cultural things that we can't fix overnight. What we can do is baby steps, giving them status as a sentient species so they're not just property and abused like chattel. That involves some heavy lobbying with Control of Magical Creatures. In time, maybe enact work reform laws giving them protected status and enforcing time off, granting them enough autonomy to have their own relationships of choice..."

"So we're fleecing money out of the xenophobic racists to funnel towards House-Elf reform?" I frowned at it, but they could alternatively shop in muggle stores themselves, which they would honestly never want to do.

"And providing the community a much-needed service and helping increase squib visibility, instead of letting their existence fuel fear against the muggles. You knew about the squib propaganda among the Pureblood Supremacists, right? Muggles were 'stealing magic' by unknown means and that's why we had squibs."

I rolled my eyes at that. "You never believed that, though, did you?"

"Of course not. Well, when I was really young I might have, but then I saw the Black family tree and saw how my grand-aunt married a distant cousin, and that my grandfather Cygnus was related to the Crabbes? It's the inbreeding that did it. The Goyles were almost as bad as the Gaunts were. I really hope I'm not distantly related to the Goyles."

"That... actually makes a lot of sense." I said it concerning the inbreeding and squib births, then realized he understood it to mean for the grocer.

"So you're okay with the plan?" Am I? I nodded, feeling tightness on my neck.

"Yeah but... what made you change your mind about House-Elves?"

"To tell you the truth, I was just like my father back when we had Dobby and Herpy. Dobby was always a bit odd, but Herpy kind to me despite how I treated her and Dobby. Then when Harry freed Dobby, Herpy was forced to bear the brunt of father's temper alone. I think Dobby was her only friend. By the time the Quidditch World Cup came around, Herpy was the only person I felt comfortable around to say I was scared of The Dark Lord coming back."

I blinked in surprise. "You just called her a person, not an elf."

Draco smiled at that. "Yeah, guess I did. Anyways, here's the pensieve you wanted. My mum... she's changed, just like I did. Whatever Skeeter gave you there... don't judge her too harshly."

I frowned, fighting myself from tearing up. "I know, but..."

"You two make each other happy, just like Harry and..." I looked at my son, and wondered when I had grown to accept him as family. He scratched his forearm absently as I rubbed at my wrist, remembering the snake biting me in my dream last night. "...and you don't need to let other people's opinions or hatred for what you are destroy your relationship. So it's different, and they don't understand it. So what?"

My eyes went from the Ouroboros mark on my right wrist to his blue eyes, Narcissa's shade looking back at me.

"Draco, I don't understand it. This relationship terrifies me; I can't just be objective like I was with Viktor, or Ron... I can't list the positive and negative features and decide if all the pain and risk is
worth it. And on top of it all, the Ministry is out to force us all to marry and breed like..."

"-like Purebloods did with their House Elves."

My face fell. "I didn't even think about that. That's horrible, and... what are you and Harry going to do? I always thought Harry would ignore the obvious Oedipus Complex and end up with Ginny, but now that's over..."

Draco looked around and cast a privacy charm as he closed the privacy curtains around us. "Well, seeing as I'll be Harry's official date to the Ministry's Yule Ball, we are going to openly defy the law and dare Ogden to chuck us out. Harry's already been forced to do the Measuring at work, so if they try to pair him off, well... Granger Enterprises has Galleons sunk into quite a few businesses that will shut down overnight and become resources for a sustained protest." It was like a lightbulb went off in my head.

"That's the reason you're funding the grocery store!"

"A protest movement won't last long if everyone is hungry and unemployed from broken economy."

I smiled at him, baffled at his skullduggery.

"You scheming Slytherin. Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"You've been busy, and I've been getting harassed by Ogden. Not to mention, planning a protest in the current political climate could be seen as traitorous. Keep this just between us for now, definitely don't tell Harry. He'll ruin it by thinking honesty is the best policy or some such nonsense." I agreed, and sat myself up in my bed with the pensieve in my lap. He left the privacy wards up and the curtain closed as he left. Gathering my courage, I emptied the vial, and poured myself into the basin.

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The first memory had me at an estate I couldn't tell, but judging from the decoration it was a Black Manor. Narcissa had been packing up her room, but took a forlorn look at herself in the mirror, aghast at the blonde that had invaded her scalp. The pair of them were wearing traditional witch robes due to her parents' insistence, dresses that reached past the knees in drab colors.

"There's nothing wrong with the color, my love." Rita said, putting her arms around Narcissa. "I mean, I loved your hair completely black, but you're still as beautiful as ever."

Cissy, however, spat her disgust. "Malfoys always breed pure blondes. I had to be... corrected."

Rita's fingers snaked through her girlfriend's hair, tugging her head back sharply. Narcissa Black's eyes closed as she moaned, teeth digging into her bottom lip in desire. "Only I get to correct you, Cissy."

Another tug, and Narcissa felt herself melt into Rita's arms. "Yes, Mistress." They kissed, and it felt like a knife to my heart. Their clothes vanished as Rita put her wand away, shoving the woman who would become my wife onto the bed. They were in their early twenties and my body reacted at the sight of my wife's pert and droop-less breasts. *Slytherin's Snake, they were spectacular!*

"We can't continue, Lucius-" She said as she was pinned down to the bed, Rita crawling over her.

"-has his own dalliances as well." She said reassuringly, handing Cissy a pillow for her head as she settled herself between her lover's legs. *Why is she making me watch this memory? She gazed down the length of her body and saw Rita's evil smile, right before the blonde's tongue delicately traced between her thighs. *I can't watch this, Rita gave me this memory to brag, nothing more.*
"Do it, please!" Narcissa begged as Rita's wand was poised over her clit. I knew what was happening next, so I turned away from the memory and tried to pull myself out of it.

"Crucio." Rita said silkily, the spell delivered at a fraction of its true potential. Like Harry said, you have to truly mean for it to hurt. I gaped as I saw my wife shudder in pleasure at the pain, moaning softly as the curse ended and Rita's mouth was buried in Narcissa Black's quim. I could smell how wet she was as her breathing sped up and Rita put a finger inside her with deliberate slowness. My wife whimpered out of frustration as Rita refused to work her up any faster. I was disturbed at how they were using the curse, but also intrigued and a bit jealous to hear those sounds come from Narcissa.

"More... harder..." Merlin, she wants more?!

"Are you telling me what to do?" Rita said, lust filling the threat.

"No, Mistress, please just..." Her words died as she was hit with another cruciatus curse and a second finger worked itself in. The pair of them continued at this, Rita working herself into Narcissa and pausing to hit her with a more intense Cruico as Cissy's breathing became erratic as she was about to orgasm. Rita dropped her wand entirely, clawing her bum with her free hand as she worked her four fingers in out of my wife quickly, lost in the moment as she sucked aggressively and her wand-hand drew blood as her nails dug in.

Narcissa's hips bucked into the pleasure as her thighs clenched in orgasm, water streaming from her eyes as Rita kept working herself in and out like a well-oiled piston. I wasn't certain I had ever gotten her off that intensely and felt intensely jealous. Narcissa seemed blissed out, almost unable to keep her eyes open as she found Rita on her mouth and they kissed each other passionately.

"I love you, Cissy. I don't care if you have to marry Lucius, I want to be yours." Rita said, curling up next to her on the bed. The door opened and Lucius stepped in, his eyes leering at the two naked witches in bed. Judging from his expression, he had been standing outside the door the entire time.

Narcissa tried to sit up and cover herself, shocked at being found out. "Lucius, I didn't-"

"Don't get up on my account. The rumors were true then, Odette wasn't just a one-time thing. You know, if your father Cygnus or my father Abraxas found out you were being indecent with an aspiring reporter..."

"Don't, please! She won't tell, ever!" Cissy said, fear very real in her voice.

"Oh, my fiance, I believe the key to a successful marriage is honesty and obedience." Lucius looked at Rita, warded the door shut, and took down his pants as he sat on her chair. His eyes flicked expectantly to his engorged cock and back to Narcissa. "I believe we have a negotiation to work out. Know your place, wife."

"This is blackmail!" Rita said defiantly.

"My cock isn't about to suck itself, witch." Lucius said coldly.

Narcissa broke the standoff. "He won't actually hurt us, besides, I'm marrying him, might as well get started." Cissy knelt before him, eyes burning in hatred for the man she was to marry.

Lucius smirked at his victory. "No, I want her." He nodded to Rita as he rolled up his left sleeve, exposing a bit of the dark brand that was on his flesh. "I think we're going to come to an understanding here. Any target I'm unable to coerce with threats of force, will need a more... delicate form of manipulation. That's where you come in."
Rita sneered at him, and saw he already had his wand trained on her and summoned both wands and pocketed them. Knowing she was defeated, she knelt between his legs and put the offending member in her mouth. Lucius looked at his wife-to-be with disgust.

"You love this witch more than me? Tell the truth." Narcissa nodded, her eyes red with unshed tears.

"Yes."

"Choke her as she sucks me off." The lights in the room darkened and came back on, and I realized I was now in the second memory.

Narcissa was beaten and scarred, her body black and purple from bruises all over her. They were in the same Malfoy Dungeon where I was almost killed by Wormtail's re-animated body. Rita was hunched over and treating Cissy's injuries as she sobbed, looking emotionally broken and wanting to be held despite knowing any contact would be extremely painful.

"Cissy, what the fuck did he do now?"

"He says that I'm a freak for loving you and wanting pain, so he wanted to out-do you." Rita had a cloth and was dabbing dittany on a small cut where she had been freely bleeding earlier. *The face always bleeds more.* Cissy winced, but let her lover take care of the wound.

"I hate your husband, even more for thinking that this is some sort of competition." Rage came out with that last word, and Rita swallowed it back down once again.

"He thinks what he does to me is the same as what you do. It never was."

"It's because I love you, know what you like, and what your limits are. Lucius doesn't even know how to love." At that pronouncement, the two women looked at each other and there was so much not being said in that look. In that moment between Rita and Cissy, I thought that they were about to kiss, and I didn't feel jealous of them in that moment. *Hell, I really wanted to comfort them both right then.* Cissy looked away, regret etched into her face.

"I don't want that man to ever touch me again."

"I'll take care of the problem." Rita said, with a surety that startled both of them.

"How? We're bonded now."

"I don't care if I have to spend every last knut I have to hire an assassin, I'll do it!" Narcissa was touched at the thought, but fear of retribution hit her.

"What about my family? Or your family, if they find out you were behind it? I don't want Malfoys to come out of the woodwork and kill Andi or myself! Or worse, if whatever assassin owns me after killing Lucius!" Rita slapped her across the face, and the pain seemed to give Cissy some focus.

"You're owned now by You-Know-Who! Anyone else can't be worse than this. I'll figure a way out, maybe use some untraceable poison." Narcissa smiled sadly at her lover.

"Severus might be my best friend, but if The Dark Lord suspects foul play, he will ask Sev to investigate it and he won't spare you."

"I don't care! I can't stand to see you like this! I love you, Cissy!" Tightness coiled around my heart at that pronouncement. *Rita Skeeter loved my Cissy all those years ago. And she manipulated her to use her position in the Daily Prophet to entrench the Malfoys as one of the most powerful families in*
"I love you too! But I worry for you; plotting to kill him isn't going to work. Maybe... Lucius won't hurt me once I'm pregnant with his heir." Even as Narcissa said that, I wished to hear the lie in her words. *Maybe she loved Odette, but Rita was just too much. And she was willing to sacrifice having a child to spare herself from his cruelty.*

"...you're letting that monster in you." Rita looked forlorn as the truth started to settle on her.

"I have never had a choice there. What I'm choosing to let happen is having his seed take root." *She intentionally blocked herself from getting pregnant? It hit me then that my wife was using Draco as a shield.*

"You know, I wondered how you weren't pregnant yet." Narcissa frowned in shame at that.

"I've been taking a diluted mixture of moonseed, baneberry, and bloodroot poisons." Rita staggered back at that, eyes unfocused on the dittany-soaked rag in her hand. *She was poisoning herself, keeping herself from conceiving...*

"You've... how has it not killed you? Why would you do..."

"Well, obviously I don't swallow it. Only just after he releases into my womb." She laughed sadly, and I recognized it as the laughter of someone who had little hope left. "I prefer the pain of buggery because at least then I know I can't get pregnant." Rita rallied at that.

"Don't you see, my love? This is why I need to get you out of here, not plotting to get pregnant and hope he'll be less cruel to you!"

"And go where, Rita? We can't escape Lucius, much less The Dark Lord! I shudder to think what Abraxas would do if he even suspected that you wanted to kill my husband." Rita seemed undeterred, however.

"I'll kill them all if I have to."

The room blurred out, and re-focused in the Malfoy Dungeon again. The look and smell there told me that it had seen a lot more use than before, and my eyes refused to make sense of what was before me. There was too much red, too much noise, and my mind was trying to protect itself from letting it all snap into focus. I knew once I figured it out, I would never be able to un-see this.

*She was gagging on an entrail expelling curse.* My own stomach heaved at the sight of it as the bile and blood made sense on the dungeon floor, the sweet smell in the air infused with copper as her own intestine was being used to restrain her instead of rope.

"She told me *EVERYTHING*, Rita! The only reason you're still alive is because I wanted to teach you the lesson myself!"

She gasped, coughing around the blockage in her mouth and throat. Rita was trying to speak around her small intestine.

"I didn' do uhhthun..." Her teeth and lips were covered in bile as she sobbed in agony, face pale as her eyes streamed from the pain.

"You thought you were *so smart*, didn't you? Infecting Abraxas with Dragon Pox so it would look like an accident? I should have bloody well stomped you into the dirt when I first found you in my wife's cunt! CRUCIO!"
Rita shrieked until her voice when hoarse, and almost passed out from the pain. Lucius seemed to realize that and stopped because he didn't want to be that merciful.

Narcissa entered the dungeon, clutching a crying baby boy and trying to comfort him in her arms. "Lucius, I don't care what you're doing down here, but put up a silencing charm! I'm trying to put Draco to bed!" Cissy's eyes took a few seconds to take it all in, and gasped in horror as she realized it was Rita. "You said you wouldn't hurt her!"

"Cissy, this doesn't involve you." Lucius said sternly.

Rita gagged around her own organs blocking her speech, and sobbed out a muffled, "hulp. muh."

"Tell her you can't help her, Cissy." Lucius said, and I could tell he was employing the Compulsion.

"I... won't... help you, my love." Narcissa held her son tightly to her. "I'm sorry." Rita's eyes blazed with shock from the betrayal, and she was unable to say anything but huff out something that might have been 'why?'

Lucius' wand was pressed dangerously against Rita's hooded clitoris. "This is what you liked so much from her, right?" The tip of his wand glowed red with heat as I could smell the cauterizing flesh as he destroyed her most sensitive spot. "Tell her why you won't help her, wife."

"The Dark Lord has gone mad in search for killing a baby Draco's age. I'm doing all that I can to prove my loyalty." She turns away, cowed. "You should, too." Rita's hoarse screaming went silent as she lost her voice entirely, fresh blood pouring down from her sex.

"You know, I could have kept turning a blind eye to your perversions, provided you kept destroying the people I told you to and seduced or blackmailed those whom I couldn't threaten to stay in line! But no, you two BITCHES needed to take it a step further, didn't you!" He opened a vial and poured it on the open wound, making Rita's flesh burn worse than what the Cruciatus Curse could do.

"Now tell me, Rita, did you have anything to do with my father's death?" Rita shook her head frantically, her grunting coming across as moans for mercy that would remain unheard.

"No? You were completely innocent, then?" Rita nodded, her body shaking as she went pale with blood loss. "See, Cissy here told me that you were planning on killing all of us, save for her. Take Draco to bed. I'll be up once I know I've broken her."

The scene melted around me and re-formed into what must have been Rita's home. I saw a blacked-out Pansy Parkinson on the mattress, and my wife holding the muggle weapon filled with sleeping potions. This was only a few months ago, and Rita looked older; frustrated yet shameless as she had just been caught dosing the young girl with a love potion. She aged well, but she never truly fell in love again, did she? It hit me, and I wondered what these two women were to each other now.

"Cissy, I might have known you'd come back. Mind continuing where she left off? She has no skill whatsoever down there, but she's kinda cute. Was hoping for stupid yet trainable."

"The world thinks I'm dead, Rita. I could leave this country with your entails splattered across the walls spelling out 'Narcissa did this' and nobody would suspect me. Give me a good reason why I shouldn't." Rita seemed to panic, and as she reached for her wand, Narcissa hit it with a potion capsule and knocked it to the floor. Cissy is scary with that thing.

Rita looked up to see the pistol trained on her forehead. "You wouldn't."

"I shot the witch lover so we could have a private talk. Tell me, why did you write that article?"
"You can't tell me you killed her."

"I didn't. I'm not cold blooded." Narcissa lowered the pistol and centered her wand between the reporter's eyes. "She has never wronged me." The reporter tried to keep up a calm facade, but succumbed to panic.

"Since when have you been noble? You taught me all about getting what you want, no matter how many people have to get burned along the way."

Cissy flinched as the comment stung her. "I'm no longer that woman."

"Aren't you? You were looking at a long stay at Azkaban alongside your husband, but now he's dead and you're all shacked up with the barely legal tart. It's as disgusting as it is convenient for you."

"How dare you, you bloody hypocrite! Who's the girl you have here?" Cissy looked surprised when she realized it was Pansy, Odette's daughter.

"Seems perversion runs in the family. Never could get Odette myself, seeing as you burned that bridge for both of us. I would have loved to taste that witch." I felt disgusted at hearing Rita reduce women to simply flavors.

"You thought this would hurt me?"

"Everyone thinks you're dead. No, this dear girl was interested in journalism. Doesn't have enough common sense to sniff out a lust potion though."

"You're taking advantage of girls for blackmail? You used to be better than this, back when you actually reported the news."

"And now I make the news. Got an Order of Merlin for my trouble to boot."

"Yeah, well enjoy that, and the Galleons that came with it. Leave my wife and I be."

"You're really going to keep up with that charade? Take advantage of being handed over like a prize to her? I doubt little miss goodie two shoes knows how you like to be used, fucked, and abused. She doesn't know the kind of depraved woman you truly are. I do."

"I've changed. I can be better than I was before, live openly as a lesbian."

"But I love who you are now, Cissy! You don't have to change a thing. Together we can take anyone we want down. Rather than take your cues from Lucius, you and I together can-"

"-Can what? Abandon Hermione and throw the Wizarding World into a new nightmare of backstabbing and favor currying? I know what she did to you, but what makes you think that I'm willing to take up with you after all this?"

"You made me this way. Taught me how to find the weakness and exploit it for pleasure and gain. You can't honestly tell me her lack of experience with women is a turn-on for you? She doesn't even love you, I bet. Just sees you as a pity case, a pretty pet project for her sympathy."

Rita stood, naked and powerful as she leaned in to kiss my wife. "I, however, know you at your worst and not only do I accept it, I revel in it." Rita's hand gripped Cissy's hair and tugged it. My wife gasped in pleasure, eyes fluttering shut in desire. I shrank back in horror as I saw them kiss passionately, and I knew that Narcissa still desired Rita. That kiss was too perfect; it proved that there were decades between the women and it was something that I could never truly come between.
They had been partners in crime as they manipulated the Wizarding World like pieces on a chess board.

"Rita, you were an assignment by Lucius. That's all. And that's over. " Even I could tell that Cissy was lying there. "I'm sorry." Narcissa turned to leave, re-dressing Pansy with a spell and picking her up to carry. As if an after thought, she turned over her shoulder. "Don't come at me through others again." Then she pointed the pistol at the reporter and downed her with the sleeping potion.

I pulled my head out of the stone basin, tried to remember where the ground was, and felt even more confused than I ever was.
I felt floored as it sank in; I didn't want to believe it. Narcissa sacrificed her child to avoid being beaten. She was willing to expose a child to the same fucked up man that she was married to. She didn't even stop to consider that her son might also have to bear Lucius' rage, just like Herpy did after Dobby was freed. I always thought people who had a child to 'save' a relationship were doomed to failure, but I have never before thought a woman would stop poisoning herself so she could become pregnant to avoid being abused. No wonder Draco was such a prat growing up, and why my Cissy only had the one child. I couldn't even begin to wrap my mind around her relationship with Rita, and how she seemed to enjoy pain with her sex.

There I go again, calling her 'my Cissy'. She disgusts me and yet I feel for her because I know the world isn't black and white. Looking around my bed in the Hospital Wing, I wanted to get the pensieve out of my lap. I put the stone basin on the table and reached for a plum in the fruit basket. Draco may have had a really good plan there with Figg, though it scares me to think that we may have to resort to a full-out revolt in order to get Ogden and his cronies out of office.

As I reached to open up the privacy curtains, Narcissa slipped in, holding coffee out for me. It smelled divine and I wasn't about to say no to it. But I really wanted to.

"Why are you here?" It hurt as I spoke, and I remembered that my vocal cords were still mending. It no longer felt like broken glass in there, only jagged rocks.

"You're my wife; I still care about you, and wanted to see how you were doing." She held the cup out, and I sat there and wondered what it would mean if I took it from her. Merlin, why am I overthinking this?

"I moved out of the house-

"-because you got attacked there again, I know, and I'm very sorry."

"I want some space away from you." She staggered at that, lowering the proffered coffee and putting it behind the fruit basket.

"Well, I'm not quitting my job here, you can just drop my course if you feel the need."

"I still want to test for my NEWT's. Just... back away for now. I can live here and get myself a flat after I graduate. I'm done with the Manor."

"Well, what about us?" I glared at her and she looked away, seeing the vial and basin of Rita's memories. "About rita's memories-

"-I saw what you two did to each other!"

"Oh. I think you would need a lot of context to understand it all." No, really?

"She felt betrayed by you, but still loves you. What you two have is twisted."

"Had. Past-tense. But I thought you'd understand it better; you seemed comfortable with the kink."

"I don't mind that. What was twisted was that she loves and loathes you in equal parts; she's so messed up she defines love by the amount of pain and angst she goes through over you."
"I don't love her anymore." I shook my head at that. She said she didn't love her, but in that same twisted way she did desire her. But it wasn't ever love.

"I'm not certain you ever did love her. You used her. Used her. Made her a monster for your husband's schemes."

Narcissa swallowed down an urge to cry. "I couldn't stop that."

"You should have told her to run! You kept her around because she helped you carry the burden, just like you forced Draco to!"

"Damn it Hermione, I don't want to talk about this anymore." I took a vicious bite out of the plum, and savored sweetness of it as I tried to calm down.

"And somehow after all this, she still loves you and that's why she hates you so much. But you don't want to talk about it? Fine. What really happened between you and Viktor?"

"Nothing!" I didn't believe her, and reached for my wand. "I won't let you in my mind again!" She seemed to cower slightly as she said that.

I felt like that was all the proof I would need. "I should have known. You're as cruel as Lucius ever was. Rita is a bloody monster, one that I know you helped create. Merlin, all you do is manipulate people through lies and sex!"

"I was never as bad as Lucius!" Cissy exclaimed in shock.

"At least he did his own dirty work." I extended my hand to the curtain and willed it open as I kept my eyes on Narcissa.

My wife's eyes never left me either, though she kept her Occlumency shields up. "You've been infected with Dark Magic; you don't care anymore if you hurt me, do you?" The curtains parted wandlessly for me.

I knew at least Madame Pomfrey would be there as I said out loud, "I don't want to be here, can I go?" Her eyes flicked over to my wand, then back to my empty hands, and understood that I didn't need my wand to do magic.

"You nearly died, Miss Granger." I turned to saw Poppy, Fleur, and Cho there. I forced myself to sound calmer than I felt.

"Fine. I don't want Professor Black here, can she go?" Fleur and Cissy shared an awkward glance before my wife shuffled away in silence.

Fleur broke the silence. "In case you wondered, we could hear you being a bitch through the curtain."

Cho felt really out of place and looked as if she wished she weren't there. Damn it, she's right. "I just... I'm sorry. I've been having doubts about Cissy and wanted time away from her so I could see Rita's memories and figure out how I felt about things."

"You don't owe me the apology." Fleur replied. I bit my tongue at that.

Cho spoke up. "I wanted time away from Cedric before things between us got too serious. My last conversation left him disappointed." She looked directly at me, which was almost unsettling. "I can't go back and change that now."
I frowned at that. "Can I just have a normal life?" I felt whiny as I said that, and Madam Pomfrey looked at me inquisitively.

"Say that again."

"Can I just have a normal life." I spoke at a statement, unsure as to why I was repeating myself.

"Mon Dieu." Fleur replied, "your voice is back to normal already." I thought about it and realized that the pain was gone. I reached for my wand and it flew into my hand effortlessly and I conjured a mirror. The scarring was nearly gone on both sides of my neck.

"Miss Granger, you just healed a preternatural wound overnight." The medi-witch said in awe. Bill and Professor Lupin's scars never fully healed. Exactly how much can I heal due to this Bonding? I looked at my left forearm and swore that the 'MUDBLOOD' scar that my sister-in-law gave me was also fading.

"Looks like I'm okay, I can go." I said, getting up from the bed. Then the thought hit me. "Why are you two here?" I asked, considering that Cho and I were never really close.

Fleur shrugged, and it made her wings shift slightly. She seemed to be coming to terms with her new body, and I was glad for that. "You're my friend, I know you'd be here if I was injured." I smiled at that as she asked for a hug. "Still, you were a complete arse to your wife." I put my arm around her and squeezed, letting go of the residual anger that was always near the surface these days.

I sighed, not certain if I wanted to get into all that. "Fleur, I just found out that she was as horrible as Lucius ever was; she simply kept her hands cleaner was all. Just... it's a long story, and I feel like I should take advantage of this second chance I have in life and get over her and just move on."

I looked at Cho, who had before seemed uncomfortable at the idea of me being bisexual but now seemed to take it in stride. Maybe the world can change for the better.

"You're my suite-mate, and I um..." She pulled some parchment from her pocket. "I take really good notes and thought you'd like a copy since you had to miss classes." I was floored by the unsolicited help. Harry and Ron always needed me to look over their papers, and asked to see my notes. Having someone willingly share notes with me was refreshing.

"Um, thank you." I looked to the fruit basket. "Want some fruit?" Cho nodded, and we started to make our way back to our rooms together.

As soon as Narcissa entered her room, she knew she didn't want to be alone. She turned straight to her fireplace and took the floo into Severus' room. The curtains were drawn shut, but she knew her way around his quarters well enough as she found herself at his bar and poured a drink.

"Damn it, Sev, I knew I shouldn't have been in the Hospital Wing. I was right; 'Mione hates me." She could hear him stirring and realized that she might have just awoken him. It's not like him to sleep in, however. His voice came through after a stiff yawn.

"Cissy, I know we're long-time friends, but I may need you to knock before entering my bedroom." Severus said as his bed creaked. She sipped her drink before turning to face him, hoping he was decent.

"Why? Fleur was there when my own wife kicked me out of the..." Narcissa went pale as she saw the ghost of her deceased niece. "Tonks."
"Hi Aunt Narcissa."

After a longer-than-usual pause, Narcissa decided who to speak to first. "I'm sorry you passed away." She turned on Severus, eyes widening once she realized he was wearing nothing more than his boxers. "Why is the ghost of my niece in your bedroom while you're nearly naked? I thought you were getting involved with... someone else."

"I'm hovering right here, Aunt Cissy." Tonks replied curtly.

Severus sat up and conjured himself some hot tea and sipped it as he formulated a response. "I went to bed alone, and just woke up to two women bickering in my bedroom. Forgive me if I decide to not get involved."

Narcissa nodded towards her departed niece apologetically. "Didn't mean to speak as if you weren't in the room. But why are you here?"

Tonks' head turned away and the ghost seemed to turn more translucent at the question. "This is the only place that feels like home anymore." Severus vanished his tea as he went to the bathroom for his morning routine. Narcissa could see his careful control to hide the pained look on his face.

"Dora, may I call you Dora? I think that maybe you should seek closure so you can move on."

"I just feel horrible for having been hoodwinked by Albus; looking back on it, he and Molly set me up with Lupin to keep me away from Severus. I married and bore him a son all while cursing Sev's name for being a traitorous bastard!"

"I think that was the plan, though. To make his defection to The Dark Lord believable." Narcissa consoled, her own emotional burden feeling lighter as she helped someone else with theirs. "But you can't go back and change the past; instead, look at the positive things that have happened. You and Remus made an amazing son who is being raised by Andi and Harry."

It sounded as if the ghost were about to cry. "I'd like to see him." Narcissa nodded, and summoned Herpy.

"Mistress?" She squeaked, looking awkwardly around unfamiliar room.

"Go see my sister Andi at Grimmauld Place and invite her and Teddy to lunch here at Hogwarts. Someone wishes to say hello." The elf nodded and popped out of sight as the outer door opened and Fleur strode in.

"Sev! I know their relationship is none of my business but Hermione is being a complete arse!" She slammed the door behind her, whipping her outer robes off and stretching her wings out, "And I know Narcissa is your best friend, but she's done nothing to help herself if she wants their marriage to-" Her eyes landed on Tonks, who was pointing at a gobsmacked Narcissa.

"If I want my marriage to what, Fleur?" Cissy replied coldly, eyebrow arched in challenge.

Tonks' ghost looked equally chilly at her. "Are you dating Severus or not, Fleur? Because you seem awfully familiar in here!"

"It's not like you can actually warm the bed next to him." Fleur replied as Severus hurried out of his loo.

"This is one redhead away from a nightmare." He muttered to himself. "Fleur, I agree with you entirely regarding Narcissa's actions towards her wife, but don't snipe at my deceased ex; Cissy,
thank you for making the invite to your sister; Nymphadora, I hope that seeing Teddy might help you find peace and move on. Until then, ladies, quit barging into my quarters as if you're a Niffler looking for shiny things! Since you three seem committed to having a row, I must request that you do it elsewhere."

Tonks and Fleur apologized and left the room in different directions; Fleur used the door while Tonks went straight through the wall. Narcissa took another sip of her drink and moved to leave the room. "Sorry, Sev, but she kicked me out of the Hospital Wing this morning."

"Buggering hell. You can stay, Cissy. I... had a feeling Tonks was going to spend last night here."

"That why you're kicking Fleur out?" Severus shook his head at that.

"I've requested that she not spend the evenings in my bed anymore."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

"She is still dealing with the loss of her husband; having her here, even for platonic reasons, is a temptation that could lead me to take advantage of her."

"You're the last man I would expect to take advantage of anyone like that." She studied him carefully, and came to a conclusion. "Exactly how serious were you with my niece?"

"Very; had it not been for the war, I would have proposed to her. I had given consideration to collaring her as... nevermind."

"But there was always going to be a war, Sev." Severus teared up, but grimaced as he fought from crying. "Therefore I knew, logically, that she could never truly be with me. I was only a... fun distraction for her, but commitment? Marriage? Not between an Auror and the Death Eater who would kill Albus."

"The heart wants what the heart wants, Sev." Narcissa said, putting a comforting arm around him.

"That's saying a lot, coming from you. You wanted Rita. And look at the destruction she's caused."

"Not you too."

"Allow me to play Devil's Advocate then. You have a lifetime of sins that she didn't know about. Now that she knows, she has to adjust her perception of you to include it. Perhaps even accept and forgive you, if she still wishes to be with you." He pressed his lips together as he bared himself to me. "If Nymphadora had known the truth in time, or even found out my true loyalties before she died, perhaps things would be different now."

Narcissa cried the tears for the pair of them as Severus shifted and held her consolingly. "Or both of you would be dead, and the war lost."

"Indeed."

"Waiting for Hermione to be ready hurts, though."

"It does indeed."

The rest of the weekend was blissfully uneventful as I went over Cho's notes and later on made our way down to the Three Broomsticks. It was a privilege afforded to Eighth Year students, who were
already legal adults and technically couldn't be restricted from going anyways. Luna had joined us, and it surprised me when I realized that I had never really had female friends that I could just hang out with.

Cho brought the butterbeers to our table, blushing slightly as she set them down. "Okay Luna, so the blond wizard over there wanted to pay for our drinks and I couldn't tell if he was just being nice or flirting with me."

"I'd say he was flirting with you."

"I don't know, he apparently knew I was with the two of you, so maybe he wanted a way to start a conversation with either of you?"

I looked at him, and he vaguely reminded me of Gilderoy Lockhart. He doesn't even deserve to be called by the title 'Professor'. I shrugged it off. "Looks too much like that charlatan Lockhart. Also, he's not my type."

Luna looked as well. "I don't think I like guys at all."

Cho seemed surprised at that. "I thought you liked women, Hermione. And Luna, didn't you say you something about a Muggle named 'Sam'?"

I shrugged. "I like men and women. But he looks a bit too..." I gestured with a dismissive hand, "simple-minded for me."

Luna bit her lip slightly as she opened her butterbeer. "Sam's a girl, and I was thinking about going to see her tonight." I arched an eyebrow at that.

"Oh, um... what is she like?" Cho asked.

"Adorably shy, short hair, bookish in a cute way."

"Huh. So is she like, the guy in the relationship?" Cho asked.

"Not really; there doesn't need to be a 'guy' in the relationship. You can come with and meet her if you want." I looked at Cho and saw her reticence.

"It could be fun." I told Cho, hoping to get away from the magical community for a bit. "Besides, I want to see Luna use a Muggle payphone."

Harry went over the international reports at Auror Headquarters, trying to bury himself in work rather than focus on where life had taken him. He knew he hadn't really taken the idea of being an Auror seriously before, seeing as he had been unprepared for the amount of research and paperwork that would be involved. Not to mention the temptation to resort to Dark Magic. I used it too easily when I was angry after Sirius died, and because I hadn't kept my emotions in check, I accidentally killed Neville in the heat of battle.

He had a flood of applicants to become Aurors yet was hesitant to lowering the standards to fill the ranks quicker, but he was essentially running the whole Aurory alone. He always thought Ron would be by his side, and would have Mad-Eye and Kingsley as role models to look up to. Instead he couldn't stand them. All he really had was a rag-tag team of people from Dumbledore's Army who was picking up the slack for security and asking the occasional favor from Severus and Fleur.

Harry reflected when the two of them came back from his last request. There was little time, so the
Severus looked annoyed yet smug as he returned to Auror Headquarters. "The next supposed Dark Lord in Germany would never have been given anything higher than 'Dismal' in my Potions class."

Harry had asked if Severus had turned him over to the local authorities. "He had enough potion ingredients mislabeled already, I simply switched a pair of labels and let Darwin's Natural Selection take its course." Harry frowned at that, uncertain about setting someone up to die like that. "I find it much more expedient to let a weed die on its own before it grows large enough to spread." Harry had to agree as an enraged Fleur came into his office, singed with the smell of charred flesh around her.

"Red Caps?! You told me that the Summoner was raising an army of Red Caps!" Harry and Severus both looked concerned about her state, but the enraged Fleur just needed to vent about it. "He was summoning FUCKING JINN!" Harry gaped at that, surprised that she had survived what should have been a massacre. Before either of them could ask her, she took a long breath and explained how she survived. "They made the mistake to curse me while I was trying to burn them; the Wizards and Genies burned faster with cursed fire. I'm going vegetarian for the next month, though."

Harry took a moment to let that sink in. Fleur's Veela fire was now cursed fire, and neither of them seemed to be losing any sleep over what they did. I meant to stop the next Dark Lord, but instead I have made a de-facto death squad. Of course, he knew Snape and Fleur would point out the deaths of these few evil wizards was preventing a new war from breaking out, and remembering how he failed at using the Cruciatius Curse on Bellatrix and knowing that she was on the run, he really couldn't blame them. And that was what scared him the most.

Harry turned to look at the map on the wall behind him. The void of Dementors in Eastern Europe that started in the Ukrainian Peninsula stretched far past Moldova and had swallowed up Prague. The affected areas were free of the Dementor Mist, but the depression was replaced with panic and fear. No Dementors is now bad news, it seems. Harry couldn't help but notice how the void was moving swiftly towards the UK, either.

The next report down, however, was even worse news. The Ministry of Romania (if it could even be called that) was requesting assistance in identifying and disposing the remains of a headless skeleton. Apparently the authorities realized that the concentration of Dark Magic was intense after the first investigators died after merely touching the bones.

The Healers' study of the dead agents revealed that they were poisoned to death, and the preliminary tests determined that it was the venom of an unknown magical creature. The bones were infused with venom, so nobody could touch it without instantly dying. Harry penned a quick reply to Romania and sent a Patronus to the only person he thought could handle this.

"Severus, it appears that Voldemort's remains have been located. Take Fleur with you if needed. Be warned, his head is missing."

After I made a small chart to explain muggle money, Luna had called Sam and we were going to meet up with her at a pub over in Camden Town. I was surprised at how easily Luna was able to flirt with Sam on the phone, and after the call was done I was told that there would be a surprise for me.

"I don't like surprises." I said.

"You'll like this one." Luna replied, smiling. Cho looked uneasy.
"Is this the same place where you two met? I don't know if I want to see people taking off their clothes."

Luna shook her head politely. "Oh, no. We're not going to the lesbian bar. Apparently we have to see this place because it has a little bit of everything." We take off to Camden Town and get a cab to take us to 174 Camden High Street.

I pay the fare and face the pub, seeing in large font "THE WORLD'S END." Seriously?!

We get to the doors and I see a familiar blond in Demonia boots, tight black pants with rivets and straps that seemingly attach randomly to her legs, and a black tee that has Bram Stoker's Dracula and the phrase 'Love Never Dies' on it. My heart leapt at the sight of Denton from my birthday night. By her side was the brunette Sam in a plaid skirt, Nightmare Before Christmas tank top, and her hair in pigtails. One glance at Luna and I knew she was done for.

"Hermione? I have to go... snog her face off." I rolled my eyes as Cho introduced herself and Denton put her arm around me, teeth grazing the tip of my ear as she whispered her greeting.

"Hermione, Princess of Sparta, good to see you again." My pulse raced at her touch, and it was a heady feeling to be wanted this badly by such a gorgeous girl.

"What kind of name is Denton Divine?" I asked as we went in. The pub had a 'it's the end of the world, you might as well drink!' vibe as what sounded like death metal played overhead.

"It's my stage name, I got the idea from Rocky." We found a table and perused over the menu as I realized I had a craving for some chips.

"Rocky?" I asked, and Denton and Sam looked at me like I was from another planet.

"Rocky Horror Picture Show. Seriously, where did you spend your childhood?"

I shrugged as I noncommittally mentioned my boarding school. The conversation got derailed as a server came by and we each ordered some sort of drink. I got a cider called Strongbow to go with my order of chips while Luna let Sam order her drink for her. Cho and Luna started to have a really good conversation with Sam but I got distracted by Denton's azure gaze on me.

"You know, Hermione, I haven't been able to get my mind off of you. If it weren't for Sam here, I probably wouldn't have ever run into you again, huh?"

Merlin, she's gorgeous, and she wants me! I blushed at the compliment, but something about the way she looked at me made reality splash ice water on my raging libido. Her look was too close to Narcissa for me.

"Hey, Denton, I have to tell you. I'm in a... complicated relationship." The chips and drinks were delivered, and I took the moment to dip them in a bit of ketchup and stuff my mouth so I wouldn't prattle on.

"Oh God, your boyfriend wants a threesome, doesn't he?" I choked and had to gulp a bit of my cider to recover. Strongbow has a crisp, dry taste to it which makes it seem like a champagne of alcoholic apple ciders.

"No boyfriend. And I don't think I could multi-task for a menage a trois." Denton nearly did a spit-take with her Guinness.

"Um, Girlfriend?"
"Not so much." She put down her drink entirely and focused all of her attention on me. *Great, now I've done it.*

"So when you say 'complicated', you mean..."

"You won't believe me." She smirked at that. *She has adorable dimples, too.*

"Try me."

"I'm married to a woman I used to loathe, and her son, who is my age, was a bully to me back in school. I didn't even think I liked women until her, and now that I know I do, I've had to stand up for them after they were getting harassed for being gay among their perceived politics and now I'm wondering if she used me all along."

"So you're 'gay married' to a Torie? Let me guess, people wanted to convert you to become heterosexual and keep out away from Old Comptom Street?"

"Um. Something like that."

"But why would... what's her name?"

"Cissy."

"What kind of name is Sissy?"

"With a C. It's short for Narcissa."

"You're right. I don't believe you. You don't even have a ring."

"Well the government refuses to recognize it, and people there want to see me and her split up and start having babies with men."

"Bollocks to that! You ought to be free to snog who you want, shag who you want, and the government can piss off for all I care!" She flicked off in a general direction and some guys a table over cheered her on. They did a double take at Sam and Luna necking and cheered them on a bit, too.

"Exactly my thinking! So while I think marriage rights should not be restricted to heterosexual couples, I don't want to be tied down to Narcissa."

"Wait, you said 'tied down'. Is this a 'fear of commitment' issue?"

"No! Well, I'm not even 20 and don't want to be married yet."

"Why are all of the hot ones straight, taken, or crazy?" Denton muttered, biting her lip and looking at mine like something she needed to capture with her own.

"You think I'm hot?" I asked, blushing.

"It's one thing if you two aren't really together anymore, but I'm not a cheater and I don't want to be the reason another couple broke up."

"We aren't a couple, though! I didn't choose for this to happen!"

"So you were a child bride, forced to marry against your will?" She arched an eyebrow suspiciously. "Hope your parents got a lot of money for you." I could tell by the sarcasm in her voice that she
didn't believe me.

"It's really complicated; I don't want to be forced to be with her, but I'm obviously not anti-gay. I just want... to date." Please believe me, Denton...

"I don't get it, but okay. If she's a lesbian, how does she have a son your age?"

"She was married to a guy, a real monster. He's... gone now."

"Why was she with him, then? Oh, you're the rebound, aren't you?"

"It was an arranged marriage; he showed his true colors early on. She might have been innocent at first, but over time, I think she's become just as horrible as he ever was, and willfully had a child with him to share in her fate."

Luna spoke up then, loud enough to surprise me. "Hermione Granger you listen to me!" My head snapped to face her. "I was a prisoner of war and tortured in what is now your home, left in a dungeon for months, and had unspeakable things done to me by Lucius Malfoy, so bad that I can barely remember most of it! She was the only person outside of that dungeon who seemed to give a damn about my well-being. She wasn't behind bars like me, but she was a prisoner all the same. Don't you dare sit on your high horse and decide that she was wrong for wanting her constant torture to end!"

Denton and Sam looked at the three of us in shock. "We seem to be missing something here. You said you were at a boarding school, right? How could you be in a war?" I sighed at that, realizing how stifling the Statute of Secrecy could be if you wanted to date a muggle.

"It's... complicated." Luna said, her eyes reflecting the demons of her past. "Point is, we survived, the bad guys didn't, and the cleanup is problematic."

Sam seemed to have an idea there. "Well, talk to Tony Blair, see if he can help."

Cho jumped in there, eager to explain who he was. "He's the Muggle Prime Minister, right?" I don't think he would be useful, though.

"What's a Muggle?" Denton asked, and we all realized we could be in big trouble.

"Luna..." I said, and she saw me unsheath my wand under the table. She nodded her understanding as she put her head on Sam's shoulder.

Denton, however, didn't see it coming. "Hermione, whatever trouble you're in, I know he'd be willing to help. He's Labour."

I smiled sadly and leaned towards her, locking eyes onto hers. I could see in her mind that she was a gentle soul who would be willing to help a friend in need, and despite the confusion she had about my life, she genuinely liked me and there was a possibility that she would truly want to date me. She just wants to know that I'm not using her to cheat on my wife.

"You're sweet." I whispered, leaning into her and readying my wand. Her eyes closed right when her lips touched mine, and instead of the electric tension I expected from this kiss, I felt nothing. There was no spark, and my heart fell as I realized that it was a complete fizzle, silently casting Obliviate on her short term memory. She's beautiful, I find her attractive and my age, but that spark isn't there. I'm sorry. I pulled away, sure that the last few minutes were gone. The look in her eyes went from blank, to unfocused, to smitten.
"Wow. I um, where were we?" She seemed to take the disorientation as a sign that it was an amazing kiss. *If only it was.*

"I never saw *Rocky Horror.*"

"Right, lucky Sam got me to see you again. I can correct this *obvious* lapse in your education." I looked over to Luna, who had Sam distracted but didn't have her wand out. I cast the same spell on Luna's girlfriend. Cho realized what had happened and looked at me in equal parts pity and horror.

"So when can I come over to your place and see this movie?"

"Oh no dear, you have to see it the proper way, in a theatre. Shadowcast on a Saturday at midnight. I know a troupe that is looking to do it, soon as they find a cinema who will let them."

I smiled back, realizing she was expecting this to be her way in for a date. *I guess I can try to let her down gently.* "I'm probably going to be busy the rest of this last year, the end-of-term exams are pretty brutal." Denton's smile faltered slightly.

"Oh, okay... well, the project is in its planning stages, so it should be ready to go once you're out of there for good." I hoped she could tell she was getting a kindly brush-off as I caught the server to pay our table's tab with my card. *Best if I just get out of here, let her down gently in a week or two.*

"Hermione, you want to leave already? Sam and I wanted to hang out some more." Luna replied, eyes darting between Sam and myself.

"Don't worry about me, I'll see you two back at... um, the school later tonight."

"I thought we were going to split the cheque." Cho said, clutching her purse that had the muggle money in it. I smiled, hoping she understood that I just needed out of there.

"It's fine, you can pay next time." I said as the server took the card.

"This is your card?" She asked skeptically. I sighed and pulled out my identification.

"Yeah, my name is on the card, right?" I showed her my matching ID that matched the credit card.

"Yeah, 'Granger Enterprises'. I just didn't want to get you in trouble. You must have a cool dad to let you use his company card." I winced at this, wishing things would just go smoothly long enough so I could pretend to be normal for once.

"Actually, it's my company. Okay?" The server muttered an apology and took off.

"You have your own company?" Denton asked incredulously, and I tried my best to shrug it off.

"Inherited it; my st-" *Don't say stepson, Granger!* "I have someone else managing the day-to-day stuff, I just get informed about how it's doing."

"You just turned nineteen though." Denton scoffed as she continued. "There's something about you, Hermione Granger. It's like you should be in your late thirties, you know? Complaining about taxes, cost of finding a new flat, settling down and having children. I know it's a lesbian stereotype, but I'm not ready for that."

"I never asked you to be, Denton. Yeah, I've had to grow up faster than I wanted to. Kind of wish I could go back." I replied sadly.

"If I could wave a magic wand, I would." Denton joked, making me frown as I realized that the truth
hit a little too close to home. I signed the cheque and left The World's End for the one place I didn't want to be at. *I don't belong in the muggle world anymore; at least I'll always be welcome at home.* I needed to have a talk with Narcissa anyway.

Severus was alone in his bedroom, but not alone in his head. He couldn't sleep and was too wound up to even try. That's why he had finished his bottle of Glenlivet and his head swam with bad ideas. *You're too pent up, Sev, it's about damn time you polish your wand since you're not willing to shag the Veela.* He pushed the thought out as he lay in bed, feeling unseasonably hot in just his black satin boxers. He kicked the covers off and his eyes were wide open, his mind pouring over everything that had been going on to make a chaotic symphony in his head.

*Get yourself off, it's the only thing that will clear your head when you're this bad.* He knew he was right, but he persevered to logically contemplate how he could meditate his mind to go quiet so he could get some rest. His body had been stressed out, beat down, and worked up without any way for him to find relief. Even in bed, he rolled onto his side only to find his traitorous appendage stand out and react to the thin fabric between him and the bed sheet, his hips wanting to rock just a little bit more for the sensation.

*You're a grown man and shouldn't feel ashamed if you want to do this.* He thought to himself, his hand brushing against the swollen tip just enough to make his own need feel all the worse. His mind couldn't think straight as it wanted to imagine himself with a beautiful witch, but he felt torn between the woman he loved and let die alongside his childhood bully, or the woman who loved him and died alongside said bully's best friend. That thought should have been like pouring ice water over his libido, but he was as randy as he was in his fifth year in the dungeons as he found his hand clasped around his turgid cock and squeezing firmly as his face was buried in the pillow. *Just get it over with so you can get some bloody sleep.*

He tried his best to only imagine an anonymous woman in his mind with soft, pale skin and tender lips beneath his as he mentally added freckles and green eyes to her, and he shrugged Lily's characteristics out of his head as he mentally added freckles and green eyes to her, and he shrugged Lily's characteristics out of his head as he imagined the girl's lips encircling the tip of his erection and made eye contact with her, eyes appearing hungry as the brown hair turned a violent pink as she satisfied herself with him. *Not her either!* Severus thought furiously, *I don't need either of them ruining this for me.* Of course, his mind was more than willing to pull himself out of that fantasy as it morphed into Lily and Nymphadora being together.

Severus let go of his cock, slapping the mattress in sheer frustration as he pushed the two witches out of his lust-driven imagination. *I won't go there, I will not go there.* He was drunk, horny, and the stress just finally made him crack as a guttural sound came from his chest as he turned and buried his head into his pillow. *It's not going to happen, you're not getting off tonight. You're probably too drunk to get yourself off anyways.*

He moaned in half-hearted way, disgust echoing through his empty bedchamber at his current state. *You only have yourself to blame for this, having turned down witch after witch because of your own damnable issues and supposed integrity.*

"I wish I could still help you with that, Sev." Severus flinched and pulled the sheet over himself as he saw the ghostly form of Tonks at the doorway.

"I told you to knock, Nymphadora." He replied curtly, sitting up in an attempt to hide his jutting erection.
"I can't really touch anything as a ghost." She said, eyes leering over him. "Shame, too. Its been months since I last had a decent shag." Severus barked a sharp laugh.

"Despite being dead now, Nymphadora, I assure you that your 'dry spell' hasn't been quite that long."

"Remus wouldn't touch me after the first trimester, so yeah, it's been months." Severus huffed, secretly grateful that his arousal was finally... deflated.

"Ah yes, thank you for the reminder and once again letting that flea-ridden mongrel cock-block me."

"Oh come on, Sev, I'm sure you've been playing the field since..." her voice tailed off as she realized she didn't want to finish her thought.

"Since what? Since the war ended and I've got witches throwing their pants at me?"

"Since we quit being a thing!" She retorted, feeling awkward after saying it. "You're still alive and able to enjoy... you have, haven't you?"

"No. I haven't sampled any flowers since you."

"Flowers? You mean to say... it's been years. Why not?" She asked, and the cold look from him was enough. "Sorry, but Fleur seems more than willing for you and she's actually quite attractive, once you look past the beaky face."

"Do you have any idea how long it took me to move on from Lily and try to love again?"

"You never really wanted to talk about her, so I have no idea."

"Over fifteen years. You and I were over almost a year and a half ago."

"You were celibate all that time? No wonder you were such an arse when you taught me."

"Yes, Nymphadora, let's go over my teaching style."

"Damn it Sev, do you believe you have to be miserable with your cock in your hand for another... thirteen years before you can move on?" Nymphadora exclaimed in frustration.

"That sounds utterly stupid." Severus said automatically as he realized that's exactly how he had been acting. "Why did you come tonight?"

"My mother just arrived at the castle gates, she needs admittance." Why now? Why this late? Severus called Dobby and directed the elf to let Andromeda and Teddy into the castle grounds.

"Give me a few minutes to get ready." He looked at her as she kept trying to get a glimpse of his nude body. "Alone."

"Oh come on, Sev, I've already seen it all." Nymphadora chided playfully.

"Then rely upon your memory, and leave me be!" She sulked as she left the room, Severus frustrated as his cock was once again fully erect and begging for attention.

Narcissa was being dragged down to the Great Hall with Herpy on her arm. She wondered what was going on to make her house-elf be so forceful with her, considering she was mumbling something about "Mistress would want to see this".
Once in the Great Hall, she gave an extended yawn and rubbed her eyes as she saw her sister, grand-nephew, and the ghost of her niece have a teary reunion. Andi seemed to be apologizing for the late hour, citing that she couldn't sleep and that she knew her daughter Tonks was a night owl anyways. "Oh Cissy! I didn't mean to wake you up too!" Teddy was in her arms, reaching out towards the ghost of his mother and cooing happily as Tonks changed her appearance and made faces at the baby. He giggled at that, his hair changing to a light purple as his tiny fingers stretched to embrace his mother.

"Teddy, it's mommy!" Nymphadora said, her voice cracking with emotion. Severus entered the Great Hall as well, staying back at the doorway as Narcissa made her way to her family.

"He definitely has your abilities, 'Dora." Cissy said as she put her arm around her sister and had Teddy handed off to her. Cissy hadn't held a child in so long, yet it was second nature to her as the boy smiled and enjoyed the attention.

Once Andi's hands were free, Tonks resumed their conversation "Is my boy doing well? He going to be alright?"

The grandmother nodded. "I think so, Harry's been a great father figure to him, and is a great provider as well."

Tonks nodded, silver tears running down her cheeks as her worries were assuaged. Severus approached her, his hand instinctively going to give a consoling rub on her back before he pulled back.

"Nymphadora, the war is over; the Dark Lord has been defeated. Voldemort and Greyback are no more. Your son won't have to worry about that, not as long as myself and Head Auror Potter are around." Tonks smiled sadly as she seemed to fade slightly. She gasped at that, clutching herself as if she could will herself to stay here. *Slytherin's Snake, she's going to move on...*

"I'm scared Severus." She seemed to fade a bit again, and she forced herself to grow a bit more visible.

"As am I, Nymphadora."

"Do you think it will hurt?" she asked plaintively.

Severus smiled sadly, Cissy could tell. *He's trying to keep a brave face for her. "Not worse than anything we did."*

She sobbed as she faded again, understanding what was happening.

Severus' whisper was too audible in the silence. "You never said goodbye."

"Merlin, don't make me start now, please." She seemed to laugh out of the stress of the moment.

The moment felt very private, and Andi and Cissy tried to grant them some privacy. "I love you, Nymphadora. Good journey."

She smiled at that. "Thank you. Maybe I'll say hello to Lily." She cracked the joke to relieve the tension.

Severus' lips curled into a slight smile. "Anything but that, witch." He chuckled, his own eyes tearing up.
Nymphadora faded even more as she sang the opening line of a *Journey* song to keep Severus from crying. "Carry on my wayward son..."

Severus looked away, blinking furiously. "There'll be peace when you are done..."

Cissy put her arm around him consolingly as she joined in. "Lay your weary head to rest..."

Tonks completely faded away as she sang the final line. "Don't you cry no more."

Severus looked to where Nymphadora had been, hoping she would show up once more. "Nymphadora." He lowered his head as he heard Teddy babble 'mama'. He conjured a handkerchief and wiped at his face as a large stag patronus galloped into the Great Hall.

"Severus, it appears that Voldemort's remains have been located. Take Fleur with you if needed. Be warned, his head is missing."

No bloody rest for the wicked it seems.

Draco was lounging in his bedroom as he heard the front door slam shut, making him spring to his feet with his wand drawn. *Get a grip, you're not about to get arrested.* He put his wand away and made his way down the hallway as he heard a familiar voice.

"Draco? I grabbed the first portkey I could when I heard the news! I'm so happy you're okay!" He bolted to the front of the house where he found an excited ginger wrapped around him in a firm embrace. The smell of Ginny's hair cheered him up as he felt his face peppered with kisses.

"My solicitor is worth her weight in gold; she even literally fought for Hermione and myself in a trial by combat. Hope she's alright."

"What? Trial by Combat? Hermione was in trouble too?" Ginny was confused and horrified at the repercussions.

"Yeah, the bloody Wizengamot was ready to charge Hermione as an accessory just because she refused to testify against me. That bastard Tiberius was ready to chuck us both into Azkaban and let us rot."

"Ugh, we'll deal with that later, for now just kiss me! I've bloody missed you." Draco's hands clasped her tenderly as their lips met in the middle of the hallway as Ginny's fingers scrambled to reach under her boyfriend's clothing and touch his skin. "Draco, we alone here?" She asked, her lips still planted on his.

"Mmm yeah," Draco replied, pulling back, "Mother and Hermione should both be at Hogwarts, we have the whole place to ourselves." Relieved, Ginny pulled Draco's shirt off and peppered his chest with a series of kisses, her mouth working its way down and undoing his belt.

"Merlin, I've missed you..." Ginny muttered, squealing in surprise as Draco's hands wove through her hair and pulled her head away from his hardening erection.

"Not yet, Hellcat." Draco pushed Ginny back against the other side of the hallway, then used his wand to bind her wrists above her head as he kissed her. She moaned into it as he tapped his wand and vanished her shirt, his eyes feasting on her pale breasts encased in black lace. "You wore this on purpose." His voice was low and suggestive as a jet of blue light knocked him to the ground and a livid Hermione Granger had him wandless and pinned against a nearby wall.
Draco gulped, shocked at how stealthy and quickly he was taken down. *She cast a repelling jinx on me with her wand, but she didn't even bother with one to pin me against this wall. Oh, shite.*

"DRACO MALFOY-GRANGER WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!"

Ginny tried to move between them, but only got her leg up to block her path down the hallway. "Hermione, no! I'm his girlfriend!"

Hermione's eyes were crimson as she stared down the ginger. "He's with Harry now, or so I was lead to believe!" Draco knew what Hermione could do, and he dropped his eyes to the ground.

"Ginny, don't look her in the eyes. Hermione, Harry and I were both dating Ginny and each other, like a three-person couple."

"Bollocks! I don't believe a fucking word out of your mouth; you're growing up to be just like Cissy!" Hermione spat at her step-son before turning back to Ginny. "Why are you here, really?"

"I was glad to hear he won his case, Hermione! I love and needed to see him!"

"You can't love him; you loved Harry, and he dumped you for this sorry excuse of a boy!"

"I love them both, Hermione! Please don't hurt him!"

Hermione panted in rage. "You're restrained. He tied you up."

"I kind of like it, Hermione. I don't know if you can understand that." Draco remembered the time he caught Hermione and his mother in the Potions lab.

"Oh she can, Hellcat. Soon as she wraps her head around the idea that three people can date each other."

Hermione was trying her best to calm herself down. "You both cheated on Harry."

The pair of them refuted her. "Not cheating since he was a part of it." Draco said.

"You connived your way into both of their beds, Malfoy? Sounds about right for the kind of shite your family likes." Hermione snapped back.

"What the hell Hermione? Harry loves Draco, just like i do! The three of us were in a relationship, together. Harry dumped me, but he and I are still with Draco, separately." Ginny fought her tears as her boyfriend attempted to console her.

"Hey, don't cry love. Hermione, let us go. Just... release us and get out of here."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "I just can't even fathom... you two betraying my best friend?"

Hermione ended her spell and released Ginny from the wall. "Fuck it. Fuck it all. I don't need this."

Draco held a shocked Ginny in his arms as he saw his bewildered stepmother leave, uncertain as to what she might do now.

There were many duties that Harry liked about being an Auror, but this was probably the worst. *You're an adult now, Harry. You have authority and have been entrusted with it by the Minister.*

Still, he wanted to flinch as he knocked on the front door of the Burrow. It opened to a gruff-looking Arthur Weasley, whose hair was pulled back in a disheveled pony tail. Harry wondered what the
man was doing here instead of being at work.

"Oh, Harry..." he said, hand smoothing back his receding hairline, "kids aren't here anymore." The smell of alcohol on his breath answered his question. Harry repressed the urge to grimace at his appearance, considering that he looked a lot better than Mundungus Fletcher ever did.

"Actually, I'm here on official business. I'm here to see Molly... um, Miss Prewett."

"Artie? Who is it?" an all-too-chipper voice rang out, followed by the sound of packing tape being ripped. Artie? Harry realized that something seemed to be missing from the house, but he couldn't place his finger on it. Was it the smell, the silence, or something to do with the magic around here?

"It's um, one of my son's friends. Come in, Harry." The Auror stepped in, and saw that the main room there was full of cardboard boxes and rolls of packing tape. The room felt stripped of its homeliness, and that's when it hit him. There was no magic in the house. Was this because the muggle girl was here?

The girl ducked her head around and Harry was able to see her. She had limp blond hair amid forest green eyes. "Hi, I'm Jennifer!" If Harry had to describe her in one word, it would be 'broken'. Something about her seemed to make the skin on his back crawl. She was completely muggle, but the shine in her eyes held something else as well. She reeked of cigarettes and Harry wasn't certain he wanted to know what else, so he put on a fake smile and introduced himself.

"I'm Harry, old friends with-"

"-Ronald, yes! Then you dated Ginevra for awhile until you came out as gay. Shame, too, you're kinda cute. Not that there's anything wrong with you being gay, I mean, since I'm bisexual for the right guy." She said that in quick succession, as if she didn't know how to pause or need to breathe between each sentence. She saw Harry glancing around. "Oh yeah, Artie's moving in with me. We're going to City Community over in Canary Wharf while working at the coffee shop off-campus. Oh, and I'm in a band too, wanna hear our tape?"

"That's... great." Harry said, his gut clenching as he was oddly reminded of Bathilda Bagshot. Her eyes seemed vacant, and he wished he knew how to perform Legilimancy just to see what was going on in her mind. There is almost nothing going on up there, is there? "I'm here to see Molly."

Her eyebrows lifted momentarily as her smile fell slightly. "Oh, she's been upstairs. I wanted to go cheer her up with a nice cup of berry tea, but Artie said it wasn't probably a good thing since she's still hung up about the divorce and now that he's dating me. I mean, I'm really friendly and want everyone to get along and find their inner harmony center, but Molly seems to enjoy being..." she gestured something with her hands to possibly mean fear-inducing, "I mean, no amount of moisturizer is going to reverse those frown-wrinkles on her face and until she lets go of her negativity, that baggage is just going to follow her through her life. I think she should take up yoga, it might help someone her age. Do you think she's getting enough folic acid? Doctors say it's necessary for pregnancy, but I read this article on an online bulletin board that seriously changed my life."

Harry smiled and nodded, making his way up the stairs. Harry went past the rooms that used to be Ginny's, then Fred and George's, and then one he shared with Ron when he would stay over. He realized that, now that Ginny went off to play for the Harpies and Ron was living over the shop with George, the Burrow no longer had any children in it. He continued up the stairs to see a distraught Molly looking out the window over the pumpkin patch where Harry and Ron used to practice quidditch with the twins. This house feels like the lived and loved-in feeling is missing, the 'soul' has been removed.
"Miss Prewett, it's me, Harry." She kept looking out the window as if wishing to see her kids and husband return.

"That slag still here?"

"There is a young lady downstairs, yes. I'm not here about that."

"She's Fred's age!" Harry nodded consolingly.

"She does come across as a bit of a bint." He admitted, hoping she will be more receptive to him. She chuckled sadly.

"I don't get what Arthur sees in her. Anyways, why are you here?"

"I'm here to deliver a Ministry decree on behalf of the Wizengamot. You're being officially told to stay clear of Narcissa and her son Draco, and you're to inform me of any Ministry event you want to go to so that I can enforce the the order of protection." Molly rolled her eyes almost petulantly at that.

"That dyke had the nerve to make me look like the bad guy in all this, while she is shacking up with Hermione." Molly looked to Harry and looked like she wanted to say more, but didn't.

"You threatened to kill her while in a courtroom, and it got transcribed into the legal proceedings." Harry couldn't help but have sympathy for Molly as they heard loud giggling from downstairs.

"I didn't mean it." Harry gave her a withering stare. "Okay, I did. But I won't. I just... how can you stand to be with Draco? It's disgusting to imagine two men together."

Harry sighed, knowing that he might have to deal with a lot of intrusive questions like this. "I'm not asking you to imagine us together, nor for you to imagine Hermione with Narcissa Granger. All I'm asking for is for you to be civil and let them, and me, have their own personal relationship and keep any negative comments private."

"But what you're doing is wrong!" She exclaimed, "And what that cunt is doing to Hermione is wrong! You're supposed to be her friend, and you're letting her behurt by that evil bitch!" Harry stood there, stunned at her reaction.

"How does Draco and I being together harm anyone, including each other?" Molly balked at the question.

"Because you two would do... with your..." She seemed exasperated at this. "Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"If you are speaking of sodomy, men and women can do that with each other, too. And if you take care in doing it, Molly, guess what? It's still none of your business. Now, do you understand the decree that the Ministry has laid down?" Molly nodded sullenly and Harry took that as his cue to leave.

I was on my third gin and tonic in the Hogs Head and still couldn't comprehend how I wound up here. I'm bound to Cissy, and her son has seduced his way into Harry and Ginny's pants. I wonder which one of them is plotting to get Ron so that they have the whole Golden Trio as a set. I drained the glass as the memory of a bound and aroused Ginny reminded me of what I did with Narcissa, and how much it resembled the horrible things Lucius did to her.

I can't do that to her again, I won't turn into the monster that was Lucius. The problem was, deep
down, I knew I liked the control I had over her. That she would willfully trust me and hand me over complete control of her body for the both of us to enjoy. And I didn't trust myself with that.

Nor do you trust Narcissa anymore; not since you realized how she treated Rita and left her to be tortured by Lucius like she left you at Bellatrix' mercy. I still couldn't imagine how any mother could give birth to a son only to use him as a human shield against her husband's wrath. Narcissa is a shrewd and calculating witch who has used her connections to avoid any real punishment for the war, and I can't forget that. Maybe this is why I should be glad for the marriage law; cut my losses and leave the family now that Draco's trial is over. He was innocent enough... no, more like he already suffered enough during the war. Maybe he deserves to try being happy with Harry and Ginny. I just don't get how they wouldn't get jealous...

"A pretty woman shouldn't be drinking alone." I heard above me, and I rocked my head back to get a good look at the man. *My eyes didn't seem to want to move on their own, I realized as I swayed slightly and focused my eyes. The voice was familiar and a playful smile came to my face as I recognized Viktor Krum sitting down next to me in the booth I had kept to myself for Merlin knows how long.*

*Why is he here?* I thought as my eyes raked over his body and wondered what his muscles would feel like once again under my fingertips. "Then join me." I blurted out as he waved the bartender over. I wasn't certain what he said, but I was fairly certain I was getting drunk as he put a shot and a drink in front of each of us. His large hand stroked the back of my head and rubbed my back in a firm and reassuring circle, and I laid my head on his shoulder as I once had back when we were involved four years ago.

"You never came to visit me." Viktor said, his chin resting on my head as we reflected on failed plans and broken promises.

"I was only fifteen then, Viktor. You were finishing school and had a promising Quidditch career ahead of you. I... wasn't ready for what you wanted."

"And now?"

"Now I'm supposed to settle down, marry a man, and be a good little witch and have lots of babies for the Ministry." I sneered at the thought of that.

Viktor chuckled at that. "It's not a fate worse then death, Hermione. Lots of women choose that path. I know I'd be the happiest man if the woman I loved would take that path with me." His hand stopped the circular motion and rested on my shoulder.

"I know; I just want to be able finish school, sack Tiberius Ogden, and overturn his stupid marriage law."

"You're against marriage?"

"I'm against forcing marriage, and forcing couples apart. People should make their own mistakes. Like... me sticking around Narcissa for so long."

Viktor huffed at that. "Wondered when you'd figure out Malfoys are bad news."

I nuzzled Viktor as he kissed my forehead. It was an old-familiar feeling that I just wanted to wrap around me like a blanket. *I hated feeling alone, and Krum never judged me. I did have a question, though. "What did the Malfoys do to you?"* I finally brought up the thing that had been bothering me about his life after the Tournament.
"They didn’t tell you?” He asked, and I shook my head. Another pair of cocktails were on the table in front of me, and we both took a long sip from them.

"Lucius cancelled my endorsement contracts, paid off the IQA league, and black-balled me from professional quidditch."

"Why would he do that?"

"I asked for a larger percentage; he raking in the Galleons and I had a few, how you say? Bills to pay."

"Was there anything... inappropriate... going on between you and Cissy?" I asked, swaying slightly. He shook his head, laughing.

"No; if he wanted me to, I probably would have, though." I looked at him as he shrugged. "What? I was a seventeen-year-old Quidditch prodigy with a healthy libido and she was an attractive, wealthy woman. Now that her hair makes her look closer to our age?" Viktor shrugged it off. "Still a Malfoy, though. Since she prefers witches, maybe she did get jealous that I danced with you at the Yule Ball."

"Oh, I doubt that, Viktor. I was her son's age; she would never have seen me as... you know." His eyes turned to rake over me and I blushed at his gaze.

"Attractive? You are so smart in many ways, yet blind when it comes to yourself. You've always been brilliant and beautiful; I'm just a talented man on a broom." Viktor said, and I remembered how much he hated his nose and his awkward gait. He walked like he was more natural on a broom, and he flew the same way. His fingers gently rested under my chin and lifted my face up to his, and my eyes were wide and needy. My head swam, both from the liquor and from the flurry of thoughts as I took in his features as they came closer to me.

"I've missed you, Hermione." Viktor whispered, his lips almost grazing mine. Move in and kiss him, you know you want to! I buckled at that, realizing he wasn't going to push things further with me. He was going to let me make the move, give me the choice, and I took it. I tasted cheap beer and fire-whiskey as he tried to probe my mouth open and I flinched back away from the kiss.

It lasted for only two seconds, but I knew it wasn't what I wanted. It didn't feel right; his skin was too rough, he was leaning over me too much, and it wasn't... right. I'm drunk, and even now, I can still tell that this is a bad idea.

"I'm sorry, Viktor, I have to... go. It's... not you, not me, but her. I've got to figure this out, understand why she'd do that. How she could put Draco into that situation. I looked at him and realized I was been silent for too long. I blinked a few times, jerking my head back up as I got up from the table. "Need to get back to Hogwarts." I reached into my bag and pulled out a few sickles to pay our tab and left it on the table.

"I'll walk you." He said quickly, standing to put his arm around me. I shrugged it off, shuffling my feet a bit.

"I got this, I'm fine. I have... class in the morning." I have Cissy's class in the morning. Fuck.

Narcissa was in bed again, having consoled Severus as he said a final goodbye to Nymphadora Tonks, only to then be sent off to find her mad sister. I'm glad that she's been able to see her son happy and well, but did it have to be this late at night? I've got class in the morning.
Her bedroom door slammed open, making her reach for her wand instinctively. Crookshanks jumped off of the bed and started trotting towards the noise. Hermione's voice mumbled a greeting to the ginger cat.

"What are you doing in here? You made your opinion of me quite clear already." Narcissa said, frustrated at her lack of sleep.

"You broke me." She said, stumbling her way into the room. Narcissa re-cast the glamour to hide her pregnancy, guilt flooding her for keeping up the pretense.

"What?" Broke her? Narcissa tried to figure out what her wife was on about as she took in the sight of disheveled hair and her staggering.

"You broke me, Cissy."

"You're drunk." She almost snickered at the situation, but a decade with Lucius made her wary of a drunk spouse. She gripped her wand tighter as she recalled being slapped so hard she fell to the ground and spat blood.

"You broke me... I can't... anything... with other guys or girls. I had a gorgeous girl, on my lap..." Narcissa could smell the alcohol on her breath as Hermione plopped onto the bed next to her. The Slytherin wanted to move away from her, but didn't want to do any sudden moves around her.

"I really don't need to hear this." Hermione tried placing a finger over her wife's lip but managed her entire palm instead. Cissy froze at that as terror filled her.

She's not Lucius, she's just a drunk teenager who is rambling.

"Trying to explain! She was there... bloody perfect... but..." Hermione shrugged.

Narcissa pulled her face away from Hermione's hand. "I apologize, I guess."

Hermione shook her head in confusion. "I don't love you... but others aren't you."

"I cannot apologize for that, Hermione." Hermione's face scrunched up as she looked at her wife. Cissy looked at her with concern as the Gryffindor swayed, keeping her Occlumency shields as strong as ever.

"How you don't have men... knocking door-downs... down doors... marrying you? Denton and Krum want... me." Narcissa recognized the tell-tale sign of belching for what it was and winced, "But I can't be..." Hermione turned and retched, and Narcissa's fears were confirmed as the splattering sound of her wife's stomach contents hit the hardwood floor.

Narcissa vanished the offending mess as Hermione profusely apologized, only to throw up a second time. Cissy conjured a bucket, divested Hermione of her shoes, and had her lying on the edge of the bed with a cool damp cloth on her forehead. You're still just a kid trying to find yourself, how can I tell you you're going to be a parent in four months?
Severus and Fleur portkeyed into Romania, and was quickly directed by the magical security there to the incident site. This area of Bucharest undergoing a modern housing development phase, which apparently meant that every house was nearly identical. Upon closer inspection, Severus realized that there were three models to choose from. Boring, dilapidated, and something in-between.

The house that was cordoned off was identical to its neighbor, except for color. The murder house, which is what the reporters were dubbing it, was grey with white shutters. The windows, however, were coated with blood as if something inside exploded and coated every surface red. *But the windows stayed intact?* Severus mused, and assumed that there had been impervious charms put on the home to keep outsiders from coming in which inadvertently strengthened the windows from breaking. The neighboring house that had been blue with white shutters. Neither shutters actually worked; they were just for show. Modern architecture is odd like that, adding touches to make a place look more opulent than it really is. *It makes me nostalgic for Victorian architecture. It might have been gaudy, but at least everything was actually functional.*

The entire housing project had been evacuated, but only after a statement had been given to the press. *Of course, let's have everyone's attention to the creepy remains that is still killing people.* Of course, Severus knew that you couldn't evacuate a housing development near the Transfagarasan Highway and keep it quiet. It was being called the zombie massacre. He knew of the muggle stories of zombies, and he would have said that there was no such thing as a zombie, until the Inferi at St. Mungo's began to grow more aware and coordinated their attacks. *Maybe it was just the Resurrection Stone, but what if mixing the Stone with goblin magic gave birth to a new form of Inferi?*

The sun was falling into a sea of scarlet and orange. It was gorgeous; it looked like someone had melted two giant crayons and smeared the sky with it. Severus wondered when was the last time he enjoyed watching the sunset, and he remembered the sunrise he shared with Nymphadora as they made love while bent over the railings of the Astronomy Tower. He closed down his mind and focused at the crime scene before him with cold logic.

The wizard at the perimeter waved them in as Fleur whispered into his ear. "So what's the deal with the Ministry here?"

"The Dark Lord found out that the vampires control the magical world here and their laws have been amended to allow them carte blanche when feeding on humans. The Minister is nothing more than a puppet now."

"Sounds familiar." Severus and Fleur nodded hasty greetings as they were ushered in. The Ministry employee looked nervous and fidgety, as if he didn't want to go anywhere closer to the remains than this.

"I was told the British Ministry would be sending two Agents here? You must be Agents Nemesis and Fury?" Severus nodded, glad that Harry let them come under disguise and coded names. It even hid her wings and made their tactical robes appear to be wool greatcoats. *While Bellatrix is still out there, any means of guile could ensure my survival. I would hate to have to duel her by myself in an unfamiliar land.*
"Why are you Nemesis?" Fleur asked.

"Counterpart to you being Fury, I suppose. The word goes back to the Greek word 'νέμειν', meaning 'to give what is due'. I bring vengeance whereas you bring justice." The pair of them were handed over to yet another official who would lead them into the house. Severus sensed something was odd with Erik, but let the thought go as he saw the corpse's remains.

The majority of the bones were still connected on the ground, on its back in the middle of the gutted-out home. Even the walls had been knocked down, all buckling away from the corpse as if it were ground zero for a large blast.

There were other wizards in the area, but it was just Fleur and Severus standing by the scattered body parts. The others seemed tired of looking at the crime scene, maybe they had been here longer. The smell of the corpse could do that to you. Fleur fought the urge to huddle her nose under her wizarding robes to try and stifle the rank odor, but it was an unusually hot day and every smell seemed cloying in this house. *If it had been in the winter, then maybe the smell wouldn't be so pungent.*

"Was the body being handed by its ankles or wrists?" Fleur asked.

"Does it matter?" Erik asked.

"I guess not." Fleur wanted to focus on anything but what the body was, because when you stare down at a dismembered body, either you stay detached, run screaming, or throw up. Severus had practice from the countless Dark Revels he attended during the war, but it wasn't something he was proud of.

"They found a lot of the organs scattered around the perimeter, but couldn't find the heart," Severus said, voice as unemotional as his face. *It seemed odd that his eyes were blue rather than dark.* Fleur had a summer tan, short black hair, but it was all just a disguise glamour. It seemed wrong that Severus was a blond, blue-eyed WASP who was tanned darker than Fleur was with black hair and brown eyes. *It was like we swapped hair and eye colors, and both got really tan at the same time.*

"Nemesis," she said, and he moved so Fleur couldn't see the body. "Talk to me."

Severus blinked at her. "They won't find the heart. Just like they didn't find the brain. It might be locked away in some basement, growing hair for being away from the warlock for so long..."

"I need you here, working this case, not lost in your head." Fleur reminded Severus.

"I'm here." She frowned at him and shook her head. "We've seen worse than this and were more professional about it."

"I'm fairly certain that this is indeed The Dark Lord. Hence why I'm all the more frightened. Bellatrix Lestrange has either tried to save or harvest him."

"Agents, what should we do with the remains?"

Severus turned to leave the building as Fleur's hands went aflame with the purple-cursed fire. "We cleanse the building, and look for the rest of the remains. Bellatrix Lestrange is in your country."

Erik frowned at the pair of British Agents, massive arms crossed over an equally massive chest. The arms didn't quite fold right due to being too muscular for that, but he tried to. He was a tall, bald man who seemed to always be on alert, even when he looked entirely at rest. He frowned as he watched the building burn down amid flashes of light and shutter-clicks from the press' cameras.
"The wizards at INTERCON going to see this now." *For the best, the International Confederation of Wizards should be involved in this.*

Fleur shrugged, her hands extinguished as she shoved them into the outer pockets of her robes. "Can't be helped; this is the fastest and most efficient way to cleanse the area without trying to touch the remains." Severus pulled out his wand slightly and cast a subtle spell, putting a pair of glasses on.

"Fury, I can see your cursed fire working on devouring the remains; there seems to be extensive enchantments in place in addition to the unicorn blood and basilisk venom that was infused into his bones."

Erik didn't seem too pleased, though. "Agents, you were asked here to help recover the body, not to destroy it!" Severus knew exactly what could be done with The Dark Lord's remains, and wasn't about to let anyone get their hands on it. *Though it appears Trixie already has.*

"I'll send you my most heartfelt apology in triplicate." Severus' eyes conveyed cold sarcasm. "At least now the remains won't fall into the wrong hands."

"The Minister will not be pleased." Erik replied, his teeth clenched in anger.

Fleur smiled vindictively. "You don't answer to the Minister and we both know it."

Erik tried to give blank face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fury." Severus warned.

"You're a blood-whore, I can smell it on you." Severus was startled at that. "Where is you hiding the bite marks?" *Veelas could smell that on a person?*

"You ought to watch your mouth, witch." Erik growled, uncrossing his arms and puffing himself up.

"Fury, stop trying to pick a fight."

"S- Nemesis, maybe I want a fight right now! Why the hell does he think we're just going to hand over Voldemort's remains to some vampire bitch!"

"I would not call Dominika that to her face."

"Give me a time and place, Renfield."

"Fury, I strongly suggest you desist in this." Severus said, his senses picking up something peculiar in the wind.

"Listen to Nemesis. We need not be enemies."

"Erik, did you set a trap for us?" Severus asked, unsheathing his wand entirely.

Erik flinched at that, "Agent, the Statute!" He turned to the cameras only to see the people writing on the ground as a flurry of bats flocked over them.

Fleur's eyes saw the bats covering the muggles as they bled, throats precisely torn so as to silence them as they were slowly drained en mass. "Must be at least two vampires there, maybe three." Fleur's hands went ablaze as Erik pulled out his own wand, preparing for the worst.

"Is this Dominika's idea of a welcoming party?" Severus asked.
"No! She's trying to bring the factions together, we've been dealing with a rogue drudge of skeletons attacking graveyards and a horror of Inferi that have been invading the ministry!" The bats flew away, leaving the corpses to rise and shamble towards us, rage filling their eyes.

"MERDE!" Fleur yelled, "REVENANTS!"

Taking care, Severus directed his wand to create a fiery golem out of fiendfyre to smash at the undead people who were starting to move faster as they smelled living flesh nearby. Once he was certain Erik was distracted by the fire, Severus sent a Patronus off to Harry in the opposite direction. "We need to retreat from here, where's the nearest safe-house?" Severus panted at the depletion of his magic. "I need to speak with Dominika. Now."

"I know you're a powerful wizard, perhaps too powerful to meet my Mistress."

Fleur scented the air, hands ready to fling fireballs. "Nemesis, I smell something..."

Severus sneered at Erik. "The revenants were a diversion, Erik! The vampire-bats are here to kill us. Apparate us to your nearest warren!"

Harry made his way out of the Burrow to find Ron awkwardly standing in the garden, smoking.

"Hello, Ron." Harry said, eyeing the fag in his friend's hand. "I guess I can't say anything about that; my vice has been throwing myself into my work. If he wants to smoke, I'm not going to try to stop him. Ron shrugged and threw it on the ground, twisting his boot into it to make sure it went out.

"Harry." He replied, glancing in through the window to see Jennifer taking Arthur in a big embrace and cackled loudly. Both of them winced at the sound of it, and they both seemed to want to ignore that it was going on.

"So, you and Draco." Ron said unsurely.

"Yeah, my good is rubbing off on him." Harry quipped, eliciting a chuckle from his friend.

"The world has changed." He said, and Harry nodded.

"That was the point."

"No, not that, I mean that it hasn't changed back. People once enjoyed our daydream charms - now they just want to forget the nightmares."

"It will take time, but we'll get back to where things once were."

"Not everything will go back to the way it was. Hermione can't come back from where she's gone."

"Hermione isn't evil, Ron."

"She and I had a row; scared everyone, then she somehow forgot it all just before the Goblin Rebellion. Something's irreversibly different there."

"The Elder Wand is influencing her, willing her to use it more. The power there wants to be used, and she's still adjusting to it."

"I thought that was yours." Harry shook his head.

"It feels like it was supposed to be, because of what happened in Malfoy Manor... you know,
disarming Draco... but now that I've seen what it's done to 'Mione..."

Ron's eyes bugged out wide at that. "You could be married to your boyfriend's mum?!" A moment of silence fell between them before they both erupted in laughter. Harry's eyes watered at how hard he laughed at that.

"Merlin, I needed that laugh. Being married to Cissy would be... quite awkward."

Ron's own laughter died down. "What happened with Ginny?"

"She wanted to travel and play Quidditch."

"Don't you still love her?"

Harry smiled at the thought of her, but there was a pain in his eyes. "Yes. I do."

"So why Mal... Draco, then?"

"I um," he shrugged, "I love them both."

"How can you love... wait, you chose the bloke?"

"It's complicated, Ron."

"It must be." Ron said uncomfortably.

"You with Lav?" Harry hoped that the change in subject might help.

"Oh, not really. I can't..."

"Why not?"

"Well, I don't know if she likes me in that way anymore."

"Are you blind? She's definitely still into you."

"No, we just spend time together... you know, when she changes. Just something she shouldn't have to do alone."

"I've seen her at the Ministry; what she wears every full moon before she puts herself in that cage? Those are date clothes, which may I add, she takes off before her transformation."

"She doesn't want to ruin those." Ron said dismissively.

"Then she wouldn't wear something that nice, now would she?" Harry explained, and Ron's eyes lit up in realization. "She's wearing date clothing."

"Merlin, you're right. But, I can't... shouldn't- I don't." Harry gave Ron a look of exasperation. "I can't take advantage of her situation."

"Take advantage of her situation? Ron, it's not her situation she want you to take advantage of."

"I can't be that person, though."

"Why not?"

"She needs a guy who is happy, well-adjusted, someone who can protect her, make her laugh, that's
not me. I'm still recovering from the horrors of the war."

"Ron, you're being an idiot. Be a Gryffindor and ask her out." A silver dragon Patonus flew around
Harry’s head, waiting for it to be acknowledged. Harry cast the murmur charm and the dragon spoke
with Snape's voice.

"Remains destroyed, vital parts missing. Suspect Trixy is involved. Request backup."

"Ron, I have to go. Would you be willing to join me?"

"Why me?"

"Because you're my best friend, and you know me. And because McLaggen is full of himself."

"I just... I don't know, what about Draco?"

"He almost died last time... along with Ginny."

"I never heard about that."

"You also never heard that I killed Neville, Ron."

"What? I heard he died during a goblin attack."

"Yeah, he was under the Imperious when he gutted Draco and was about to kill Ginny. I tried to find
a peaceful solution instead of Grindelwald's Cauldron. But in battle, all that matters is survival.
Please, I've needed you by my side and I can't do this alone."

"What about Hermione?"

"Severus and Fleur both agree with me; we need to keep her and the Deathstick as far away from
this as possible. He found Voldemort's remains and evidence that suggests Bellatrix is in Romania.
The last thing we want is her wielding that wand."

"I get that it's bad, but honestly? Not our country, not our problem."

"She's harvested parts of Voldemort and is slowly on her way back here. My theory is that she's
eating Dementors."

"Eating Dementors?! Why would any witch in their right mind go anywhere near a Dementor?"

"I don't know; but even the Unspeakables are confused as to why a Death Eater is consuming the
soul-suckers. But Bob agrees with me that it can't be a good thing."

Fleur and Severus found themselves in the middle of a noisy rave, and were being ushered to a back
office where thug-looking men with earbuds nodded to let Erik pass. She realized then what Severus
meant about how the laws were vampire-friendly. Most of the kids here look too young to be here;
letting a few go missing after these parties would be a perfect blood stock for the vampires. They
stopped the two agents with a cursory nod.

The tall, bald man of the pair was standing against the wall as if at attention. His face was handsome
yet narrow and it conveyed that he had been military earlier in his life. The other one was a bit
shorter but had bulging muscles that strained the uniform black tee and black slacks that they were
wearing. This one had prominent eyes and a gold tooth that seemed to be a throwback to an earlier
decade. He had this disturbing look to him, like he was the assistant principal in charge of spanking
naughty children, and he enjoyed his work a little too much.

The man's voice was deep, faintly Polish and gruff, but still this side of human. "Search them for weapons before they go down."

Erik nodded. His hands pointed to the great coats as he asked them to surrender their wands. Fleur and Severus handed over their wands, both realizing exactly how disadvantaged this could make them. "Check for muggle weapons, too." Erik pat-searched the pair of them, grunting in confusion until he reached into Severus' coat and pulled out a Mac 10 and the extended magazine.

"Magic pockets, no way that could have fit inside your coat otherwise." The guard at the door said, reaching inside his own jacket, unsnapping the strap to his own concealed weapon. "Check the arms for spare wands." Damn. Erik gripped Fleur's sleeves like he meant to rip them off.

"Wait, please. I'll just take the jacket off. You can search it, too, if you like." Fleur's hand was hovering over the emergency portkey button but was given a stern yet minimal shake of his head. This place is warded against portkeys? Erik's hands reached into the sleeve and removed the spare wand hidden in the sleeve and the M1911 pistol from the inside pocket.

"What was that look he gave you? No, Fury, you keep your hands exactly where we can see them. Don't take off or touch anything."

The bald-headed man searched Severus for concealed weapons, and didn't find any more. Erik patted Fleur's legs down, but missed the pouch at her ankle. She had one weapon, but she really didn't want to have to rely on her emergency backup weapon. That was in case everything went to shite, and it looks like it may have. The only saving grace was that Severus' Beretta 1301 was still secured on the back of his robes under a disillusionment charm.

The agents were deemed suitable and were lead down an extremely long spiral staircase. It would certainly block out all sunlight, was this an excavated bomb shelter? As they went down the long stairwell, her ears popped from the change in air pressure.

"Abandoned NATO Missile silo." Severus said plainly. "We'll be deep enough that no Inferi can smell nor dig down to us." He flicked his eyes to Erik. "Dominika is scared."

Severus' words hit a nerve, and it showed on his face as Erik said, "Mistress' concerns are your concerns, Nemesis." The three of them made their way down the spiral stairs, Erik in the rear. Did he think I would try to make a break for it? Probably, but where could I go?

They stopped at a level that wasn't on the bottom floor, and Eric moved around them to knock on the door in some sort of pre-arranged pattern.

Doors this thick aren't supposed to open silently, Severus thought as he swallowed his fear, and I'm supposed to be able to at least hear myself gulp. Severus quietly tried to clear his throat, and still heard nothing.

The utter silence was affecting his ears and balance, and he had to keep his eyes on the ground in front of himself in order to not lose his balance and fall over. I can't even hear my heartbeat here. This is a really powerful privacy spell. He risked a glance forward and found Fleur sprawled on the ground.

"Fury!" Severus said, his throat silent as panic flooded him. If I were to be killed, nobody would hear my screams. Erik moved around him and grasped Fleur's wrists, pulling her a few more feet forward and helped her up. She stood up as if nothing were the matter and slapped him hard across the face.
Severus shuffled his feet as he kept moving towards them, vertigo threatening to take him down. It looked like the two of them were having an argument, which told Severus that the utter silence would end in under a meter.

Bright, cheerful laughter surrounded the room as Severus broke through the barrier. It was light and youthful, disconcerting as you realized that you were in a Vampire Warren. *Cheery children sounds were fucking creepy.*

"-could have warned us about the Silence! I could have really hurt myself there!" Fleur snapped sharply.

"Nemesis, you and Fury are actually in Dominika's retreat. Obviously we will have the highest security possible." Erik replied with a mild tone.

"Then what is the laughing sound?!" She asked, eyes wild as she scanned the room. Their skin was crawling at the sound as the shadows seemed to recede and a porcelain-skinned little girl stepped into view. She seemed to physically be not a day over six, but the fashion was dated by at least two centuries. The shadows seemed tangible as it caressed her body, as if Darkness could be alive and it was her personal familiar.

"Hi, I'm Dominika, did you like my magic trick?" She giggled again and Severus' skin crawled with the utter wrongness of it. Her eyes were big and innocent, but missing the sparkle found in youth. Her eyes were utterly dead.

"Seulement un enfant..." Fleur muttered in horror. Dominika scented the air and her eyes went red.

"Oui, Vélane. And that makes you, Nemesis, Severus Snape."

"Merde." 'Shit' is right, Fleur. Severus' mind reeled as he tried to arithmentically calculate the odds of his survival.

"So are you on Trixy's side or not?" Severus asked her.

"Trixy? Is that the witch who brought all this trouble to my country? No, I'm not on 'her side'. I'm on my own."

Fleur looked at her disgustedly. "We want to stop her, and it seems that it would be in your best interest to let us do that."

"Stop her?" Dominika giggled happily, her voice pitched with saccharine sweetness. "No, I want her to kill everything, then I will destroy her and have an undead army to protect my lands from the wizard-kind!"

"You're mad if you think you can stop her on your own, vampire."

Her voice went sour. "I'm much older than I look. Now that I have you two here, you will dispatch her for me, but only when I tell you to." Madness reflected in her sing-song tone as she stared at them with those dead eyes of hers.

"We will not help you." Severus said defiantly, until tendrils of shadow jutted out from Dominika to grab and slam Severus against a wall with enough force that he saw starbursts of light as he began to slip unconscious.

"Oh, but you will, Veela. Look into my eyes." Fleur clenched her jaw and defiantly stared at her partner. The last thing Severus saw was Dominika imposing her will upon her.
Something pricked Fleur's conscience and she looked up for the briefest of moments, only to be caught as the vampire's will clawed inside her mind. Fleur tried to fight it, but how do you fight off fire ants crawling around inside your brain? Fire burned through her mind, synapses singed until she thought her brain would cook and skin would crack and peel away.

When she could see again, Fleur realized she was huddled in a corner, shaking. Severus' lifeless body was wrapped up in shadows like a mummy, and she wasn't sure if he was alive or not.

"What did you do to Severus, you bitch?" She muttered threateningly. Dominika knelt down beside her, leaning over Fleur as if to give a loving embrace. She realized that the vampire's tiny fingers had exponential strength as she was pinned to the ground.

"Eventually, Veela, you will call me Mistress, and you will mean it."

"We came to stop a mad woman from getting unlimited power, I had no idea that there would be two of you!"

The little girl leaned up against her cheek, running her delicate tongue down past her jawline and over the pulse point in her neck. "I am going to enjoy sinking my fangs into your neck and drinking you down until you're my puppet."

Fleur flailed at that, kicking her legs and wings out wildly in hopes to get out from under the child-sized vampire. She found her legs pinned down by Erik, a look of panic and fear on his face as he fumbled for his wand. *I can't let him spell me*, Fleur thought as she got one wrist free and scrambled for the thin vial that could buy her escape.

The veela's fingers found it, forcefully smashing the glass vial on the ground and letting the Peruvian Instant Darkness powder blind everyone. Fleur redoubled her struggle with strength she didn't know she had, flipping herself over the two who had pinned her down and scrambled towards the exit.

"Severus!" She yelled, hoping that she was moving towards him but wasn't certain. She was in pain, and pain meant that she was still alive, and she took that for the only good omen she had right then. She kept moving until the Silence claimed her and threw her to her knees, and she relied on gravity to give her some direction as she tried to at least keep crawling. *Pain means you're alive. Moving keeps you alive. Just keep crawling."

Fleur's fingers found what must have been the opened door, and she made her way around it by touch alone. The air felt different, more spacious, and the Veela has hoped that she had made it to the staircase. Her knees ached as she crawled her way up the stairs, each step giving her a shred of hope that she was going to make it out.

Then she felt fingers brush against her ankle. She tried to move faster, but the small hand wrapped around her and started to pull her back. The hand was definitely clawed as the Veela felt her right wing snapped and torn off from her body. The pain was excruciating, drowned out only when she realized that she had gotten past the Silence and Dominika was on top of her, lips brushing up against her ear.

"I've been undead for centuries, do you think your little tricks will work here?!"

Fleur's heart pounded in her throat. She couldn't breathe, and she couldn't make words. All she could do was scream as razor-sharp teeth tore into her, and the Veela went limp and quiet.
Fleur's eyes opened, the sensation was nearly like sandpaper. She wanted to close them again, but her last memories trickled in and she had to get her bearings. She grimaced as she blinked and saw a light attached to the ceiling. *Okay, I'm not locked in a dungeon.*

She tried to roll over and that's when she realized every muscle in her body was sore as if she had been beaten up. She figured out from the rough-feeling sofa and the generic artwork on the wall across from her, that she was in a hotel room that was trying to look nicer than it really was. She tried to move her head to take in the rest of the room, but a familiar voice warned not to. Pain shot through her neck and all the way down her spine, informing her that she had barely survived the vampire attack.

Her voice came out in a ragged croak. "Erik." She was parched and realized dehydration was a serious concern.

He sat down in a nearby chair, just close enough to be in her peripheral vision. "I didn't think you'd be alert so soon. Can I get you some water and painkiller?"

"Where.." She swallowed, the parched sensation going even into the back of her throat. "am I?"

"Someplace safe." He got up and the sound of a water bottle seal cracking flooded her with relief.

"How?" She reached out for the bottle, and Erik placed it in her hand.

"I moved you. Dominika said, 'next time I will kill you too.' " She watched his throat work as she swallowed. *He was scarred worse than me, maybe now he'll make a move.*

"What did.." Fleur took another long gulp of water, she wasn't sure if she was bleeding internally. "Dominika..." A wave of vertigo hit her and she used her free arm to settle herself as she laid upon the couch. As she turned her head to the left to take in the room, she saw the white feathers matted with blood in her peripheral vision. *Something was wrong.* She snapped her head to the right and only saw the sofa.

"She took your wing just before she bit you. She marked you as her servant, her Renfield... it's... best that you do as she wants."

Grief poured from her as she took it in. She was just getting used to no longer looking preternaturally beautiful because she had her wings, but now...

"That bitch took my wing. I can't fly now." Her voice was ragged as she realized had once again realized how much of a gift she had that was now ripped from her.

"But you're still alive." He said consolingly. Her fury-filled eyes met his.

"Yes, so I can be her lapdog like you? How did the Wizards let her rise to power here?"

"She and her kind defended our lands against Grindelwald when nobody else would. In exchange, we granted them a favored status as our protectors."

"And now?"

"Something bigger has come, and divided the vampires. Dominika's the less... cruel option."

There was something in the way he said that which reminded Fleur that her throat hurt. *This is less cruel?* Her fingers felt dried blood on her neck, and a small whimper came out as she remembered the last memory of Severus, swallowed up by the tangible darkness.
Bile rose in her throat as she thought what a more cruel option would be. Sev...

"What happened to Severus?"

"Gone. We need to stop this witch."

"Fine. Where do we start?" I will find and burn Dominika for this.

I was in trouble, and I knew it. Professor Snape held me after class for my cheek and I just knew he was going to assign me a disgusting detention involving runespoor eggs or something worse... without my gloves. What I didn't expect was for him to ignore me as he seemed to be marking papers.

"Excessive explanation... no concept of brevity..."

"Sir? I'm here for my detention." I asked meekly, wishing that he would look up at me.

"Annotated footnotes to five different sources as if I care how much reading you do..." He was grading my paper in front of me!

"I believe that was an impeccable paper, Professor!" Severus slammed down his quill and I jumped slightly at that.

"Well, Miss Granger, if I had asked you to transcribe five different texts, I'd give you an Outstanding for your ability to mimic a copying charm."

"Sir, I didn't just copy that, I memorized it all!" I replied indignantly.

"...and you could also get an Exceeds Expectations for your impersonation of a parrot. Don't you ever have an original thought in that head of yours?"

"Of course I do! But the assignment clearly stated..."

"Silence! Goodness, woman, does your mind's internal chatter ever cease?" He took that moment to stand up from behind his desk, his robes almost billowing from the circulation in the room. "Have you ever truly emptied your mind of all thought? It might seem blissful both to you and to every professor who has to grade your literary regurgitation week after week!"

"I'll write it again, Professor."

"You will do no such thing. Tell me, Hermione, have you ever been able to empty your mind of all thoughts?"

Only when I frig myself rotten, and even then I usually think of you.

I blinked at him, and my mind locked onto one and only one detail. He called me Hermione. My eyes were in his and I hadn't noticed it until I blinked and pulled away, realizing that he had taken a cursory look inside my mind. Did he know that? Did he see it?

"You don't sleep well, either. Come, I have a remedy for that." Severus swept around his desk and I followed him through the side doorway which put us in his bedroom. It was simple yet tasteful, his mahogany four-poster bed was decked in silver and green sheets across from a wall of books that made my heart flutter slightly. But it was the item atop the bureau that gave me pause. Iron shackles. My quim throbbed and grew wet at the thought of using those as Severus returned from his potion cabinet in his lavatory and saw my fingers delicately trace the expert craftsmanship that was put into
"I do not recall giving you leave to touch my personal belongings." Severus said, his voice missing his usual sternness. I don't know why I did it, but I grabbed the cuffs and ran out from his bedroom and into the classroom, only to be stopped and dangled from my ankles over my head. The classroom door was slammed closed and warded shut as I helplessly dangled in the air. Severus stalked over to me, his posture threatening like a panther waiting to strike.

"What do you think you are doing, Miss Granger?" Severus asked silkily. I realized that my skirt had flipped from being inverted, so I quickly tried to use my hands to keep the skirt from falling up.

"I um... I don't know, sir." I replied, "Would you please release me from this spell, though? I can't talk to my professor while my pants are in his face."

"Put on the shackles." I gaped at him, not believing his request. "Put. On. The shackles." I obeyed him the second time, and he gently lowered me to sit on his desk. The feel of the cold desk so close to my cunt made me want to writhe and find the perfect angle, as the sensation of having my wrists bound seemed almost electric to me. My hands were folded in my lap as the anticipation had waves of desire coursing through my body as I waited for Severus to do something... anything.

His lips met mine, and ecstasy burned through me as he grabbed my restrained wrists and pulled them over my head, making me fall back onto his desk with a stack of papers cushioning my head as I landed backwards. My mind was utterly blank as my legs parted of their own volition, my body begging for his entrance to sate my carnal needs. His mouth and tongue parted my lips, and his soft tongue snaked into mine and licked the inside of my lips. All I could do was moan into it and return the kiss as I felt him crawl onto the desk as well.

"Hermione..." Sev panted as he divested me of all my school uniform with his wand, eyes glittering darkly as he took in my nude form. His lips trailed kisses down my cheek and onto my neck, where I turned my head and felt his teeth lightly bite, making me wetter than before. His large hands were gentle as his fingers pinched and rolled my nipple, making me arch and roll my hips wantonly as he chuckled darkly at that.

I was tense, scared, yet melting all at the same time as his lips trailed lower and took my nipple into his mouth and he deftly sucked upon it, making me writhe and my wrists pulled the shackles' chains taut over my head. I struggled against the restraints now that they were attached to the desk, and Severus took that moment to look me directly in the eyes as his fingers slipped inside me.

"I want to see the look on your face when I enter you, to remember this moment." Sev whispered silkily as my eyes jerked open and I gasped as his fingers rolled inside me, hitting a spot that pulled me deeper into desire as if I could drown in it. His thumb pressed down upon my clit and ground an excruciatingly slow circle as the two fingers found an almost too slow rhythm that left me panting and begging for more.

"Severus... more, please..." I panted as he chuckled, kissing me deeply as he sped up, waves of pleasure flowing all over my skin and reverberating down my spine. He pulled away from my lips and I was frustrated at the loss of his lips and fingers, my own head straining to close the distance as I felt something completely new enter me. I shuddered as I took him in and felt him slide home inside me, hitting every spot inside to leave me clenching and needy as he pulled back out and slammed himself home inside me.

"Severus...!" My needy eyes met his as our lips met again, his hips frantically pumping into me as I was becoming undone by him. I felt myself pulse and grow tighter around him as my breathing went
ragged, his teeth nipping at my lips as the climax hit me and I exploded into a million pieces around him, and his own thrusts went jerky as he also came inside me. He kissed me one last time as I laid slack-jawed and bound to the desk, mumbling his name as he slid out of me and cast a cleaning charm on my cunt.

"Ten points to Gryffindor for finally having a clear mind devoid of chatter." Severus teased as I nodded drunkenly. Merlin I'm drunk off of sex...

"Thank... you." I mumbled, speaking seeming difficult at this time. "Will sleep well now."

Severus smirked as he released me from the shackles. "Not the kind of detention you were expecting, were you, Miss Granger?" I shook my head as I tried to get up from the desk.

I tried to sit up again, yet the world still seemed wobbly as I fell sideways and nearly into my wife Narcissa. Holy shit, that was a dream, right? My mind felt like a bone-dry sponge and the headache was rapidly moving into migraine status. I looked down and saw myself dressed in pajamas, and tried to recollect the night before and how I wound up in my wife's bed. She got off of the bed and sipped her morning coffee as she picked out which teaching robes she'd wear today.

"Did you bring me here?" I asked, eyes blearily taking in her bedroom.

"No, you staggered in her all on your own volition." She said, divesting herself of the midnight blue satin and my eyes were locked onto her nude body as she slid into a fresh pair of black lacy pants. Merlin, what an ass she has.

"I need a hangover draught." Narcissa had a vindictive smile on her face. I really didn't like that look.

"All out. Looks like you get to just deal with it." She put on her dark green teaching robes and charmed her hair up into a professional bun. There was something odd about how the outfit hung on her body, however. The more I tried to think about it, my brain felt foggy and hurt my head more.

"What, you didn't restock your stores after that bender you had?" I asked.

"It's not that I can't restock my hangover potions to suit your needs, but that I won't." Cissy's clipped tone was not missed by me.

"You're serious." I replied, shocked at her change of heart. "Just going to let me suffer?"

"I'm tired of being jerked around by you, Hermione!" She flinched as the Compulsion punished her for saying that. "First, I thanked you for what you did to help save our son from Azkaban, and then you moved out of our home. Secondly, you then saw selective memories of the darkest days of my life with Rita, and what do you do? Shoved me away, again, like a bloody coward!" This time she winced as the pain hit, as if she were ready for it to strike. "You have said you want to live your life, be young, and then you show up piss-drunk in my room?! TWICE, no less!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't think-" Blood trickled out of her nose and she wiped it away with the back of her trembling hand. She was scared of me. Merlin, she was scared yet still standing up to me.

"I've dealt with an abusive husband who got drunk on Dark Magic and fire-whiskey, for years, so I've got a thick skin when it comes to this, Hermione. I know you've been trying to adjust to owning the Elder Wand, and for having resorted to using the Dark Arts, but I really don't want you to go down the same path he did."

She just compared me to Lucius. I was lost for words at that. She turned away as she searched her wardrobe for the shoes she wanted to wear to match the robes.
"And despite the Ministry’s misguided efforts, we're married, have a son, and you've got Granger Enterprises to run."

"Cissy, I'm not ready to be an adult; not to mention a wife, step-mother, and business woman-"

"-but the world keeps turning, and you need to understand that you can't be a child anymore."

I rolled my eyes at that. But it's not fair... why doesn't she run it?

"Yeah, well, life isn't fair. The Malfoy name is mud, but people will rally behind Granger. Besides, with it, we can make the world better. I mean, that's why we're here. You taught me that when we were foisted together. Huh?"

"I didn't say that."

"You thought it, really loudly." Her lips were pressed thin in annoyance. "Like it or not, Hermione, we're Bonded to each other. If we allow it, and actually work together, the Bond will help us." I reeled at what all she had said to me. She wasn't pissed off, just... disappointed.

"I'm really sorry, Narcissa." I looked her in the eyes, letting her see that I actually meant it. She nodded and handed me a potion vial. I took a sniff, noticing the color and smell was slightly off. Were there rose hips in this?

"This isn't a hangover potion."

"Morning sickness potion, it'll work just as well. So why did you come see me last night?" I grimaced and took it like a shot, surprised at how quickly it cleared up my nausea. She took back the now-empty vial as I thanked her.

I tried to think about how to answer her when Herpy silently delivered a cup of coffee to me. Even she seemed to be cowering at me.

"I don't recall. I... wait, I wanted to... confront you. Ask why you'd have a son and sacrifice his life... his innocence... to Lucius and The Dark Lord."

Narcissa paused at that, her body going from defensive to relaxed. "It was a horrible idea I had one night after an... excruciating session. That was a decision that I regretted as soon as I was with child. I knew Severus would help me terminate it and make it look like a miscarriage, but when it came time... I felt him move, and I couldn't. Shortly after that, things were so much better. Luce was happy, and I wasn't being punished anymore. But I hated myself for what I had done. What kind of future I was making him be a part of.

"Then The Dark Lord was destroyed by Harry Potter. It was the best thing I could have hoped for, though after that I was busy spending every last favor I had collected to keep my husband out out jail." Cissy looked away shamefully. "I thought we were safe after that."

"What about Rita? You helped destroy her and turn her into a monster. She even killed Lucius' father for you." I replied, uncertain how I could ever trust this woman. I put down the coffee and put my head in my hands, trying to get the throbbing in my head to subside.

"Abraxas Malfoy bankrolled the Death Eaters early on, hoping that this would do better than Grindelwald's attempted uprising did. Between that and teaching his son how he should break me in as a wife... he is better off dead. She was going to be a monster regardless. I just gave her ambition and structure for it to be mutually beneficial to us." I looked at her curiously. "I knew Rita; she always had a vindictive streak in her. I just gave her focus, targets, and used her for my own gain."

I shook my head at that. "I don't know, from the memories I saw, I think I can almost sympathize
with her."

Cissy's eyes darted to my own. "Don't. She may have once been redeemable and had some goodness in her, but trust me, it's gone now. Luce and I made sure of it." She reached over and placed two fingers on my temple and my migraine receded noticeably. The pained look in her eye told me where it went.

"Cissy, you didn't actually heal me before, did you?" I asked as I understood the Bonding better.

"I helped increase your healing ability, but no, I just took on a large part of your discomfort to lighten your burden." Narcissa replied, eyes tightening as she adjusted to the pain.

"You didn't have to do that."

"You're my wife, my life partner. What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine." There was something plaintive in her face as she said that. "Eventually you'll understand that."

I turned away from her, unprepared for thoughts like that. "Why are you being so kind to me after all this? The Compulsion?"

"No, it's because I love you and accept you, flaws and all. That's the thing about growing up and being with someone. Not just giving up at the first sign of trouble. Or the second. I truly think you and I can work this out together, and I'm going to keep working at it and hope you'll give it a try as well."

I felt bad all of a sudden for what I could remember of the night before. "I went out last night, and-"

"-yes, you had a gorgeous girl in your lap who wanted you and you tried snogging her, then got piss-drunk with Krum who also wants in your pants." Narcissa huffed bitterly as she went to her bathroom mirror and charmed her makeup on for the day. "I don't need you to come brag about your sexual conquests."

"Oh, okay. I came to say that I didn't want them. That there wasn't that spark I've had with you." She lowered her wand, placing her hands on the counter. She was trying really hard to stay calm, wasn't she?

"So what do you want, Hermione?" She said, head sagging as she braced herself on the counter facing away from me. It felt like we were on a precipice of something; that I had to choose my words and actions carefully. What do I want? I have no clue.

"Honestly, I don't know. I just, you know, what that... spark." She turned to face me, and there was a scheming glint in her eye. My guts flipped at that, wondering what kind of ideas she had going on in her head. "I've only felt it with you, Cissy." There was a look in her eyes, just behind the tight squint she was trying to hide, and I felt if reflected in me. It was longing, the desire to just hold her and realize I was at home with her. She loves you and is waiting for you to just admit it too. This isn't admitting weakness or defeat, Granger. She must have seen and understood the thoughts in my head as she seemed to relent.

"Okay. Time to take some advice and meet you halfway. I want to ask you out. On a... you know," she shrugged nervously, "...date. A date? Her, and me, going out together?"

"What? I um-" I thought about it, and wondered what would have happened if Narcissa had come out to the club with me after my birthday dinner with the parents. I wouldn't have met Denton and Cissy might have sang more Billy Idol to me. It put a smile on my lips.
"Merlin knows we sleep better when we're together, and apparently you want to know more about me, so perhaps we could get to know each other better when we have time on the weekends?" She realized what she implied and backtracked. "Not sleep together sex, but like sleepovers and cuddling."

"Go out together on the weekends, you mean like go to Madam Puddifoots?" I said, cringing at the horrid decoration. Even Narcissa winced at the idea.

"Well, I suppose we could do that. I'd rather go someplace less..."

"Garish?" I supplied. Cissy laughed softly, and the sound was pleasing as it rolled over me. I conjured myself a glass of cool water and sipped it, sneaking a glance at her smile.

"Yes, garish works. Perhaps we could try something in the muggle world." I nodded as the memory of my dream came back to me. *I really need to get myself off again, if I'm fantasizing about Severus-Headmaster Snape.*

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*Fleur was dead. Dead. Severus tried to wrap his mind around that concept, but it just didn't want to connect. He thought it was just shock as he took in his own reflection in the mirror. *I'm not undead, I haven't turned.* "Fleur is dead. Let her go."

His hand was shaking as it clenched the bloodstained towel that he had been holding to his wounds. He didn't want to heal the wounds magically until after he had siphoned all of the wounds to ensure he wasn't contaminated with any vampire blood or saliva. *Last thing we need is another Renfield.*

Severus threw the towel into the cheap metal waste bin and flicked a simple *evanesco* to make it go away. It didn't make his pain and regret go away, though. Furious, Severus hexed the can with a banishing charm, denting it as it was flung, bouncing around the cramped area four times before it fell dead on the floor.

Harry barged into the bathroom, eyes wide and wand out. "How'd they get in?" It took a split second to realize that the disturbance was merely Severus. "You alright, Sev?"

"Alright? Does it look like I'm all right, Potter?!" Snape yelled.

Harry didn't take the bait. "What can I do to help?"

"You could have rescued Fleur!" Severus' doubled as if the wind was knocked out of him. "Saved her instead of me."

Harry winced at that. "It was hard enough to find you two; Ron and I did everything we could to breach the wards and Kreacher only found you."

Severus sank to his knees. "It wasn't good enough; she deserved saving more than I did."

"How did they know it was you? We took precautions." Ron muttered, shaking his head.

"Interdiction. It was a specially-designed trap to catch me or anyone else who knew how to stop this."

Ron looked at the scene photographs again. "So the remains were placed here to kill anyone who wanted it, but if they could destroy it, it sprang a trap?"

"Exactly." Severus said, his mind still trying to imagine Fleur's fate. Ron, however, had arranged the
wizarding photographs around the room as if he were there again, standing right over the remains of the body.

"This was way too elegant for Bellatrix." Harry and Severus both snapped to attention at that, and looked around the scene.

"Three vampires were in their bat-form and conveyed enough saliva to create Revenants. How does this implicate Lestrange?" Harry asked, reviewing the photo of the muggles rising as undead victims of vampires.

Severus nodded when he realized what he had missed before. "Vampires usually are solitary creatures when they hunt for blood. This was a coordinated attack around The Dark Lord's remains. She knew that the Inferi horror and Skeleton drudge attacking so openly would attract attention." *It was a bloody trap and he fell for it.*

Harry counted off how many separate spells had to be used in order to secure the building and build the trap. "How did she have this much magical power to do all this?"

Ron nodded. "And how she avoided notice?"

"I believe will find our answers once we find her... If my theory is correct, everything that is undead is not to be trusted. Everyone that is under the thrall of an undead is also under Bellatrix's sway."

"Why do you say that, Severus?"

"Because Bellatrix has harvested Dark Lord's brain, heart, and skull. She's more than likely infused them into herself; absorbing his memories, magical talents, and every mental instability that man had. I believe... Trixymort is a Lich."

Dominika killed Fleur and had me wrapped up in living shadow to prove how powerful she could be. She must have thought I would be scared out of my mind around her, and to abandon this country to her own machinations. She was right about me being scared, however. I've been scared a lot. I've been scared all my damnable life. But I knelt at the feet of a madman for over 17 years and plotted his destruction right under his non-existent nose. A thousand-year-old vampire was a challenge, but I will have my revenge.

Of course, Severus thought, *there would be a rash of attacks once Harry shows up.* The three of them made their way to the latest slaughter, fake identification and disguises good enough to fool the muggle authorities.

The police officer securing the scene frowned at their arrival. "INTERPOL getting involved?"

"More help can't be a bad thing, right?" Ron muttered as they made their way in and put paper booties over their shoes. Harry had watched enough police procedural shows to understand what was going on, and Severus knew how to wing it and fit in. Ron, however, seemed to know just enough to not complain too loudly.

The hole-in-the-wall bar had an expected run-down feel, but the secret passage that went straight down under the storage freezer was quite unexpected. As the reached the bottom of the passageway, the area opened up to a bloody mess.

A coffin lay on its side. The wood buckled under what appeared to be a bombarda curse, splintering
the dark varnish into so many toothpicks. The lacy white lining, however, was in bloody tatters.

The remains inside could barely be recognized as human. All that was left of the corpse was the shredded midnight blue suit, a bloody hand free of skin, and a scrap of scalp. *The man had been blond.*

The other body lay perhaps five feet away. The woman's clothes were shredded and her chest had been ripped open, ribs shattered like glass. Similarly, most of his internal organs had sprayed outward, leaving his body cavity empty like a rotisserie chicken. Only her face was untouched. Pale eyes stared out in search for a savior that would never come. She was his Renfield, and would have fought to the death to protect him. Severus cast the *muffliato* spell to give them some privacy.

"What could have done this kind of damage to instantly kill a vampire?" Harry asked, pulling out a wizarding camera to record the scene.

"Entrail explosion curse." Severus said, remembering how Bellatrix used to think the entrail expelling curse was too mild and swore to improve on it.

"Who the fuck invented that?" Ron asked the silence.

"One guess," Severus replied. All the blood was black, suggesting that the human died at least 12 hours ago. The man's body had his teeth intact, and Severus measured the distance between the elongated canines. Leaning over the woman's remains, he was able to place every visible bite within that bite radius. "She didn't cheat on him, so much for that theory."

"What do you mean, cheating? Were these two involved with each other?" Ron seemed baffled at the concept.

*They were partners in the most intimate way, trusting each other with their lives.* Severus shrugged the thought away. Another person came down the stairway and broke the *muffliato* charm.

"That you, Severus? Wands down, boys, I'm with INTERCON."

"Hello, Bastard." The man was wearing a brown trenchcoat and fedora over a brown pinstriped suit. Severus always thought the man looked like he was supposed to be a Prohibitionist in the Roaring Twenties.

"It's Bertrand, and I told you to stay in England."

"What's intercom?" Ron asked warily.

"International Confederation of Wizards. It was the group that enacted the Statute of Secrecy."

"You mean like the UN?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I suppose. I don't follow muggle politics much."

Ron looked confused at this. "So where were you wankers when You-Know-Who rose to power?"

"We have a policy of staying out of a country's internal politics. But now that you lot are hopping around to other countries and conflict erupts? We can't just let you keep doing this." Bertrand have Snape a withering look. "Requesting to do a rescue mission in Australia? Really?"

Severus gave him a cold stare. "We're conducting cleanup for a wanted fugitive in our native land Bellatrix Lestrange, and I specifically had permission from the Romanian Government."
"That's funny, they are saying you never had permission and that you killed everyone at the scene. Your wand didn't happen to cast fiendfyre, now did it?"

"I do believe you will need an international tribunal of judges to agree to make me surrender my wand. How did you know where to find us?"

"Your colleague informed us where you'd be."

"...we didn't tell anyone." Harry replied, raising his wand again. Apparently Bertrand was a fast learner.

"Never trusted the Romanian government anyways, Mister Potter. Okay, what happened here?" Bertrand decided to trust them as he looked over the scene. Severus pointed out bodies.

"The Vampire died instantly from an entrail explosion curse, but his Renfield looks like a Ghoul attack. What's wrong with that picture?"

Ron had a thousand-yard stare as Harry figured it out. "A bloodthirsty ghoul and a Wizard fighting on the same side."

"Either we have a new alliance forming here, or ghouls have learned advanced Dark Magic. But since I do not believe a few piranhas can take down a great white shark, that leaves me to one inescapable solution."

"The fugitive Bellatrix Lestrange. But if she caused this murder, why? And who caused the massacre at the Patriarchal Cathedral?"

"There's been another attack?" Severus asked. "The vampires are falling under Lestrange's control and the leader, Dominika, isn't happy with the civil war about to happen."

"You said she became a lick, what's that?" Ron asked. Bertrand paled at that, and Harry understood that whatever it was, eating Dementors on top of it meant something really bad was coming.

"You must be Potter's friend, Ronald Weasley. It's lich, L-I-C-H. Necromancers can kill and cannibalize their own for a power boost, which... ironically kills themselves in the process. Making them mentally insane with exacting focus, and nearly indestructible. She had Voldemort's remains, didn't she?" Bertrand said, his voice shaky. Severus nodded.

"She's un-kill-able? How do we stop her then?" Ron muttered fearfully.

Harry pitched in what he knew. "Snape called her Trixymort, which works if she really did harvest the brain and heart, and now she's consuming Dementors, too..." Bertrand whistled low in amazement.

"She's an undead Voldemort with nearly god-like powers over the dead. Her existence depends on whatever talisman she imbued when she devoured Voldemort; destroy that, and she's done. We're going to need a lot more backup." He pulled out a piece of parchment and wrote out a note for his superiors, and it vanished in a flash of black smoke.

"Scene secured, Snape pursuing Lestrange on behalf of British MoM. Reports indicate suspect has transformed into a Lich. Romanian MoM has gone rogue. Request backup and any details about the prophesied Cataclysm."

Herpy was nice enough to bring me my school uniform, so I went ahead and got ready in Cissy's
room as she went over her class notes for the day. I had finished doing my makeup charms and
picked up Narcissa's forgotten wand when I heard a knock at the door.

"Enter!" Cissy called out, and I turned to see her busily searching through her desk.

"Good morning, Narcissa. Have you heard from Sever..." Minerva's eyes darted over to me, and I
tried to play it cool. "Miss Granger."

"Professor McGonagall." I smiled politely as my flustered wife tossed down her notes in resignation.

"Have you seen my wand, 'Mione? I swear, I just had it a moment ago... Crooks!" Crookshanks
doesn't steal wands, I thought as I shook my head playfully at her.

"You were doing your makeup, remember?" I said as I handed it to her. Narcissa breathed a sigh of
relief and holstered it in her robes. Minerva looked away and bit her lip at our exchange. Narcissa
didn't seem to notice it.

"You were asking about Severus? I haven't seen him since, well..." she took a breath, "Tonks is
gone."

Minerva looked like she was waiting for the punchline. "I know she is, I've seen her ghost in the
castle."

"No, I mean, her ghost moved on. Andi came to visit, brought Teddy, there were a lot of tears and
she got her closure." Narcissa said. "It all happened last night, right before... he got a Patronus from
Harry."

"That explains why Fleur is missing too, then. Very well, you'll be my Deputy while I'm Acting
Headmistress. Hermione, could you fill in for Fleur today?"

I balked at that. "Well, she mostly just leads us in discussions over the books she has us reading, and
we have a paper due next month..."

Minerva smiled at that. "Then it's settled."

"Um, no it's not." I injected, "I'm still a student, and I have my N.E.W.T. exams-"

"-which you could pass with flying colors in your sleep, wife." Narcissa replied.

"As I said, it's settled. If you want to start living in a Professor's quarters, you can pick up the slack
and substitute teach." I wanted to object, but there was a scheming glint in her eye. "Or do we need
to have a conversation about a teacher and her student shacking up together - right under my nose?"

"Fine, but this is blackmail." I quipped, gambling that she wasn't too upset at me. Minerva smiled as
she turned to leave.

"Blackmail would be suggesting that I bring back Gilderoy Lockhart, and let him see all of the heart
doodles around 'Hermione Jean Lockhart' in your notes from second year."

Narcissa snickered at that. "Hermoine Jean Lockhart?" I blushed furiously.

"I didn't think anyone saw those. I erased the ink..."

Narcissa's hand cupped my cheek and I fought from rubbing my face into the touch. "You forgot
about the indentation on the parchment; that's how we used to pass notes in my day." Crookshanks did
his little jump-facerub on Narcissa's ankle as an act of defiance.
"Well, you can sit at the Head Table today then, but you two lovebirds will need to comport yourself in a professional manner." I gave a weak smile as Narcissa collected her papers for the day and strode past us out of her quarters.

"Ward the door on your way out, 'Mione." my wife called out over her shoulder as Minerva raised an obvious eyebrow at me.

"What?"

"You two act like an old married couple at times."

Yellow police tape surrounded the Patriarchal Orthodox Cathedral, and the flashing blue lights of police cars were stuttering as the spinning reflectors seemed to cut in and out for no visible reason. Severus had a pair of spectacles on his face as he took in the scene and scowled.

"The Inferi are inside the Cathedral, and we're at the magical saturation point. Any more active spelling, and muggle technology is going to start failing."

"Snape," Ron asked, "I don't mean to ask a stupid question, but where did the bodies come from?"

Bertand glanced around as well. "Yeah, there are no nearby graveyards; otherwise we would have gotten reports of this." The four of them crossed the yellow barrier, waving a badge to the police officer whose duty it was to keep people away. The block was entirely devoid of people, which was odd for the early morning. *Maybe they were all inside for a morning Mass?* Perhaps even the muggles knew enough to stay away.

The yellow ribbon was wrapped around tree trunks and street signs. At the back side of the cathedral was a small garden, where the yellow tape wrapped around a stone angel that appeared to be mourning. A gust of wind blew, making the tape flap and twist as in its wake. *There was something downright creepy about this.*

"Where did you get those spectacles?" Bertrand asked curiously.

"Bob." Severus replied flippantly.

"Who is Bob?" He asked as the other three moved on without him.

At the doors of the cathedral stood the officer in control of the scene. He looked over six and a half feet tall, face skeletal enough to make everyone want to check him for a pulse. Twice. He walked towards them with a brisk, purposeful stride. His hair was short to almost non-existent, though it was obvious his grey hair was completely gone from the top of his head. He wasn't in a uniform, and Severus could see magical wards on the man's body but no magical aura. *He's either a squib or has protection he doesn't know about.*

He looked like he was pissed off, but that might have just been his normal face. "Well," he said.

"A man of many words, I take it?" Sev said, pulling off the spectacles and wiping them clean with a cloth before putting them away. In his periphery, he could see the latent intimidation charm worked on Ronald. The man standing over them, however, had his eyes locked on the movement as if a serpent sizing up his prey. *Can't be intimidated, it seems.*

"Was it an inferi attack?" Harry asked, straining to look past the man.

"Yes." Severus replied automatically, eyes locked on the officer.
The tall man grunted a non-committal answer.

Bertrand shrugged, frustrated at the lack of a response. "What's the disposition of the uninterred?"

The officer's eyes looked nearly dead and had to work to focus on the question.

"What's happened with the bodies?" Ron asked. *Even Ronald understood what was happening, we were getting hassled by the Muggle authority.*

"Coroner is coming." Severus tried to look the man directly in the eyes, but he seemed ready for that.

"And, pray tell, where is the nearest cemetery?"

"We don't need you." He paused awkwardly. "Disturbing. Evidence."

Bertrand exchanged a glance with Harry, giving him a knowing nod and impersonating a cockney accent. "Alright, tell you what. Me and my mates here are going to go back to your place, drink your liquor cabinet, and then go find your bird and shag her rotten before leaving your godforsaken country. What do you say to that?" Severus bit his cheeks as Bertrand over-emphasized his hip-thrusts to a ridiculous effect.

"Please. Leave." He said, blinking slowly. Severus' hand was on Harry's shoulder and pulling them back.

"Understood, good day." Severus' attempt at smiling was horrid and he knew it. As they walked away, Harry seemed confused at what had happened.

"He just agreed it was an inferi attack, Severus. We should be going down there." Severus winced as he put up a muffliato charm.

Ron shook his head. "No, he was pretty out of it. Confundus charm, or already dead?" They made their way back under the yellow tape.

"We're still getting in there, right?" Harry muttered, trying to keep his lips from moving.

"Obviously." Snape replied. "I got a good look with the spectacles and the Inferi were nothing like the Goblin-quickened ones in Saint Mungo's."

"I went ahead and named them 'Type 2'. The basic inferius would be 'Type 1'."

"Well then, we now have a third type. Quickened like before, but hungry like werewolves on their first full moon. Fast, intelligent, and hungry." Severus said, jaw clenching. "And the Ministry was being attacked by the basic kind of inferi, correct?"

Bertrand nodded, patting a bulge in his pocket. "Finally." He pulled out some parchment that Severus had not seen there before. "I think this is good news. Unless every grave has been emptied tonight, this isn't the Cataclysm."

Severus' eyebrows furrowed in thought. "There was a prophecy about that, correct?"

"Yes, it was destroyed when..." He glanced at Harry, "at the incident at your Department of Mysteries. But it was only a copy, here's the transcript." He handed over the slip of paper, Severus' black eyes taking in the words with stoic stillness.

*Destiny's End comes at the end of the Cataclysm...*
"...'and none will come after.' I remember hearing that." Harry said in the early morning.

Severus’ mind reeled at the second line. *Darkness is swallowed; Bellatrix is involved.* He kept his face neutral. "The entire Hall of Prophecy was destroyed, Potter, I'm certain you heard many words jumbled together all at once."

Ron shrugged. "I don't remember much from that night; I had to be obliterated because I somehow got attacked by some weird floating brains with tentacles..."

Bertrand's eyes bugged wide at that. "Your Ministry captured Outsiders, and just locked them up?"

Harry saw the exchange with confusion. "They were in thick glass bell-jars. Perfectly safe if you didn't touch them. Why?"

Bertrand saw Snape's warning glare and smiled, shaking his head nervously. "Oh, nothing. Just... odd." He took the parchment back and put it into his pocket. "So, this is only a small... zombie... apocalypse. Where's your Veela partner?"

The club was quiet and dark. There was no one there but Fleur. *Nobody alive, that is.* It was noon here, meaning that the students in Hogwarts were only now going down to breakfast. She wondered who would cover for her class, since she was hoping to finish *Of Mice and Men* and start with *Animal Farm*. Instead, the club had been raided, but not by the police. The sweet smell of copper was in the air as every exsanguinated corpse was a potential Revenant as soon as the sun fell.

Erik was at the entrance, too afraid to come in. "It looks like the battle has already started." Her right wing was itching still, even though it was gone. *At least he was able to bandage me and stop the bleeding.*

"These were just kids!" Fleur shouted at the Renfield, furiously wiping away a tear that started to roll down her cheek.

"The vampires allied with your witch are destroying Dominika's hunting grounds." Erik pointed towards the bar. "The Bartenders were vampires." Fleur looked around the bar to find three dead vampires, decapitated and chest cavities ripped open with the internal organs missing.

"Harvested, just like Voldemort. What... what can be done with vampire organs?" Erik shrugged. Fleur grimaced as she picked up one of the head that had been removed. *He was Polish and was probably handsome when he was undead, but I can't tell much more from it.* The second head looked like it were torn off instead of cut off. "This was torn off, not cut by a spell." *Summoning charm?* It was the third head that revealed the clue she was looking for. Bite marks.

"Did you find something?" Erik asked, still unwilling to enter.

"Vampires don't feed off of other vampires, do they?" Erik shook his head.

"Wrong kind of... chi? Is that the word? You can't drink life from the lifeless. Can we go? Police will show up, and this place is creepy."

She moved the body and the floor mat beneath it, only to find a trap door. "Didn't have time to escape as they were eaten alive. Erik, get in here and help me."
"I uh, I'm not the best at magic." Fleur rolled her eyes as she opened the trap door.

"I don't even have my wand back." She snapped back, finding a muggle torch nearby and using it as she wend down the ladder. As her eyes adjusted, she saw a few huddled bodies in a distant corner and had something cold and hard pressed up against her back.

The voice behind her said, "Don't move. I have a gun pointed at your back." Fleur's hands went up automatically as she smelled Vampires and Renfields all around her. "Is that Dominika's Renfield upstairs?" Fleur nodded, gulping down her fear.

"She bit and marked me too." Her eyes darted around. "I want to stop her and kill her."

The weapon was pulled away from her back and she breathed a sigh of relief. He took a look out of the trap door, nodded, and visibly relaxed.

"You can't trust him; you have to be bitten more than once to be bound. I'm Louis." He stepped from behind me and jerked his head upstairs. "We have to go end this. But first, you have to deal with Erik." He placed a recover in her hand. "Take care of him."

When I first sat down with the Gryffindor table at Hogwarts, I saw the professors at the Head Table and imagined what it would be like to be one of them. I was seated between Narcissa and Hagrid, and once again I felt as small as when I was a 'firstie'. Minerva stood before the lectern as the students whispered among themselves, some looking in my direction while others openly pointed at me.

"Good Morning, Students. The Headmaster and Professor Delacour were called away on urgent business Sunday evening, so Miss Granger has graciously offered to fill in for her." The students began muttering among themselves as I took an extra-long sip from the water goblet to avoid eye contact. I could tell the Head Girl was glaring daggers at me.

"Before you all think you can either skip the class altogether or try to convince Miss Granger into a field trip, she has the class notes and has already read all of the books that you have been assigned for your year." I wanted to sink into the chair even more as I heard laughing, but knew I couldn't. "Also, curfew has been extended for the Halloween Feast to midnight for all students. Enjoy the rest of your breakfast."

Narcissa cast muffliato and spoke softly to me. "If you want, you can go back to my room and get something more suitable for teaching in." I shook my head to decline as I reached for a roll.

"Thanks, but I don't want to look like I'm trying to appear old."

Narcissa muttered "that's it" as she put her fork down rather forcefully, reached into her robes, and pulled out a piece of parchment and started tapping her wand on it. "Sev gave me this years ago when I was questioning exactly how bad my relationship was with Lucius. He was... well, he saw first-hand an abusive relationship and wanted me to realize that it was still really bad despite The Dark Lord being gone for a decade. You're not as bad as Luce, but I can't keep doing this! I can only afford so many nosebleeds and migraines, Hermione."

She handed me the paper, and I gaped at the title.

**SIGNS THAT YOU ARE IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP**

It sank in as I saw the check marks. *I'm not... I can't be abusive...* I ran out of the Great Hall and went back to my room, glancing down at the checklist as dread flooded through me.
do you:

√ feel afraid of your partner much of the time?
√ avoid certain topics out of fear of angering your partner?
. feel that you can't do anything right for your partner?
√ believe that you deserve to be hurt or mistreated, or make excuses for them?
. wonder if you're the one who is crazy?
√ feel emotionally numb or helpless?

does your partner:

√ humiliate or yell at you?
. criticise you and put you down?
√ treat you badly enough so you don't want your friends and family to see you?
. ignore your opinions and accomplishments?
√ blame you for their own behavior?
√ see you as property or as a sex object, rather than as a person?
√ have an unpredictable temper?
√ hurt you, or threaten to hurt you?
. threaten to take away the children/money/home from you?
. threaten to harm themselves if you leave them?
√ force you to have sex?
√ destroy your belongings?
√ act excessively jealous or possessive?
. control where you go and/or what you do?
. keep you from seeing friends or family
. limit your access to your money, contact with the outside world, or transportation to get away from them?
. constantly check up on you?

I blinked as I fought tears that wouldn't come because I was too dehydrated, and slammed the door to my room. She thinks I'm this horrible to her, but she still loves and wants to try to date me? I couldn't wrap my mind around that, only the Compulsion could be forcing her to put up with me if she thinks of me like this. She strengthened the Bonding to save my life, but then went back and closed her mind so I couldn't see her memories anymore. I couldn't make sense of the mixed signals there. She isn't even dating other people, so what is she planning to do when the Ministry pairs her off with someone for marriage?

Facing my wardrobe, I angrily shoved garments back and forth as I looked for something respectable that wasn't muggle clothing for teaching in. I can't seem to find any witch robes that I like that don't make me look like I'm trying to dress like Minerva... A knock at my door disturbed my train of thought and I prayed that it wasn't Cissy knocking.

"Go away, Cissy! You made your point quite clear!"

I heard a door open, but it was the door to my bathroom instead of the front door. Cho frowned sheepishly as I realized that the knock came from that direction. "Hermione, are you okay? I didn't hear you come in last night; you left Luna and I at the muggle bar pretty early in the evening."

"I kind of met up..." I don't want to admit I got sloshed with Viktor Krum, "well, I wound up in Narcissa's room last night..." I realized that Cho was never really my friend before, but her concern meant that something had changed between us. "Cho, what do you think of me? And please, be honest." I pulled out a set of dark green wizarding robes and walked over to the bathroom to change.
"Well, you were always very intelligent, confident, though a little self-righteous. Oh, and scary after that hex you left on Marietta. Though after Umbridge was willing to use an Unforgivable on Harry; I understand the drastic measures you took to protect all of us. But last night - actually for a while now - you've seemed... lost. Like you don't know what you want to do with your life, nor do you have any control with where you're going. Is... that why you've been reading this stuff?" She picked up my copy of The Loving Dominant. I froze in place as my mind reeled with what this meant. She went through my books. **Of course she would, she's a Ravenclaw.**

I gulped, and went for a distraction. "You came in my room and read my books without permission?"

"Well, I came in to check on you last night, and that one caught my attention. At first I thought it was disturbing when I had also seen SM101, but then when I started to understand it, I could see why it might work for you."

I was floored by this. "You think this is good for me?"

"Well, it suggests that submissives crave to serve people, and that when they do these... um, things, that it's consensual and a part of the appeal is that the submissive person has so many decisions and choices to make during the day, that they are relieved of that stress by letting go and following a person they trust. So, conversely, it can be assumed that dominant people benefit from having that control and an outlet for their darker desires."

"Really? I actually haven't read it yet." I changed quickly in the bathroom for a bit of modesty.

Cho shrugged. "I'm a Ravenclaw, reading and learning about stuff is my thing. And I recall how scary you were in your row with Ron a while back, but lately you've seemed a bit more mellow at times. Even Luna's noticed it, and we thought it was because of Professor Black."

"Actually, she's been the source of my problems, though now she says that I've been abusive to her. She even had a checklist of stuff that made me seem like quite the monster."

Cho frowned at that. "I'm going to have to disagree with you there; I think it's time for you to own up to your own problems. As for abusive? I've only seen you avoiding her as much as possible while still trying to protect Draco. And that's partly why I think you don't know what you want. You seem to want to do the right thing, but emotions get in the way when it involves your own life."

"How have you noticed all this?"

"Well, Luna noticed it a lot more, I've just been following the Daily Prophet. We think that you do love her, but you're resisting it because you're scared of the commitment and you think it means you have to give up what you want in life. Not to mention, the Ministry's new marriage law is going to force you to be married to some guy soon."

I shook my head at this, not expecting such a blunt assessment of my life. **I think she's mostly right on all this, but I still have to deal with Cissy thinking that I'm abusive.** "Wow, um, I'm not used to being told stuff like this so bluntly."

"You told me to be honest. And I've learned since the war to say what you want to say before it's too late. And in case you missed it, your wife is telling you that you need to change how you treat her before it's too late to reconcile."

"There's a big difference between relationship mistakes and being called abusive, Cho."

"And you're not Lennie from Of Mice and Men. You can understand where she's coming from, what
she wants you to do, and how you can work on this."

I nodded, agreeing with her. "Well, Cho, you need to get to class. I don't want being tardy just because you wanted to check up on me."

"Actually, I can be late if I still arrive before the teacher does."

"What?"

"You know, you're not the only one that's read Hogwarts, a History. I have your class first today."

She smiled at me, and for the first time I realized she had made a joke. *I'm not used to having female friends, much less Ravenclaws.* We made our way to our first class where I would be teaching for the first time, and hoped that I wouldn't mess this up too badly.

"You all are Renfields." Fleur said in amazement as she started to piece things together.

"We prefer the term 'companions'."

"You're their food. That's all they think of you."

"Not all of the vampires see us like Dominika do. Our vampires do not treat us like chattel and they want to fight her."

"How do I know you're not under Bellatrix's sway?"

Louis looked at her like she was being stupid. "We have a pulse, we're able to talk, and we're not trying to eat you."

"Did you kill the people upstairs?"

Louis shook his head. "We barred the exit to protect ourselves. Now go take care of Erik; he'll betray and kill us all if he had the chance."

Fleur nodded and went up the stairs, mind reeling with she just learned. *The vampires are broken up into factions, and some of them oppose Bellatrix and Dominika. But could I kill someone in cold blood?* She remembered Erik was ready and willing to kill her for his Mistress Dominika, and she felt less bad about this. As she made it to the doorway, she realized that Erik was gone. *Damn.* She turned back towards the trap door, fired a shot into a nearby corpse, unloaded two more shots into the chest cavity, and made her way back to them.

*They don't know I'm a veela, do they?* She decided to keep that secret as her ace-in-the-hole. Just in case.

Louis smelled the burning powder of the recently fired pistol and nodded. "Let's go." As they made their way down the tunnel, the quality of darkness changed. Clutching her muggle torch, Fleur made her way down the cold stone hallway as the light at the end of the hallway flickered in anticipation.

Louis' hand was tracing the wall as they walked, and stopped the group when he noticed something. Fleur couldn't see anything until he pressed some sort of hidden lever and the rockface opened up to expose a large room. The group filed in and made themselves at home as rations of food and water were passed around.

"This is our hideout. Dominika knows of the crypt network down here, but we don't think she knows of this particular area. We'll rest here for a bit before we resume searching for her secret
Fleur nodded thankfully; her mind clicking that detail into place. "Actually, I think I have already been there. It's an abandoned NATO missile silo."

The group murmured as Louis tried to hush them. "That isn't connected to this underground network. If you had seen where she kept her coffin, she never would have let you live. Not even Erik knew."

Severus scowled and ignored the question. Harry responded instead.

"Fleur was last seen with Erik and Dominika. I had a house-elf rescue them, but only came back with Snape."

Bertrand leaned against the wall and said, "Maybe she killed Erik. And that just leaves Dominika. And she's tucked away in her coffin for the day."

"Best to assume Fleur has died." Severus said without any inflection. "We need to sweep and clear that cathedral of the undead."

Ron held out a tourist guide he had found earlier. "Well, apparently the catacomb tours stopped a few weeks ago after a suspicious death that was never solved. I think that's a clue on how to get there."

Severus pointed on a map where an entrance was. "That should get us underground. Where's that backup you promised, Bertrand?"

"I didn't promise anything, and I bet they will show up once we're done anyways." The four of them made their way to the entrance on the map and quickly found themselves underground and heading towards the Cathedral. The dark hallways smelled of earth and moisture, like there should be mold or mushrooms growing down here. The artificial lighting was sparse and a horrible shade of yellow, casting a sickly pallor over everything.

"Do you hear that?" Harry asked, his whisper echoing a little too much.

"No." Ron replied. "I don't hear anything."

"Exactly. I also don't smell what you'd expect to smell underground."

"No vermin or insect activity. Snape, any sign of life?"

Severus put his charmed spectacles and peered forward. "I'm out of range still."

Bertrand flicked his wand out and cast *Hominem Revelio*. As soon as the spell went out, the air seemed to shudder as the lights failed and the rudimentary ventilation system shut down as well.

"The area was at the saturation point, wasn't it?" Bertrand asked, casting the lumos charm to light their way.

"We should be getting to the access point for the cathedral, right?" Harry asked as Ron looked on his map. "Because this really feels too quiet."

They made their way to the darkened crypt where the smell took on something more putrid. They all looked for the corpses but found nothing. *I can smell that they were here, but they all decided to just walk away at the same time.*
Bertrand stepped close to Snape and whispered, "I don't mean to complain, but where is everybody?"

Ron shook his head. "This is too easy." Severus took the group up through the crypt and towards the Cathedral's basement. His spectacles seemed to no longer be working as he had given up on them and took point, keeping his wand readied for an Inferi attack. He unlocked a door and made his way inside, warning them all to be ready for anything.

"Don't worry, Mister Weasley. Something will go wrong soon." his wand cast the lumos charm as well, and there was no movement in sight. *This building was crawling with Revenant-like inferi barely an hour ago, where could they have gone?*

The corridor opened into a large room with four coffins. Each was on a raised platform as an iron candelabra burned in each corner of the stone room. *Most vampires made some effort to hide their coffins, but not Dominika.*

"Arrogant," Bertrand whispered.

"Yes," Severus whispered back. He wasn't certain if they could wake up and attack them all, but he wasn't about to take the chance.

There was an uneasy smell coming from the coffins, Severus noticed. When he opened his mouth, he could taste metal on his tongue. *Blood. Lots of blood.* It made him feel queasy as Bertrand took a defensive position while the other three prepared to open the first coffin. It was a dark, well-varnished 'toe-pincher' coffin. It was widest at the shoulders and narrowed down to where the feet would be, as if to pinch at the toes.

"Harry, open it." Severus said.

Harry didn't argue. He put his wand away as he looked for the latch to the lid. Ron and Severus had their wands trained on the lid and waited for it to pop. The Auror took a shuddering breath as he silently depressed the latch, and lifted. It wasn't even open by six inches before it was closed again and the three of them wanted to retch as the sweetly-sick smell of copper made them all gag.

"What the fuck happened to him?"

"Saponification?" Severus guessed, too late to cast a bubble-head charm on himself. The vampire had been nothing but gooey remains, he seemed liquified, if that were even possible. *Human corpses can occasionally turn into soap, but the undead?*

"That wasn't soap. Soap is supposed to smell good." Bertrand said, retching as he slowly backed away. He tried to not think about how someone could wind up sloshing in a coffin.

Severus silently cursed and put a bubble-head charm on himself as he reached for the next coffin. Harry and Ron did the same, and every coffin checked out the same way.

"They all just died in their coffins, in the same way? I don't think so." Ron said astutely. Harry's bubble head charm ended first and he kept gagging on the smell.

"Merlin, it's worse now!"

Bertrand shrugged. "Yeah, well, we opened all four." A faint grunt could be heard as the four of them exchanged a wary look.

Severus pulled out his tactical shotgun from his back and swapped out the ammunition he had in it. This was supposed to be his last-ditch resort, the conflagration potion in these paintballs would ignite
on impact. *Inferi won't fall sleep anyways.* As the sound grew larger, he didn't need the spectacles anymore. He knew where they all went, and why they are coming back. *They had ran after the rats before when they were out of food, but now they smelled the blood and are drawn to it.*

"Harry, Ronald, prepare to use *Sectumsempra.* I'll ignite the parts once they are no longer coming to kill us." Severus worked the pump and chambered the first round into the barrel.

The four of them spread out and trained their wands at the doorway that they had come up from the Crypt.

"They are coming."

Fleur knelt in the catacombs and pulled the backup weapon from her ankle-pouch, the weight increasing in her hands once it came out entirely. "You came for war, didn't you?" Louis muttered as she checked her magazine and clicked it into place. The AR-15 had a full automatic setting, but she only had two clips for it. *At least they were both extended magazines,* she thought sourly, *but I still have limited ammunition for this.*

"Any of you good at magic? Particularly cutting hexes and severing curses." A few hands went up timidly. One belonged to a waifish young woman whom Fleur placed at barely 18.

"I'm fair with severing charms for tailoring work." Fleur shook her head.

"I don't need delicate accuracy, I need cleaver work. The Revenants I saw before, along with the vampires we may be up against need to be hacked apart as fast as possible. I can light them up, but I can't do all the work myself. If you can't do it, that's fine. Stay back so we don't lose more people."

"I can do a decent repelling jinx..." she replied. Fleur smiled as she turned her down.

"They are undead and fast. They can shake most spells off like a giant can. You'd help so much more by protecting the rest of the group here and ward the door shut while I go hunting."

She nodded, and it looked like Fleur had a team of 3 wizards and 2 witches who would be going out with her. *Better than nothing.* The six of them made their way out as the remaining people holed up and began to ward themselves in place. The overhead lights flickered slightly so the Veela resorted to her muggle torch.

"These lights are always acting up." Louis said, raising his wand. "Lu-"

The catacombs fell into complete darkness as Fleur fought off the rising panic as she had a flashback of Dominika. She tightened her grip on the flashlight as the front stock rested over her left wrist, but even that flickered out. "Light." She commanded sharply.

Louis cast the lumos charm, and Fleur discarded her useless flashlight as she took point in front of the group. Shuffling footfalls could be heard in the distance, and before she could say anything, one of the witches cast the hominem revelio spell through the catacombs.

"Shit! Why did you do that?" Fleur asked, checking that she had the rifle set on semi-automatic and the safety off. "They will notice that spell and come running!"

"I didn't know! I thought I heard something, I wanted to be sure!" The blond witch replied fearfully.

"Pack in tight, whatever it was will know we're coming now." Louis replied, his wand at the ready by Fleur. "It can't be Vampires, the sun is still out."
Fleur shrugged tightly at that. "Lately I've learned to throw the rules out the window. Things aren't always what they seem." The tight group moved together down the hollowed stone path as Louis reached his hand out and barely grazed Fleur's missing wing.

"Don't I know it?" He gave a knowing look to the Veela, and tilted his head towards the bloody, bandaged stump that used to be her wing. "Sorry about that."

"Sorry about what?" One of the other wizards asked as a strange shrieking sound alerted them that the revealing spell hit its mark, and the witch replied with the answer.

"It's not alive. Wait, they... they are moving, fast." She grimaced as she cast it again. The Shrieking hit again. "Moving this way, I wager."

Louis took the lead and started to move towards them. "We need to get away from the rest of our group, keep whatever is out there from catching their scent."

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I decided to take a break from the standard teaching methods and took Fleur's class outside for our discussion over the latest novel we all were reading. This class was all of the NEWT students, meaning it was all four Houses who were in their seventh and eighth year, but the overall number of students was shockingly low. *Too many of us fought and died in the war.* But I did notice something that was slowly starting to happen.

As we all sat outside under a tree, the Slytherin students weren't isolating themselves as they usually had. I could pick out pieces of their conversation with a hufflepuff and Parvati. Apparently the Hogwarts interhouse Quidditch team tryouts was this weekend and two teams had been formed to play against Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. *Well I'm glad that's having a positive response.*

"Alright class, so we are all supposed to have finished reading Of Mice and Men. What did you think of the ending?"

My eyes shot wide open as Crabbe's hand was up, excitedly. I smiled, shocked at the idea of seeing him so enthusiastic over a muggle book. "I um, sympathized with George. He did his best to take care of his friend and yet when that accident happened, he decided to do the most merciful thing to protect him."

Cho looked slightly disturbed at that. "But he shot and killed his best friend rather than try to defend him!"

"Yeah, but the people there would have... is 'lynched' the right term?" I nodded, surprised at how he seemed to learn more about Muggles this way than 6 years of Muggle Studies with Professor Burbage. "Lennie reminded me of Greg, and last year we were... pretty lost without..." *Without Draco.*

"Who is Greg?" someone interjected. I looked around but missed who said it. *She sounded familiar, though.*

"Goyle." He shrugged, "We have first names you know."

"Did you two want a farm, live off of the 'fat of the land'?"

The class went silent at that. *The rest of the students were finally realizing how little they knew about the Slytherins, and never gave them much compassion.* I decided to try and steer the conversation. "Did you two want a farm, live off of the 'fat of the land'?"

He teared up and nodded. "Back in sixth year, after Dumbledore was killed. We wanted... not a farm, just our own place, away from the war, our families, and our 'Pureblood Obligations'. 'Course,
then came the classes with Carrows and Vincent forgot about us getting away from the war. He got to use Dark Magic and not only did it change him, he liked the power it seemed to give him. Then he started to parrot everything Alecto said and couldn't wait to get his Dark Mark, I knew I was alone. Crabbe wiped away a tear with his sleeve, angry that he let his own emotions out. "If I had known he was going to cast Fiendfyre to try and kill Harry, I would have... should have... put my wand to the back of his head. I shouldn't have tried to help capture Harry in the first place, I was just scared."

The class was dumbstruck at that. Vincent Crabbe regrets trying to capture Harry.

"Maybe you shouldn't have picked that side." Leanne said bitterly. I jumped into the conversation there.

"I know what it was like for the Slytherins; unlike the other houses, they were expected to join Voldemort and take the mark. Their families pressured them, they knew they only had each other for support, and everyone knew they had to act like Purebloods, even though most of them are only half-bloods now. The Sorting Hat warned us to work together, but did any of you really try to reach out and be a friend before the war?"

Crabbe spoke up when nobody else would. "It's okay, we were prats. We were told we would be rejected and misunderstood by everyone else just because we were in Slytherin House; that the bullies in Gryffindor would convince the rest of the school we're the bad guys."

"That's because you are!" the Hufflepuff retorted angrily.

"Leanne, I think an evening restoring Filch's logbook might change your mind."

"Huh?"

"Detention." Merlin, I'm assigning a detention this soon in my teaching career. Severus might be proud.

"Oh, come on! You're just... filling in for today!"

"Then your detention is for tonight. I want you to see what Harry saw; that Gryffindors bullied Slytherin by calling them 'bad guys' for so long, that we inherited their prejudice just like the Pureblood extremists did against the muggle-born."

Luna raised her hand, and I was glad because I knew she'd help change the subject. "Hermione, how come people seemed to avoid the guy Crooks?"

"He was different, and there were racial tensions back then during the Great Depression."

"But why was it so hard for them to get the money for their own farm?"

"The Great Depression was the greatest Muggle economic collapse the world has seen. Too many people had too much money tied up and locked away, and too few didn't have enough money to make ends meet. Eventually every store and shop suffered, and the farms overproduced food and flooded the market, crashing the price so that they couldn't make ends meet, either."

"Sounds like the Goblin Rebellion."

"But you know what really sets Crooks apart from the others there?"

"His missing hand?" Luna asked.
"His skin color. This is set over in the Americas, where their racial problems are worse and more insidious."

Crabbe scoffed at that. "That's ridiculous! He was born that way; why would people treat him differently for his skin tone? If anyone should be shunned, it was Curley's jealous insecurity over his wife. Maybe if he paid her better attention she wouldn't be such a flirt."

I was stunned at that. "You really liked this book, didn't you? Five points to Slytherin for your astute commentary." More like for pointing out racism is ridiculous, but I don't want to shock him that he's questioning the Blood Purity propaganda he was raised to believe. I let the discussion continue, and I was glad to see Ravenclaws debate Slytherins about if Lennie was a dangerous character while a Gryffindor and Hufflepuff discussed the finer points of why Curley's wife didn't have a name in the story. Before too long, I checked the time with tempus, and realized class was almost over.

"Anyways, the next book we'll be doing is 1984. It was written long ago, so this is supposed to be about a really bad possible future. Don't forget that your paper is due by Halloween; class dismissed."

Severus' nerves were on edge as the wand light flickered, threatening darkness as they were about to be overrun. Taking the chance, he fired two rounds just past the doorway, letting the conflagration rounds explode and burn, giving them light and a temporary barrier from the incoming Inferi.

"Lumos maxima!" Harry enchanted, a ball of light arcing and hitting the ceiling of the crypt. With some quick thinking, Bertrand out a sticking charm on it to keep it in place.

"Good thinking Harry, how long will it last?"

"Twenty minutes, I think. I didn't time it when Dumbledore and I ran from a cave full of Inferi."

"Wish I had the Uzi now," a Severus muttered. "Harry, take this in case we get overrun." He handed the Auror the derringer stuffed in his robes. "It seems small, but fire it under someone's chin, and it will take their head off."

It was daylight outside, so there wouldn't be any vampires stirring, but these new inferi were unknown and could do anything.

Bertrand must have also been thinking that as they heard the distant sounds grow louder. Something wasn't right here. "Why aren't they here yet?"

Ron shrugged. "Something else caught their attention?"

The death wail of something massive reverberated through the catacombs and the group looked at each other uneasily.

"Someone else caught their attention." Severus intoned darkly. Harry and Ron took point as the four of them made their way back into the tunnels. Severus' adrenaline had burned off, leaving his breathing a bit too quick and thinking just a fraction too show. Calm yourself, slow your heartbeat, control your breathing, speed up your mind. He didn't want to make a mistake with an itchy trigger finger. There was something on the ground, dissected into various parts. A giant scorpion-like sting was aflame while the undead pallor of the skin had Severus confused as he tried to piece together whatever beast had just died. It was on two feet, but the hands had massive claws on them.

"Fleur?! You're alive!" Harry called out, lowering his wand and running forward. Severus' heart flipped at the sound of that, his stomach unclenching in a way that he hadn't realized until now.
Behind Fleur were a handful of wizards and witches, all visibly sporting bite marks as they were vampire Renfields who apparently allied themselves with her.

"MERLIN! You okay?" Ron said in horror. What happened to her? "What did she do to you?"

Severus lowered his own weapon as he took her in. She was covered in singe marks and dried blood as if she were the avatar of the Angel of Death, and all Severus could think of was how relieved he was to see she survived. As he approached her, a similar look of recognition and relief was on her face.

Severus fought an urge to touch the Veela, in case she weren't real or this was all some fevered dream. Would I have Harry, Ron, and Bertrand as backup in a dream? He thought idly, convincing himself that this worst-case scenario must be reality.

Fleur called softly, "Severus." she was attempting to get his gaze. He needed to know for certain, so he had the spectacles on and was looking over her new allies. They all seemed to only be witches and wizards, and were not concealing anything else.

Severus moved forward to her, his eyes flicking to her in soft horror. She lost one of her wings. Fleur took the moment to embrace him and sob silently.

"Fleur, I'm sorry... Are you going to be okay?" Severus said, returning the hug.

"I have to be, Sev. We're still on the mission." Severus could hear exactly how not alright she was from screaming her throat hoarse, but was going to press on regardless.

"Fleur, I figured out that Bella-" he started. She nodded and cut him off.

"-can control the undead. It's a small-scale civil war between factions of vampires; Bellatrix wasn't able to assume control of them all. Even Erik is scared of what will happen, but he's still rooting for Dominika to win this." Fleur waved the wing stump over her shoulder. "I want to burn her for doing this to me."

Severus' face went stony at that. "Trixymort shouldn't be able to control vampires with the level of necromancy she had before. I'm almost certain that she's become a Lich."

"She would have had to... oh. But that would mean she is-"

"-undead herself. We can't kill her." Fleur twitched in rage as Severus' words.

"That's wonderful for her then." She sighed sarcastically. "Oh Merde, the skies are actually clear here. She's linked to the Dementors, isn't she?"

Harry spoke up. "She's eating them."

"And she's experimenting with inferi hybrids, like this Manticore." Bertrand added, pointing at the dissected creature. Severus looked back down and realized the clawed hands looked somewhat like lion paws, and the scorpion-like stinger...

"Slytherin's Snake and all his mudblood wives..." Severus cursed as he took it in. Trixymort hybridized inferi and manticores. Fast, venomous, and undead so she could control them. A flood of righteous fury went through him and he swallowed it down, letting the power it gave him simmer and explode at the right moment. There was the scent of something on the back of his nose, something like rotten leather that he couldn't place.

"A manticore? Isn't that one of the most dangerous beasts out there?" Ronald asked fearfully.
Bertrand nodded. "And the Lich easily killed it with inferi, fused it with one of her corpses, and re-animated it."

"She's trying to raise an army." Harry concluded, his mind reeling at that. "Where's that backup you ordered from INTERCON?"

"Putain de bon dieu guerre internationale! We have the International Confederation involved now?"

The crowd of people finally backed away from the dead beast and Severus shot the Manticore's body once with his shotgun, igniting it to burn quickly. "And they are to provide backup here, so relax. All will be well." Severus sarcastically deadpanned.

Another scream echoed underground and the wizards tried to localize the direction without magic. "Was that human?!" Louis asked, panicked.

"It was human, at any rate." Fleur replied, pointing down a tunnel that was entirely dark. The corridor was thankfully empty as they went down the length of it, but eventually it split into two paths. Fleur took the right side and Bertrand took the left. Severus stayed with Fleur as Harry and Ronald joined Bertrand and went left. The few magical renfields with Fleur decided to stick with her.

When Severus could no longer hear Harry and Ronald, the scent finally clicked in place. "Reptilian." Charlie Weasley worked in Romania, wrangling the dragons... The smell was more snake-like than dragons, and Fleur's nose started to pick it up as well.

"Reptilian? This seems more likely to be a dragon lair." Fleur responded, waving a wizard to take point and light the path before them. "Think our ammo will work on them?"

Severus shook his head uncertainly. Salazar, please don't let there be any dragons here...

I went back to my room for lunch and asked Herpy to deliver me something as I sat cross-legged on my bed and started to browse my copy of The Loving Dominant. I can't believe Cho read this before me, and thinks it might be a good thing. The subsequent knock at the door, however, wasn't expected.

"Hermione? It's me, Luna." I waved my hand and the door opened for her. I didn't bother to hide the book from her. As she came in, she had a paper bag full of food for us and I felt guilty for hiding from the Great Hall. But I didn't want to see Narcissa again for lunch. Not yet. Not after she gave me that list.

"Sorry, I just didn't want-" I started.

"I knew you weren't going to be there. Herpy helped me pack a lunch for us."

I smiled at that, but my chuckles of happiness collapsed into sobs. Holy fuck, why am I feeling weepy now?

"Luna, I just... I couldn't do it. I couldn't sit up at the Teacher's Table, next to my wife..." Not with her accusing eyes on me, calling me an abuser...

Luna came over and put her arms around me. "Hermione, what's wrong? You did great in class, kept the discussion going and helped us all get a bit of perspective on stuff."

"She claimed I was abusive. I... I'm not a bad person. I'm not, I'm not... I just try to do good things but my emotions get the best of me, you know?"
I started rocking slowly as Luna's lips pressed themselves on my forehead. "Oh, 'Mione, you're not a bad person. Not at all. But you do need to keep your emotions and actions in check. Come on, let's eat before lunch period is over." Luna crawled onto the bed next to me and opened the bag, handing me a sandwich and a banana while she had a similar sandwich and a peach for herself. *If Ron tried to do this, it would be nothing but meat and sweets.* I chuckled at that as I tore into the Roast Beef and Provolone. I didn't realize how famished I was as I laid back against my pillows and peeled the banana.

"Mow." Crookshanks said, hopping up onto the bed and began purring as he used his paws to knead at my belly. I winced in pain, as the cat's weight on just two small alternating paws was more than I could really handle.

"No, Crooks, get off me. You're not a tiny kitten anymore." I tried to nudge him off but he refused, continuing to knead my belly and sternum.

Luna chuckled at the exchange. "You know it's in their nature to do that, right?"

"What, be annoying? He's usually well behaved with me." I put down the banana and scooped him up with both hands, dropping him off the bed entirely. *He will land on his feet.*

"Besides that. That's how kittens help their mother induce lactation when they nurse. So it's natural instinct for them to associate it with their mothers."

"Crookshanks is smarter than the average cat and knows I'm not about to nurse him."

Luna shrugged. "Well he's not trying to squeeze any dabberblimps out of you." I looked at her in confusion as her eyes went to read the title of the book beside me. "A Loving Dominant? Is that being added to Fleur's curriculum?"

I blushed sheepishly. "Oh, no. Personal research." *Cho didn't tell her anything.* She left it at that.

"Well I hope whatever you learn from that book helps you and your wife get along better; sometimes I find it's useful to stand on your head and see the problem through the other person's perspective. Anyways, I have to get to Potions. I'll take notes for you." Luna said helpfully as she got up and made her way out of my room.

*See this through Narcissa's perspective?* I wasn't sure I wanted to judge myself that way.

Cloudy eyes stared up at Fleur. There had been awareness in them, though clouded over with something else. It wasn't entirely human, based on the goat-slit pupils. The team had followed her directive, though the creature was too bulky for the weaker cutting hexes to slice through. Fire worked, though. *My cursed fire seems to always work.* Fleur thought as the acrid stench lingered in the tight area. Severus' best cleaning charm wasn't enough to banish the smell, but it did keep them all from gagging.

"It's like it wanted us to kill it." Louis replied in soft horror.

"I believe it was one of Trixymort's experiments gone wrong. The eyes were serpentine..." Severus muttered as he watched it burn clean.

Fleur had figured it out. "It was a Lamia, mixed with a Dhamphir, judging by the baby fangs. This had too much humanity still; probably too alive for her to control."

There had been someone home, like the goblin's stone-raised inferi. There was someone looking out
of those eyes. The last few minutes replayed through her mind, the few seconds lasting an eternity.

"Shit its a trap!"

"Back up Fleur!"

"Sev, come on!"

We froze in the illusion where seconds could last years. She had me on the ground and was straddling my waist; hands at my throat, but not choking me yet. I had dropped my rifle as I was taken down and only had my flaming hands pressed against her chin. None of the spells had hurt her; Severus refused to shoot and burn us both at the same time.

"Didn't mean to kill," the creature said softly, pleadingly, "didn't undersssstand at firssst. Didn't remember who I wasss."

The Renfields were surrounding us, hesitating to fire a severing hex.

Severus screamed, "Hold your fire, hold your fire, dammit!"

I gulped and stammered, "Okay then, just let go of me and let me get up..." The creature shook her head fearfully, still trying to explain what happened.

"I needed meat, needed flesssh... needed to remember who I wasss. Tried, tried not to kill! Tried... to walk past all The housssesss, but I couldn't. Too many ss scentssss," she whispered, tongue tasting the fear on the air. My hands tensed, recalling the fire back within me, showing a moment of mercy.

"Then get off of me, and don't attack us." I said, hoping to survive the next five seconds.

"But... you all ss smell of fear. And blood. And ssshe wants it. Sssshe wantsss it all." The yellow slit eyes started to cloud over as she was getting re-possessed. "Sssshe wantsss it all to dieee..."

Screaming, I released the fire within me through my hands, through her chin, and through her skull. Her body jerked in shock, yet the hands clenched in a death-grip upon my neck. A slicing hex passed over me and I felt the magical wash of ozone as blood poured down and the body went limp atop of me, fingers releasing my neck as I crab-walked away and frantically reached for my neck to stem the bleeding.

"I got hexed, I'm hexed!" I put my hands out and frantically swiped at my neck, trying to figure out where I was bleeding from.

"No, you're fine. You weren't cut!"

"There's blood! I'm bleeding!"

"I cut her hands, not you." My wild eyes met his as my frantic fingers confirmed that I hadn't been hit. "You're okay, Fleur. You're okay." Severus conjured a vial and scraped saliva off of my face, and another one to siphon the blood from my hands. I looked at him in horror at that as he shrugged non-chalantly. "Never know when you might need it."

"This is a dead end, we should double back to Harry and Ron." Louis said, leaving Severus to help the Veela up. The took the other path and their ears popped from the pressure difference. Fleur could tell the pressure was less now, suggesting that they were making their way back up towards the surface.
As they made it through a hairpin turn, Fleur noticed a silencing spell was in place and tapped her ear at Severus to let them know of the concealment charm at work. They all nodded, raised their weapons, and made their way through to open fire on the other side.

*It's St. Mungo's all over again.. but worse.*

Bertrand was using slicing hexes on the legs of the quickened Inferi to stop them, but Ronald must have been slow at burning them as the legless zombies arm-crawled their way forward and the INTERCON wizard had to go back and work fast at beheading them. *Not fast enough, though.* Harry was pinned against the wall by one of them, his tactical robes torn and his arm bloody as he fought off his assailant. The inferi was halved at the torso, trailing his bowels behind him as the need to bite and feed drove it mad for flesh and blood.

Springing to action, Fleur and Severus started to clear the room with headshots, leaving the undead creatures writing as they burned on the ground.

Ronald had his wand out but was having trouble slicing apart the fallen Renfields who were killed by these quickened Inferi. "HARRY! GET IT OFF OF YOU!" Fleur looked at her fallen comrades who seemed to be trying to get back up jerkily. *Merde, they are turning fast...*

Harry's Seeker reflexes came in handy as he used his right hand to keep the snapping jaws off of him while his left hand gripped Severus' derringer. He had the barrel pressed into the chin as he pulled the trigger, then pulled it again, and again. It only had two shots in it, so Harry was dry-firing it as the Inferi head was consumed with fire and he shoved it away, letting it burn and die on the ground.

Fleur panicked as she realized he had been bit and what it might mean. "Harry, are you... Will you turn?" She saw him turn deathly pale and hesitantly put her arm around him in support.

Harry shook his head, swaying as if he were drunk. "Fucking... Lamia-dhamphir thing. Ron, send a message... Draco. Code C." Harry swayed again, passing out into Fleur's arms. She let him down gently and laid him on the ground, quickly casting diagnostic charms on him. He screamed in pain as the spell washed over him, making Fleur gasp as she realized how bad the situation was. Severus was busy vanishing any traces of blood from the ground, telling Bertrand to get a bandage over the wound so it would stop bleeding freely.

Fleur read off the floating runes over the body from the diagnosis. "Blood loss, arm injury, poison of some sort... *Merde.* Cursed wounds."

Narcissa wasn't expecting her son to barge into class, but judging from the look on her face, she waved him in and dismissed the class early. "Use this extra time to work on conflict resolution, and we'll start on defensive theory in November."

"Mum, it's Harry." Draco said, panic in his face. "He's been injured!" Cissy nodded, her mind reeling at the implications of this. *Slow down your thinking, don't panic. What's the first step?*

"Is he alone?" Draco shook his head.

"No, Weas- Ronald send the patronus. He's got Sev and Fleur there."

Narcissa effected her soothing voice. "Okay, he's got a really smart Veela and your Godfather, a Potions Master, on hand. He will make it to a Healer or Mediwitch."

Draco gulped in panic. "He's poisoned, Aunt Bella made some sort of Lamia hybrid." The panic at the end of her nerves crept back in and threatened to seize her core. *Her cursed wounds are going to*
"Okay, Draco, send word back to your Godfather, we will treat Harry in a magic-free room at our home. Herpy!" Draco nodded and cast the Patronus off, shock wearing off of his face as he trusted that there was a plan in place. The house-elf appeared and could tell there was an emergency. "Did you move out all of your Master's stuff?"

Herpy nodded. "I removed everything that was Master Hermione's and brought it here, the books, the clothing, the orange beast's favorite toys."

"There was a special room, one that magic was not in. Did you empty that room?" Herpy shook her head, eyes large in grief.

"Herpy could not get in. Has Herpy failed Master?" Narcissa quelled the House-Elf's grief.

"No, it's okay, I just..." Really can't send Draco in there...

"Inform Minerva, I should be back in time for the next class. Do not tell Master Hermione this." Narcissa prepared the fireplace and had a pinch of floo powder in her hand. "Coming Draco?"

As they made it through the floo, a streak of orange zipped by them.

"Mother, was that...?" She nodded, curious as to what Crookshanks was up to.

"Yes, Hermione's cat seems to know how to use the floo network." Narcissa replied as Draco over to what had been the Nursery. Kingsley was there, signing off some documents as he checked in with Nurse Wainscott to see if the retrofitting was going well. She looks a lot better since the destruction of St. Mungo's.

"Mrs. Granger!" She exclaimed happily as she approached, arms outstretched. Oh, she's a hugger. "Thank you so much for donating your Manor! What we need now though are fully-certified Healers. Your credentials are still intact, right?"

My dream career, what I studied for but never got to do because a Malfoy wife wasn't to sully her hands with employment.

"They are; but I'm busy this year at Hogwarts. I've come to let you know Harry Potter was injured by one of my sister's creations and we'll need to set up a magic-free area for him to recover in." Her eyes widened in shock.

"Oh goodness! Does that mean we need muggle medicine-" She replied abruptly. Draco quelled her worry.

"Hermione's parents both have muggle medical knowledge, I'm going to see if they would be willing to work here a bit." Draco replied helpfully as he turned to face Kingsley. "And Harry wanted me to tell you 'Code C'."

"You know my reservations about that." The Minister said as he frowned.

"They are the same as his, but we need the Auror Guild up and running. And neither of us can do that job," Within a moment Narcissa figured out Harry Potter's 'code'. Cormac McLaggen is going to be running it.

Kingsley nodded and sent off the Patronus informing Cormac that he would be field-promoted to Auror and will be temporarily in charge. "I want some good news after that."
Draco nodded solemnly. "Harry's alive, Severus has vials of the creature's saliva and blood, so he can brew an antivenin."

Narcissa breathed a sigh of relief. "And since Hermione and I aren't really living here, we're going to donate the full Manor to be the new Magical Hospital. Draco, I don't mean to kick you out, but-"

"Honestly, I've been pretty much living at Harry's. It's been difficult coming back here." Cissy smiled at that and made her way down to the specially-constructed room that Hermione made for them. *I hope that this doesn't signal an end to us.*

Harry had conjured a sling for his wand-arm and realized he couldn't really spell well with his left hand. He had the Derringer reloaded with more Conflagration rounds, but felt wary about what kind of future the Aurors would be with these muggle-inspired weapons. *And I had to call Code C, Merlin please don't let me regret this.* Pain shot through his arm when his friend Ronald tried to clean the wound magically, only for them to learn about Bellatrix's penchant for making cursed wounds almost sentient against being healed.

Draco's Patronus had informed Severus that Granger Manor will be ready and able to treat him there. Harry marveled at the irony of that; *Malfoy Manor which had been Voldemort's home, full of torture and murder was now the makeshift hospital.*

One of the Renfields had scouted ahead and found a path out from the tunnels. "This way! There's daylight, thank the Gods!" The rest of the Renfields ran ahead, glad to be out of this basement. They started to follow them up, Harry was hot on their heels. As they made it out, he realized something seemed wrong. *This is a bloody trap, isn't it?* As the Renfields scampered away, each of them went a different direction and bled themselves to complete a circle, locking Harry and the rest in just like Severus and Narcissa did to the Inferi at the Awards Banquet. *They all had vampire blood in them. The same blood.*

Fleur spat in rage as her fireballs crashed against the transparent shield. "Erik, I knew I should have killed you when I had the chance!" Erik looked calm and collected as he spoke into a radio in his hand. A flock of bats flew in a tight group, coalescing into the child-like form of Dominka. She was in a pastel sundress and a wide-brimmed floppy hat, her face exuding a cherubic smile that didn't match the utterly dead eyes that seethed with bloodlust and rage. It was the creepiest thing Harry had seen since the homunculous baby-sized Voldemort that was carried around by Wormtail in the graveyard at the end of the Triwizard Tournament.

*How is she out here?! She can survive daylight!*

"Oh hello Harry Potter. Daddy is quite cross at you for not staying dead." *Who is 'Daddy'?*

Severus stepped in front of him. "Where is Bellatrix?"

"She promised me she'd leave once she had what she came for."

"And that is?"

"Your deaths, silly! She wanted a distraction and I really didn't see a reason why I couldn't help. Besides, look at me now!" She twirled, making the hem of the dress lift slightly. Her childlike playful antics left Harry's blood running cold. "We're immune to sunlight now!" Harry really didn't like her saying 'we'.

More vampires appeared, seemingly just dropping in from out of the sky.
"There were no rival factions of vampires tearing this country apart." Fleur spat; hands aflame in rage.

"No, there wasn't. Bellatrix came here and we struck a bargain. If I sent my Renfields out as decoys for her in other countries while concealing her here, she'd have the power and control of the undead to grant me the power to stand in the sun. She also dealt with my Lamia infestation." Harry counted the odds as they were trapped in the circle. *The vampires outnumber us three to one, ne vermind the Renfields.*

Severus turned his head to mutter to Bertrand. "That backup you said was coming? We need it now."

Dominika heard it apparently as she giggled girlishly. "Oh, didn't you hear? The British Ministry *declined assistance* from the International Confederation. You're here all alone. Any last words?" *First the attack at Ragnok's execution, now this?* Harry's mind latched onto the memory when he first met Bob at the Unspeakable's office, and he realized that whatever 'Unmarked' agent of Voldemort that was betraying them now had to also be an Unspeakable.

"Yeah!" Ron shouted rebelliously, "I love Severus' bright, smiling face!" Everyone looked at Ron, confusion etched on their faces. Moments later, magic washed over them all but didn't break the circle that held them.

"I love Severus' bright, smiling face." Fleur repeated, and the circle remained unbroken.

"What on Earth?" Bertrand muttered, but felt the wash of magic both times.

Severus reloaded his shotgun as he, Harry, Ron, and Fleur repeated it like a mantra.

"I love Severus' bright, smiling face." Bertrand had his wand at the ready as the circle buckled, but didn't collapse. *But we've painted one hell of a beacon here, though,* Harry thought wryly.

"It's not working, whatever you're doing." The INTERCON wizard said, fully prepared to be slaughtered by the vampires before them.

"I'm going to enjoy you like juice box, wizard!" Dominika sneered as the vampires jeered. Harry's eyes noticed something in the distance, and a quick glance at Fleur confirmed it. The rush of magic had not gone unnoticed as a large Norwegian Ridgeback flew overhead, breathing a heavy plume of fire atop the vampires who were poised to strike the trapped group. Riding the dragon was a familiar redhead, Charlie Weasley. Harry realized that this must have been Norberta, the baby dragon who had been deemed too violent and ferocious to have been male.

The Vampires and Renfields had all huddled in and piled on to protect Dominka from the fire as tendrils of sentient shadow stretched out along the ground from her, hitting the barrier of the circle and collapsing it as Charlie Weasley and Norberta made a second pass, strafing the ground with fire. *It was Dominika's blood, alright.* As the formerly-trapped wizards saw the dragon coming down again, Severus and Fleur grabbed Harry and Ron and made their way back towards the tunnels as the fire splashed down onto the pavement, mere meters away.

The force of the super-heated air blasting outward knocked Harry and Ron over, leaving them gasping for air as they both crab-walked themselves somewhat upright again. Norberta landed and it was only by Charlie's *Sonarus* charm that the Auror could understand him.

"Harry Potter comes to Romania and doesn't even say hello, then asks the Confederation to *not* send any additional assistance? I knew there was trouble." As Charlie nodded his greeting, Norberta
wheezed as she tried to catch her breath again. *Apparently she can't do three large blasts at a time.*

Severus and Fleur, however, were slinging fire of their own as they countered the shadowy protrusions that were attacking them. The tendrils of shadow grew sharp and rose from the ground, attempting to stab and slash at the pair of them. Ronald had his wand out, blasting into the pile of vampires acting as human shields with *Confringo* while Bertrand found himself dueling Erik and a few of the magical Renfields and went straight for dismemberment. Harry had the Derringer pointed back down the hallway to the catacombs as he fished out his wand and grunted as he sealed and warded the door shut. *No need to get flanked that way,* Harry thought as searing pain shot through him again.

Harry realized that whatever adrenaline that was muting the pain within him was wearing off, and that his attempts to use magic were only serving to hurt him more. "Ron!" His friend was there by his side, supporting him up. Harry's left hand still had the tiny pistol up, but his hand was shaking too much for his shot to be worth anything.

"I got you Harry, we're going to make it." Ron took the Derringer out of his friend's hand and pocketed it, putting Harry's left arm over his shoulders to support him as Ron kept his own wand out and they turned to face the firefight. Charred flesh decomposed into ash as layer after layer of vampire burned away to their final deaths in the noonday sun. As each new layer went aflame, the shadowy tendrils recoiled as if to ward away the fire.

In the middle of it all was a vampire older than anything else that walked this earth, embodied in the likeness of a little girl. Fleur and Severus stood on either side of it, coating it in relentless fire as Severus emptied his shotgun and quickly loaded it again, pumping shell after shell of Conflagration rounds into the pile of screaming bodies.

Harry was glad to know that although these vampires could withstand the sun, they were still succumbing to fire. *Except Dominika. How was she seemingly fireproof?*

"Merlin, why won't it die?" Ron whispered hoarsely, his eyes wide from the fire fight.

Harry shook his head, too disturbed to say anything. *I don't want to admit it out loud.* The creature wouldn't die because it was just that damn powerful. *How much of it was just her, and how much of it was Trixymort?*

He stumbled forward, forcing Ronald to follow him. Dominika's clothing was burning clean away as she raised her hands defensively, as if the child's body could ward off the constant barrage of fire being poured upon it.

"She can't take much more, can she?" Ronald asked as Harry fished the Derringer from Ron's pocket and drew down on the burning vampire.

Harry pulled the trigger, eyes locked onto the youthful vampire as he watched her flesh blacken, curl, then peel away. Muscles and bone ligaments popped as he pulled the trigger again, making the body turn into ash as the vampire finally succumbed to its final death.

Harry watched the child-like vampire die before him and made a promise to himself. *I'd see Bellatrix Lestrange burn in Hell for what she's done here.* There the fires of Hell can burn for all eternity. *Bellatrix would burn for all eternity, and eternity wouldn't be nearly long enough for her.*

Draco went to his room to pack it up, his mind idly realizing that most of his clothing had already made it to Grimmauld Place. *What am I going to do if he doesn't make it?* He tried to shake the
thought out of his head as he passed the library and heard the voice of Albus Dumbledore.

"...glad to hear Hermione's parents are safe and sound."

"Mao. Merrr... mew?" Draco peered in to see the orange tabby flicking his tail as he stood on a table and had a conversation with the portrait. *Albus Dumbledore is talking to a cat.*

"I don't see any problem leaving the Floo Network modifications in place. It's not like I can remove the translation runes from your collar, either."

Draco spoke up. "Okay, so I'm not going mad."

Crookshanks turned to him and meowed again, and Draco could swear he understood the cat saying, 'No, you're not.'

Albus' portrait looked to Draco as well. "I speak cat." Crookshanks hopped down from the table and strode off, tail flicking to wrap around Draco's ankle as he left the library.

"He'll want a floo opened so he can go back to Hogwarts, Draco." Albus called out as Draco left the room. "I'm not his servant!" Draco thought idly as the sound of a muggle record-player drew him to the room that had been closed off before. The door was cracked open, so he peered in to see Narcissa packing up the room by hand. As he stepped through the doorway, there was a strange sensation that went over him, like some sort of background noise he had always tuned out was missing.

As he looked around, he saw familiar items that used to be in the dungeon below, before the war resumed. There were new things that she was putting into a chest, including what he could only guess was some sort of torture implement with a glass tube at the end of it. Then he saw the bottle of lube and other items that was inside the chest. *Salazar's whore, this is their... sex room!*

As if his mother were psychic, Narcissa lifted her head and eyes darted to land on the shocked expression of her son. "Draco! Um... It's not what you think. We're not torturing anyone in here."

Draco nodded, his face puckered as if he swallowed a lemon. "I know this is... different." His mother realized that he understood. "Want to never -ever- mention this again, and make sure Kingsley doesn't see it?"

Narcissa nodded her agreement as she finished filling the chest and put the lock on it, and began to dismantle the Saint Andrew's cross on the wall.

*I'd gladly lose me to find you
I'd gladly give up all I had
To find you I'd suffer anything and be glad

I'd pay any price just to get you
I'd work all my life and I will
To win you I'd stand naked, stoned and stabbed

I'd call that a bargain
The best I ever had
The best I ever had

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*I'd gladly lose me to find you
I'd gladly give up all I got
To catch you I'm gonna run and never stop*
I'd pay any price just to win you
Surrender my good life for bad
To find you I'm gonna drown an unsung man

I'd call that a bargain
The best I ever had
The best I ever had

"Is this muggle music, mother?"

"That's The Who."

"I wouldn't know, now would I?"

"That's their name, The Who." She got the cross off from the wall and collapsed it down as she continued singing the song, and Draco could tell the well of emotion she kept behind the dam that was her neutral face.

"I sit looking 'round
I look at my face in the mirror
I know I'm worth nothing without you
And like one and one don't make two
One and one make one...

Draco saw a tear roll down her cheek, a bit of the emotion leaking from the damn and he decided to leave the room and let her have some time to herself. She really loves Hermione, doesn't she? He thought about his own unusual relationship with Harry and Ginny and wasn't certain he loved them as much as his mother loved her wife.

Chapter End Notes

[1] - "...and none will come after." was an actual fragment of a Prophecy in Harry Potter and Order of the Phoenix.
Narcissa had all of the kinky toys and equipment squared away, and had the magic-free room re-purposed as a hospital room by the time the Grangers arrived. She was also able to keep Draco from noticing the not-so-small fact she was pregnant while in that room as he helped her carry out the trunk and kept her back to him. *Apparently he didn't want to look at me while he knew what this room was for, and I'm fine with that.* William and Jean Granger arrived carrying books on anatomy, diagnosing, and a physician's desk reference. *I see there 'Mione gets it from.*

"Draco here tells me you are in need of my kind of medicine?" William said questioningly. Cissy nodded sadly.

"Harry's been bitten, and the resulting cursed wound has my sister's signature all over it. Any attempts to magically heal it result in the wound counteracting or attacking the patient even more. At the end of the Final Battle, I had to do a lot of field amputations with Dark Magic in order to save people whose curses were going to spread and kill them within days. I don't want to take his wand-arm, and even if I do save his life, he might become something undead."

"Well we can't counter magic, what good can we do?" Jean asked, perplexed.

"Severus can still develop an antivenin, since this is essentially a venomous bite that just happens to thrive on magic. But we have to deliver this cure in a way that the cursed wound can't counteract. Harry keeps throwing up whatever potion we try to get him to swallow." Cissy frowned at that.

"Can you run an eye-vee line?"

William sputtered at that. "Yes, well, I um, have done that before when I had to do a wisdom tooth extraction... it's been years, though."

Jean sighed, resolve on her face. "We can help; retirement has been a bit too boring for us anyways. Do you have any equipment?" Narcissa nodded darkly. Draco had handed over Lucius' black book, and with it they had discovered his secret laboratory where he had been dissecting muggles in order to find a weak spot so they could wipe out all mudbloods with a malady. *I also know exactly why Lucius cut Viktor off so abruptly, and I can't really blame him.* It galled her that the man she married could build a hospital with muggle equipment in order to dissect fellow humans in order to exterminate them like vermin, but that his twisted moral code saw gambling and throwing quidditch games as indefensible. *Maybe he was just looking out for his bottom line after all.*

William's gaze seemed to pierce his daughter-in-law's eyes. "What was that last part, about becoming undead?" Narcissa mentally kicked herself for getting distracted.

Draco's eyes were downcast, the burden heavy on his shoulders. Narcissa had offered to take the responsibility for him, but Draco wholly refused. *He said he would fulfil Harry's final wish if his boyfriend turned.* "We know the creature was influenced by necromancy and vampire blood so we aren't certain if just reversing the venomous bite will be enough. He could actually turn; we have another potion for that but are facing the same issue, though."


"Tincture of garlic and a solution of silver nitrate. It once was used to treat warts, actually." Narcissa said, omitting the fact that Draco would be holding the proverbial stake-and-mallet if he didn't make it.
"So were leeches." Jean retorted, but Cissy could tell she was relenting. "Lead the way; I'm fairly certain we're going to need to obtain some equipment that your kind has never heard of before. No offense."

"None taken." Narcissa replied, leading her in-laws to the specialized room, her mind stuck on the black book. *That thing was Lucius' power; it held enough blackmail and secrets that kept the Malfoy name in power for so long in Wizarding society. It also indicated that Broderick was actually the second Unspeakable who was found dead under mysterious circumstances.*

I was nervous as I sat at the Head Table for dinner, wondering where my wife was. Minerva leaned over and asked what was bothering me.

"Oh, um, nothing." I lied, "I assigned my first detention." *Leanne was only a year behind me, I doubt she'd see me as an authority figure.*

"She came to me about that, actually." Minerva said, smiling. "Not only do I stand behind you, I threatened to double it if she had any more complaints."

I tried to not smile at that too much, relieved to have her support in this. "Have you seen my wi- um, Professor Black?" I tried to stay professional.

"Oh dear, you didn't receive word. Harry has been injured and she's helping Severus at your manor." *My Manor? Why?* She saw the confusion in my face. "The wound is particularly nasty and requires delicate treatment. Since she's a qualified Healer and you donated your Manor to be the new hospital, it only seemed natural that you'd have heard about this."

"I didn't... hadn't known." *I'm okay with giving up that place, but why haven't I heard from Harry yet? *"How is he? How is everyone else? What was going on?" I reeled as Minerva informed me of everything she had known so far, and I was left dumbstruck as I started to understand Cissy's devotion to me and my friends unfold.

_Fleur lost a wing, Bellatrix is still out there, and Harry's been bitten by some sort of monster that my sister-in-law created. Fuck._

"If you want to go see Harry tonight, I'll cover your detention. Severus told me all about what his detentions for Harry were after the incident with Draco. Oh, and Fleur will be back teaching tomorrow." Minerva shook her head sadly. "I wish we could do more for her; I know how much she wishes she could look at least human again. Any luck with my old transfiguration notes?"

*I actually had a theory on that, but was certain I couldn't do it on my own. *"I'll have to confer with Cissy, actually." I guess I'm going to talk to her after all.

Draco was reading *The Wizard and the Hopping Pot* as he waited to see Harry. The story used to confuse him as a child, since his father said the hopping pot was supposed to protect the magical world from the dangerous mob of muggles, swallowing them while and hoping far away for the wizard to release them somewhere else.

Once Draco was old enough to read for himself, he saw that the story was written differently than he had been told as a child. His father blamed blood traitors for making the story politically correct, and explained that the story was about putting your own selfish needs aside and helping protect and preserve Pureblood society, even from itself. *He fed me years of lies to make me afraid of muggles, while inflating the importance of blood purity. Draco recognized that muggles were actually good*
people and had been innovative since they couldn't rely on magic, and was glad Hermione's parents were here.

The Grangers did an amazing job at putting Severus' powdered bezoar potion into an intravenous line as a first-line defense as he kept brewing the antivenin and his mother was tending to Fleur. She looked in pretty bad shape, judging from all of the bruises she had on top of the missing wing. At least she wasn't Infected, I don't know if Severus could keep it together if she were in the same condition as Harry was.

A slight rattle brought his attention down to the hand-held mirror on the table, so he picked it up and invoked the mirror to come to life. His reflection disappeared as he could see his girlfriend, Ginny Weasley, instead. He was glad he had found these linked mirrors in the Manor, so they could talk even when she was too busy with the Harpies to come visit.

"How is Harry?" She asked, and Draco winced slightly at the sight of her bloodshot eyes. She's been drinking again, no wonder she's not apparating home.

"He's... being tended to. Severus is making the antivenin, and the Grangers are using muggle medicine to get it into him." Draco remembered the look that Jean gave him after he called her grandmother.

"He still won't talk to me." She confided sadly. "Being away from you two has been hard; with my parents splitting up, and Dad moving in with that fucking slag..." He could tell by her cadence that she wasn't hungover, but still slightly drunk. She's getting good at covering it up, which means it must be happening a lot now.

Frowning, Draco said something that had been on his mind for awhile now. "You're not the only one dealing with shit, Ginny. I was on trial, remember?"

"Yeah, well we both were there when St. Mungo's fell. We both supported Harry on his stupid quest!" Ginny snapped back. Guilt flooded through Draco as he recalled the fear that struck him back when Morrigan's crow flew overhead.

"And I couldn't save you!" Draco retorted. "And I wasn't there for Harry. I won't fail him this time." No crows this time, thank Merlin.

"Draco?" Ginny asked, genuine fear in her voice, "what aren't you telling me?" Draco worried that she'd crawl into a bottle and never come out, like her father had.

"Nothing. I'm just here for him." Draco flashed a smile. "See you soon."

"Take care of our boy." Draco shot her a glance and she quickly added "Sir." at the end. Draco nodded at that.

"With my life." The connection between the mirrors was closed, and Draco's jaw was clenched as a mix of anger and grief flooded him. Entering the room where Harry was, he once again heard the slight hum of magic disappear.

"Ginny sends her regards." Draco said, his eyes taking in the blackened veins sprawling out from the purplish-green bite wound. This was definitely Aunt Bella's work, he thought disgustedly. The Grangers shared a glance and decided to give the two of them some privacy.

"I heard the conversation you had." Harry said, his voice scratchy. Draco was glad to know that the pills he had taken for the pain were working. "She's making it all about her. She's still drinking, isn't she?" Draco's eyes were averted at that. I'm not going to tell him.
"Mate, a lot happened. She loves and misses you."

"I killed for her, Draco. I never wanted to be this person. And on top of it all, she's throwing away her reputation and career for nothing."

Draco's eyebrows shot up at that. "I've killed too, you know! I've killed to protect those I love and I haven't lost one bloody wink of sleep." He choked up. "I'm here for you now, too, if it comes to that."

Harry looked shamed as he apologized. "I'm sorry, you're right about that. But Draco, you can't tell me you're happy with how she's been lately." Draco frowned at that.

"I still love her." Draco said, shrugging. "And if you love her, truly love her, you'll support her as she's dealing with this."

"I do love her, but I need to know she loves me... us, that she loves us... more than her addictions. I was fine with her chasing her dreams, but right now, she's escaping reality." Draco knew he was right, but didn't want to admit it to himself. If she had thrown herself into playing quidditch instead, maybe she'd be making headlines for better reasons. But wasn't Hermione guilty of the same thing, in a way? Trying to deny the fact she's bonded to my mother?

A knock on the door made Draco turn and see his stepmother. "Oh, Hermione, come in."

Harry tried to lift his head from the bed, grimaced, and relented. "Hiya 'Mione. Shouldn't you be at Hogwarts?"

She shrugged it off. "I was, had to sub for Fleur's class today."

Harry chuckled at that. "Professor Granger teaching at Hogwarts. Did it go well?"

She tucked a curl behind her ear, and Draco recognized it as a nervous tick. "Yeah, I lead a great discussion, but handed out a detention to someone for being overly discriminatory to the Slytherins."

"Wow. Guess the times are changing." Harry replied.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going off to Romania, Harry? Didn't you know the government there was overrun by vampires?" Hermione rambled, concerned eyes looking at his wound.

"Didn't want you worried." Harry looked guilty as he said it. "Besides, I ordered Sev and Fleur to go, and they needed backup." Hermione's eyes shot to Draco, who raised his hands to prove innocence.

"Didn't even ask me, step-mum. He took Weasel-um, Ronald with him."

Hermione's glare went to Harry. "Sounds like a Harry thing to do. Well, now that you're laid up, who is going to run the Auror office?"

Draco and Harry exchanged an awkward look as William Granger poked his head into the room. "I don't know how this is done in the wizarding world, but Harry needs his rest and he's got another visitor here. McClaggan, put down Draco's charmed mirror."

Draco cursed and rushed out of the room, leaving me alone with Harry.

"You should have asked me to come help."
Harry shook his head. "I want to keep you and the Elder Wand as far away from Trixymort as possible." Trixymort? Trixy-Voldemort!? My mind reeled at the implication.

"That crazy bitch infused Voldemort's powers into herself." Harry strained to nod his agreement.

"She's a Lich. Might be tied to a prophecy, we ran into an INTERCON wizard there." Prophecy?

"Cormac! My girlfriend might be in the locker room for all you know!" Draco yelled, apparently struggling to get the mirror back from him.

"So keep it down then!" I rolled my eyes at the juvenile antics and tried to ignore them. I looked at his wounds, and saw the meticulous notes made by my father, wife, and Severus for his treatment. I remember Molly scoffing at the idea of complimentary medicine before, but this looks quite promising.

"So you're being treated for the Venom first, then clear you of any vampiric infection."

Harry nodded at that. "If I do have any vampiric blood in me, it should in theory want to fight the venom."

I bit the inside of my cheeks and decided to ask the question that has been bothering me for awhile now.

"Harry. What happened between you and Ginny? Really?" I asked, and the look on his face made me realize I wouldn't like the answer.

"I wanted to give her space to be her own person and pursue her career in Quidditch at first, knowing that we loved each other... and we both love Draco albeit in different ways." I saw the pained look there and knew there was more.

"Bullshit, Harry. You don't break up just because she's going away. You broke up with her before so she wasn't a target by The Dark Lord, which I thought was a futile gesture. You were willing to do a long distance thing."

"I've got a lot on my plate, and a lot of stress in my life. And between trying to clean-up the Wizarding World and be a positive example of how two men can be in a healthy relationship, I can't handle Ginny's drinking on top of it. I can't clean up after her as well."

I grimaced at that, remembering the tabloid articles going after her and the photographs of her drunken antics. "But you still love her, right? She's drinking because she is hurting right now due to what you did."

Harry rolled his eyes. "She's pretty much chosen alcohol over me, 'Mione."

"Her drinking problem is her issue. And in case you haven't noticed, she loves you and is more devoted to you than I've seen in any other relationship, save my own with Narcissa. And that's because there's a magical compulsion involved."

Harry sighed, and I could hear a tired resignation in his voice. "I just wish she would fucking stop drinking." Where the hell have I been lately? I shouldn't have missed this.

"Merlin don't tell me you've had rows because you've been nagging and pushing her to quit."

"Well, yeah I have. I've felt so emotionally... abandoned by her since the last few times I floo-called her all we did was argue to the point where I didn't understand what was going on nor why we were
still together. I saw her devotion was more to liquor than to me."

"You're blind then, because she's in love with and totally devoted to you. She's been drinking because she's been hurting, and I bet that your pointing it out and nagging her to quit has also been not only hurting her more, but driving her drink more. The more you push and nag at her will make her feel like you're judging her. She needs nurturing and constructive support, first and foremost."

"Well then I'm glad she at least still has Draco," Harry replied, pain evident in his voice, "because I've been relieved that I haven't had to worry, stress, nor deal with it. Because I am so damn tired of this."

I had not noticed how bad things had gotten between them. You've been too busy dealing with Narcissa and Draco to even ask Harry before about his relationship with Ginny. "I think the underlying problem here is that you love sober Ginny but hate drunk Ginny. You have to accept the fact that they are the same person. You can't have one without the other, and only she can make the decision to work on her drinking."

"So what am I supposed to do? Just hand her a bottle of fire-whiskey and say to hell with everything, because that is what she wants and will do anyways? I just wish she would want to not get too drunk."

"She's going to. It's going to happen again, and you have to either accept that or move on. If you accept that and support her until she is ready to confront it, then there's a shot that it will help her. But what you've been doing has only been building resentment between you two."

"I don't want resentment. But for her own sake, I want her to change so she's more responsible."

"If she decides on her own to get help, I know that you and Draco both will support her, but you cannot force someone to change if they aren't willing to. I know you, Harry. You're a 'fixer', and you see a problem and want to rush in like the knight in shining armor."

"I feel like Sir Luckless from The Fountain of Fair Fortune." Harry moaned. I smiled at that, knowing he had been reading The Tales of Beedle the Bard to Teddy.

"And in the end, the water wasn't magical and it was only when each of the three witches realized their own worth, were they able to solve their own problems. All you can do is be her companion on her journey." Harry seemed to finally get it, and I felt relieved. I may not understand why or how three people can love each other like some sort of triangle relationship, but if it makes them happy, who am I to judge?

"If McLaggen is still out there, send him in. He already knows he's in charge of the Auror Guild until I can get back on my feet." I stopped short as I was turning to leave.

"He's doing WHAT?!!" I recalled his attitude during quidditch tryouts as well as how he treated me at Professor Slughorn's Yule party.

"He's got the best spellwork to do the job, 'Mione. I'd have gone with Krum, but he's not a citizen of this Ministry. Just... go and let him in." I nodded, wished him a speedy recovery, and made my way outside where my father and wife were discussing muggle vs. magical first aid techniques. It appeared that Narcissa was intrigued by how Muggles have found ways to re-start a heart with electricity and my father was surprised that a spell was invented that did the same job as the Heimlich Maneuver.

Draco, however, was talking into a mirror and apologizing while Cormac flashed a playful smile at
Why is he looking at me like that?

"Miss Granger, how... fortuitous... it is for me to run into you here." He knows what 'fortuitous' means? I stood there, mouth agape, wondering who gave him a word-a-day calendar. If he's going to be formal with me, I can return the favor.

"Yeah, Mister McLaggen, I was just checking in on my friend Harry." Cormac beamed at my wife and father.

"Just 'McLaggen'. Huh, I've heard marvelous things about this new branch of complimentary medicine. Looks like collaboration between wizardkind and muggles might really assist us here." He turned to see me, his eyes twinkling with charm. Slytherin's serpent, he's flirting with me.

"But since you're here and I have your attention, would you be so kind as to accompany me to the Halloween Ball?"

_Huh?_ I blinked as I tried to think of the proper response. _Why on earth is he flirting with me? And we're having a Ball for Halloween?_ Cormac pressed on.

"See, my sweet Aunt Dee-Dee is worried that I won't have a date, and if she doesn't find out soon that I have someone, well..." He made a cute little shrug with a grimace, "she's going to set me up with one of her friends' granddaughters. And then remind me that I need to find a wife pretty soon else the Ministry will choose one for me." He looked genuinely scared of his Aunt Dee-Dee, and I stifled a giggle at that.

"Um, sure, I can be your date that night, McLaggen. Will I have to meet this aunt of yours?" His face went from relieved to horror.

"No, in fact I'd rather you not." He laughed nervously, "She is famous for getting her way once she starts a conversation, and I'd rather not have her rope you into becoming the next Mrs. McLaggen. I mean, it's my own life, so it should be my choice." He nodded his thanks and went to speak to Harry.

I turned away, remembering I had been here to speak to Narcissa about a way of reversing Fleur's transformation. She was next to my father and had heard the entire exchange. I couldn't read Narcissa's expression as her mouth was stuck open and she seemed to be at a loss of words.

_I just accepted to go out with Cormac right in front of Cissy._

Narcissa's heart felt like a shuttlecock in badminton, as soon as she felt like she was going in a good arc, she gets slammed into the opposite direction without any warning. _She's willing to try dating her wife, but also Cormac? Who is this Aunt Dee-Dee of his?_ William Granger excused himself, muttering something about needing the kitchen.

"Yeah, that wasn't me, love, that was Cormac looking for a peep show." Draco apologized, "I think I'm going to add some sort of password security onto this mirror." She couldn't make out what the ginger was saying in reply, but Hermione flicked a glance to it as if she were deconstructing it in her mind.

"So you're going to the Halloween Ball with Mister McLaggen?" Narcissa said crisply. Hermione was still looking at the mirror in fascination.

"I guess so; he seemed nervous and in need, so..." She turned to look at her wife, face pensive. "I'm only going with him as a friend. I guess I should have asked if you wanted to go with me first."
Cissy shook her head. "No, I have other plans that evening." She smiled coldly. "A date, as it were." Watching Severus get pissed on the anniversary of Lily's death isn't much of a date, but she doesn't need to know that. Hermione smiled and nodded, obviously distracted as she returned her attention to the charmed mirror.

"Layer a few spells to work together and then seal it; Protean Charm, Extendable Ear..." She seemed like she was designing something in her head, and the look on her face was adorable and made Narcissa already want to forgive her. She turns into an absent-minded professor when she's onto something, doesn't she? That looks so familiar... She thought, seeing a bit of Severus in her.

"Though, you do realize he's related to the Chief Mugwump of the Wizengamot? If you're hoping to end the marriage law, it wouldn't hurt to have his ear."

Hermione turned to look at her wife, puzzled. "Yeah, alright. Do you have a knut? Two knuts?" Cissy shrugged and opened her purse, handing her the coins.

"You are going to tell me what in Slytherin's name you're up to, right?" Narcissa asked as Hermione thought for a second, switched to the Elder Wand and cast multiple spells and charms on the knuts in complete silence, watched the pair of them glow together, then return to the original color.

"Here, turn your head." She asked, with just a hint of authority in it that set a bit of a flutter in the pregnant woman's chest. The cold coin was pressed onto the skull just behind the left ear, where she could feel a sticking charm take effect. She put one on herself on the same place and cast Muffliato.

Hermione tapped it with her left hand and said, "Can you hear me?"

Cissy turned her head to the left, realizing that the sound came from the knut. She mimicked the same tap and replied to her. "Yes, how?"

Hermione beamed as she canceled the noise-dampening charm and excitedly kissed the Slytherin. It was quick thing, yet it made Narcissa antsy and want more. "I just upgraded those contact Galleons I made years ago by layering in the Eavesdropping spell the Weasleys used in their extendable ears. Got the idea from..." Hermione looked pensive again. "I need to get in touch with David Mallett. It's for Fleur."

Narcissa chuckled. "You are quite scatter-brained today, aren't you? Okay, I'll see what I can do. Also, might I suggest you make them flesh-colored so as to hide them better?"

Hermione's eyes lit up. "You know, you and I can make a good team when we put our minds together."

"Just now figuring that out?" Narcissa replied, winking at her. Narcissa could tell from Hermione's shifty gaze that something was brewing in her mind, but wasn't ready to bring it up. Change the subject then. "Alright, I have to ask, you do realize Cormac McLaggen is looking for a wife, and was flirting with you?"

Hermione frowned at that. Okay, so she's not entirely blind to that. \"Well, I kind of figured it out after I accepted. But, I don't have to accept any marriage proposals if I don't want to.\"

"Until the Ministry starts pairing people up and forces them to marry due to the Measuring. What's your plan when it happens?"

Hermione shrugged, "I plan on staying loyal to my family despite whomever they force me to marry. It's not going to be a traditional Bonding, so I could just divorce him and make the Ministry start all over again, right? I mean, you're the one telling me to work inside the system."
"I was going to be rebelling alongside Draco, actually." *It's not like they are going to be able to deport us all, including Harry Potter.*

"How absolutely Gryffindor of you." Hermione smiled at her, and Narcissa felt a wave a pleasure wash over her. *The Compulsion punishes me when I speak harshly to my 'husband', and rewards me when she is pleased with me.* As much as she hated the double standard the Bonding imposed upon them, she was glad to have this way to measure Hermione's feelings.

Narcissa's mind latched on to a detail and pondered. "Hermione, have you ever heard Cormac talk about his Aunt Dee-Dee before?"

The Gryffindor shrugged, "He was all about quidditch or trying to get into my knickers before. Maybe it's not a blood relative, and just an informal term of endearment?"

"Perhaps. But to hear any McLaggen give that kind of obsequious veneration is just... peculiar." She gave the Gryffindor a smoldering, suggestive look. "As for getting into your knickers, I should hope you have better standards than him." Cissy gave her wife a shy smile and felt her body tighten with desire. *Have I hit the stage of my pregnancy where my libido goes up, or is this just the Compulsion?*

Hermione's lips parted at that as she licked them nervously. "I uh, hope I didn't make you jealous there, Mrs. Granger-Black." *Quit over analyzing it and just charm the witch.* Cissy stepped closer as their eyes locked and the fell into each other's gravitational pull.

"I'm not usually the jealous type," She whispered as her lips brushed against Hermione's, "provided I'm getting my needs met." Mione's lips captured Narcissa's greedily, and it was like a damn of emotions broke between the two of them. Delicate fingers clasped her head as her wife's tongue began to probe inside her own mouth, deepening the kiss into a frantic need.

"MOMS! GET A ROOM!" Draco said in fake disgust as he walked away, secretly glad to see them getting along again.

Severus was at an impasse. He was able to brew the antivenin potion easily enough, but he was completely lost at how he could heal the living tissue while killing any latent vampire blood within Harry. It would have to be a delicate balance of healing and killing, and he didn't like Jean Granger's suggestion of chemotherapy. *I'd rather have him on the Draught of Living Death.*

The door opened and was followed by the friendly tones of his former Potions professor. "Quite a conundrum you got here; if you're confused, I'm not certain how much good I can be." Horace Slughorn said sadly. "You know if Silverthorn was here, I'd bet he could have figured this out by now."

Severus nodded, remembering back to the days of his Apprenticeship under Potions Master Silverthorn. *"James Silverthorn and Pandora Lovegood were able to make intuitive leaps of logic that I was never able to keep up with."* Bertrand had decided to stick around, and was cross-referencing the muggle medicinal texts to Borage's Advanced Potion Making.

"Lovegood? Wife of that Quibbler newspaper guy, Xenophilius?" Bertrand asked. He remembered how his fellow apprentice quit seeking a Mastery in Potions to get married and settle down with a minor job in the Ministry.

Severus nodded at that. "I knew it must have been true love between her and Xenophilius; the two of them were night and day to each other." He looked away, pushing his emotions into the massive void within himself. *Her intuition made one failed leap of logic and she blew herself up.*
"I remember teaching that Ravenclaw, she had one of the most steady hands I had ever seen," Slughorn reminisced, "I can't fathom how she could have possibly made some sort of mistake that killed her."

Severus remembered feeling the same way when he first heard of this, and found out that she had been locked inside her own lab and that her cauldron had indeed exploded on her. What on earth was she up to? He brushed that line of thinking aside as he put up the various values for Arithmancy and set the solution to be at least 80% chance of Harry's recovery. "What potions can assist me to do this?"

Horace looked up at the equation floating overhead as the line crashed down when Severus muttered the incantation. "Working backwards? Try Draught of Living Death; your version, not the official one." The equation ran, and the lines crashed just like before. Bertrand cocked his head sideways as he interpreted it.

"So, that would kill Harry Potter?" He asked curiously.

Severus frowned slightly. "No, Reginald, it simply means he will not have at least an 80% chance of recovery. If I modify the eigenvalues and solve for the outcome being his survival, then..." He flicked his wand and the line moved rightward as a percent chance of survival over time. It began at 100% at the current time, which made Severus glad to realize his equation was working (since Harry was alive at this point) but the line wavered over the first few hours and faded around a 35% chance after five days.

"That sank like a dropped quaffle." Horace replied sadly, "We don't seem to have enough information for the equation to run beyond a week..."

Severus erased the potion from the equation, and the line crashed within 72 hours. Bloody hell, doing nothing will kill him faster.

Horace called for the House-elf and Herpy popped into existence. "Get your Mistress, please. We need a Healer's input on this."

"How about Brimstone Potion?" Severus scoffed, plugging it into the equation and running it for a lark.

"Severus, Brimstone?! That will just kill him faster!" The Arithmantic calculation stayed above 90%, though the color of the line turned blood-red. Of course, there's always a caveat...

"Not according to this. He would recover from the venom as his own metabolism would be boosted for a short time." Severus deadpanned.

Bertrand caught up in the conversation as he remembered what the Brimstone Potion entailed. "But that's an Infernal-class potion! That's highly illegal!"

"It is only illegal to dose someone else with it. If the boy takes it himself to save his own life, are you going to arrest him for wanting to live?"

"Snape, that's a Faustian Bargain and you know it! I can't believe you'd give that to him!" Bertrand snapped, "No wonder the International Confederation has such a thick file on you!"

Narcissa entered the study, hanging onto Hermione's arm and beaming at her. "Then I'm definitely going to look forward to this surprise date of yours... any hint at what I should wear?"

"No," Hermione replied cheekily, "you know magic, you can modify whatever you're going to wear
Severus took in their appearances and noticed the barest smudge of lipstick on Narcissa as well as slightly tousled curls on her wife’s head. Judging from the way they seemed to be leaning into each other, Severus supposed that they had been snogging like fifth year students.

"Narcissa! Please tell my esteemed colleague we cannot give Harry Potter the Brimstone Potion!" Horace Slughorn said with exasperation.

Narcissa’s face went from jovial to horrified. "Severus, no! I thought you’d be able to treat this easily!" She looked up to Severus’ arithmantic equation and fine-tuned the variables and re-ran the equation, and the red line turned black at the fifteen year mark. "You know how unstable that potion is and the kind of price that comes with it! Look, he can lose up to eighty five years of his life essence if you let him do this!"

Hermione turned to her wife. "What potion is this? How would it make him lose eighty five years?"

Severus frowned. "He may lose up to that much life-force. I’ve only lost weeks or months before."

Narcissa looked at him with disapproval as she addressed Hermione’s question. "The potion was designed to take your magical and physical reserves and to, in a word, concentrate it for a limited period of time. It can boost your strength, speed, and magical ability... at a cost. The duration of the potion as well as the cost in your overall life-span seems to be completely random and the benefits never outweigh the risk, Severus."

Hermione mulled that over and looked to her former Potions Master. "You've used it? How many months did you lose?"

"End of the Wizarding War, in 1981. Aurors were given free reign to bring in every Death Eater and to use any spell they wanted. Albus hadn't secured my immunity yet so I was having to defend myself from both sides of the war as the Lestrange brothers decided to blame and kill everyone around them for the demise of The Dark Lord. So I lost a few months for a few hours of being superhuman and almost invulnerable. I’d do it again if I had to."

"But we're talking about Harry using this; using an Infernal-Class potion." Narcissa replied sadly. "I don't think he'd be willing to do that."

"I'll start brewing it, and if he won't take it on his own, I'll pour it down his throat myself." Severus scratched at his Dark Mark at the same time Hermione rubbed at her right wrist. Bertrand's eyes flicked between the two of them as Severus realized that it hadn't been a coincidence.

"Snape, I thought your tattoo went inactive the first time You-Know-Who died."

"It did. This time, it hasn't begun to fade yet. I was having to defend myself from both sides of the war as the Lestrange brothers decided to blame and kill everyone around them for the demise of The Dark Lord. So I lost a few months for a few hours of being superhuman and almost invulnerable. I’d do it again if I had to."

She nodded, alarmed. "I thought it was just me." Her left hand brushed her hair behind her ear, and she jumped in surprise. "Knuts! Cissy, got any more?"

Narcissa automatically checked her purse and handed her three coins. What the devil? Severus was completely confused as he saw Bertrand draw his wand on Hermione.

"You don't have a Dark Mark." Bertrand said warily.

"Well spotted. Voldemort put a different mark on me." Hermione's sarcasm didn't have the same
ability to cut someone down yet, but Severus inwardly smiled at it.

Bertrand's eyes darkened on the Gryffindor. "What did he give you?" Hermione raised the back of her right hand up to him, pulling down her sleeve to expose the tattoo that encircled her wrist.

"Just a snake! He's dead, so it doesn't matter!" Severus could tell that she was trying to convince herself of that. Reginald lowered his wand, unable to hide the fear that chilled him to the bone. Severus took a moment and spoke directly to him, hoping to catch him unawares and to get a glimpse of the thoughts in the man's mind.

"Bertrand, what does it matter that she has a snake tattoo?" Bertrand's fearful eyes met Snape's and the Slytherin dipped inside the man's mind ever so slightly.

*Destiny's End... Elder's Bane lies in the fist, Ouroboros 'round her fist...* Bertrand blinked rapidly and put on a fake smile. "Nothing, I guess."

Hermione layered some complex charms on the knuts and then made them transparent as she handed one to Severus. "It's a Communication Knut, stick it behind your left ear. I'll also give one to Draco."

She looked up at him. "Fleur should probably have one, too."

Severus went ahead and put it in place, having learned how effective her contact galleons had been before. "You think Trixymort is doing something to our marks?"

The Gryffindor nodded jerkily. "She has all of The Dark Lord's memories and magic, I wouldn't be surprised if she's up to something. This way we can all stay in immediate contact should anything happen."

Narcissa was lounging across a sofa as Severus brewed the Brimstone potion, kicking her heels off and letting her stocking-clad legs dangle over the edge. It reminded her of when they were students in Hogwarts, except that they weren't getting stoned instead of studying for exams.

"Severus, did you know my cousin Regulus Black's final act was to try and destroy the locket horcrux?" She asked as she perused Lucius' black book. He had suspected Regulus had turned once he disappeared, but he never heard of any orders to track him down and execute him for defecting.

"I had only recently heard that from Harry; apparently he didn't trust anyone and went about this as a lone wolf, save for the House Elf Kreacher."

"That may not be entirely true; apparently before his disappearance he was seen with a woman. Was he romantically involved with anyone?"

Severus shrugged as he ground up the sulfur into a fine powder and poured it into the cauldron, flinching away from the rotten egg smell. "I obviously didn't divulge nor seek out any such information, for fear of having Lily targeted. Was she a Pureblood?"

Cissy turned the page, attempting to appear nonchalant. "No idea. Any idea what I should wear for my date with Hermione?"

"She didn't tell me where she wants to take you, either." Severus replied, smirking. "You really should get back to Hogwarts tonight, but please refrain from snogging her to the point you both look disheveled."

Cissy winced at that. "Was it that obvious?" she asked.
"Only to the not-so-casual observer." Narcissa's lips curled into a small smile as Severus continued, "But I am glad to see you two getting along again."

"Sev, do you remember that checklist you gave me ages ago when you wanted me to realize Lucius was a terrible husband? I um... showed that to her." She looked to him and he went from his usual stillness to one that only the dead should have.

"Goodness, Cissy, why on earth would you do such a thing? Surely you realize that you're her first real relationship. Such blunt tactics shouldn't be used..." Severus put down his mortar and pestle. "Let me understand this; you did that to her, then you two were snogging?"

Narcissa exhaled in frustration. "It seemed right in the moment. I, however, did forget she hasn't really dated before; I guess my tactics were a bit much."

Severus turned towards her. "A bit much? She's new to this and needs to understand you better and why you love her. Don't let her think it's only because you have to due to the Bonding."

"I'm fairly certain the only reason we wound up snogging was because of the Compulsion." Severus could hear the defeat in her voice.

"I do not think that was true; unlike with Lucius, she isn't ordering you to do anything nor do you loathe her enough to override the suggestive nature of the Bonding. Just be a good woman to her and let this all unfold like it wants to."

I was back in my room, glad that I would be attending classes as a student again in the morning. Fleur looked really torn up, having lost a wing to the vampire. I hope David Mallett can help. Luna had come over to give the notes from today's classes, and we sat in the companionable silence as I copied the notes by hand.

"Do you have plans this weekend?" Luna asked, "because I was hoping to run into Sam-"

"You're still going to try dating her after we had to Obliviate her memories?" I asked.

"Oh, right. You left early. She's fine with me being eccentric. You and Denton, though..."

I waved her off. "That's fine. I've actually got a date with my wife. Apparently there's enough chemistry between us that we're going to give this a fair try."

Luna's eyes brightened at that. "I'm glad to hear that. Something tells me that you two will work it out regardless of your Bonding."

My smile faltered at that. "You said I should try to see myself through her eyes, but I'm honestly not sure that I want to. Not after how I've apparently treated her."

Luna stood up and made her way over to the edge of my room. "Well, let's see." She cast a sticking charm on her skirt and did a head stand. "She had a certain kind of role to maintain, a lifetime with a horrible man to please and keep from getting too angry, suppressing her sexual orientation after a fashion, and though she did have a child with him to make the families happy, she seemed to stop at only one, which in itself is quite telling."

I frowned at that, thinking of Luna's family. "But you're an only child and a Pureblood."

"My mother miscarried twice before me, so when I was born, they decided to close Pandora's Box as it were." She smiled as if it was an inside joke.
"What's so funny?"

"My mother's name, Pandora, was pretty apt for her. But Narcissa... she's had a pretty hard life, but isn't really a narcissist. She had to tear down everything she believed as her husband and the first Wizarding War disproved her Pureblood Superiority sentiments. But after a baby Harry defeated Voldemort, she was isolated and forced to keep serving her husband due to the Bonding. She refused to make more children suffer in that home."

\textit{Merlin, her life has been thrown upside down.}

"My father's Quibbler has been around for a long time; we roughly know how much she had to do to keep him out of jail. I can guess she's kind of like you right now; uncertain who she can be in this new world. What do you know of her?" I wasn't really sure I knew as much as Luna seemed to.

"Just her taste in music, she was best friends with Severus in Hogwarts, she's a qualified Healer."

Luna smiled at that. "Well she knows you're intelligent, into social justice, and an activist. Her life has been devoted to manipulating people like pawns. Have you ever thought to ask her what her passion in life is? What she'd love to do now that she has the freedom to?"

"I think she's teaching right now only because she's the best person for the job and it needs to be done. As for knowing more about her personally, that's why we're going to go on these dates."

Luna's lips puckered at that. "I find that odd. With the Marriage Law in place and the deadline looming, she should be looking for a suitable husband before the Ministry assigns her one. My head is starting to hurt so I think I'm going to come sit down now." Luna came down and sat on the bed near my desk.

\textit{What was Luna going to do if she liked Sam?}

"You're not worried about the Law?"

"No, I found myself a man to marry. He proposed, knowing that I have a girlfriend and was doing this to save me from whatever fate the Ministry was going to assign me. Rolf is asexual and didn't really want to be chased by other women trying to persuade him into marriage."

"But what about Sam?" I asked.

"I can't marry her anyways." Luna said simply, "so if I have a relationship down on paper with a man I never live with, does it really matter?" I shrugged at that, starting to realize the urgency of getting this law overturned.

\begin{quote}
Severus worked around the clock on the Brimstone potion, getting it nearly perfect as the forty-second hour of simmering transmuted the egg-yellow potion to blood red. He had taken a sleep replacement potion in order to stay up, knowing that he would be paying for it when he fell asleep the next evening. \textit{Harry had better realize how much we all have done to ensure his life, and take this blasted potion.}

William Granger knocked gently on the door makeshift potions laboratory that was inside what is not being called the Granger-Black Hospital and Severus bade him enter. "You said the potion should be done around now."

Severus nodded, rubbing the exhaustion off of his face with his hands. "It is, the color change just occurred and now I will leave it to cool down to room temperature."\end{quote}
William stepped closer and looked into the cauldron. "Amazing how similar muggle medicine is to magical potions."

Severus shook his head, confused. "You have something as Dark as this? Why would muggles invent something to give them a temporary boost in their abilities at the cost of their longevity?"

"Steroids. Like your potion here, illegal in most instances and fully banned in sports. Prolonged usage can cause addiction, personality changes, and death." The former dentist replied, and Severus could see the question forming in his mind.

"You wonder if this is the right avenue for Mister Potter? I don't see any better option."

"I suppose, but hadn't you said that the cursed wounds would refuse potions and magical healing?"

"Not in this case. This potion is as Dark as it comes, so Bella's handiwork will welcome it in hopes to kill him faster. We are gambling on the fact that this will kill the cursed wounds before Harry."

William shuddered at that. "So this is as good as Chemotherapy. I... had another question, Mister Snape." Severus nodded for him to continue. "You are best friends with my... I'm sorry, still have a hard time fathoming this... my daughter-in-law."

"And your question is?" Severus prompted.

"Yes, um... from what Jean and I could tell, they seem willing to stay together despite this draconian law that was written to separate them. My daughter seems to still be loyal to her and her son with the expectation that they can change the country for the better. But from what I've heard, Narcissa has a history of wielding influence the likes only Rupert Murdoch has seen."

"You are wondering if this is some sort of scheme or ploy by my best friend to keep Hermione around." Severus let the flat tone convey his sarcasm. "And you're asking me, what? To get her to end this romantic charade? If this was all just a charade, I would expect her to have a better handle over her own emotions. Instead, she's been both happier and more miserable than I have ever seen her due to being in love with your daughter."

"Well, when you put it like that, it does seem silly. I apologize," William back-tracked, "I had only heard that the Malfoys had considerable influence..."

"Which was pissed away during the last war. Now she's lost most of that on top of having the additional burden of being ostracized for being a lesbian in our society."

William looked properly shamed for having brought it up. "I apologize; I always had hoped for a son or a son-in-law. Instead I get a step-grandson."

"So you are disappointed that your daughter's spouse is of the fairer sex?"

"You're an arse, Snape." William glared as soon as Severus had said that.

"At least I'm not a bigot." Severus' gaze was steady on the muggle, and he flinched first.

"She's my age. And they haven't seemed happy in awhile."

"They seem to be doing better now. Besides, their own happiness is up to the two of them to remedy." Severus waved his hand over the cauldron, and deemed it cool enough. "Let's get this potion to Harry and save his life."
The First Date

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hitchin' Bitches, TNG (The Next Generation), and BoundRopeJam are all actual events in the kink community, and Regulation is an actual kink store in London. As far as I know, Regulation does not host any kink classes or 'munches' in their premises. For more information to local events in your area, try findamunch.com.

The final class on friday was over, and I was tearing through my closet trying to pick out the best outfit. Casual, but not too casual, and I want to look good for her without looking like I tried too hard... Why is this so difficult? Showering and braiding my hair to dry so the curls would stay together was the easy part; picking an outfit to impress Cissy was always impossible.

Crookshanks meowed as he walked past me, his bottle-brush tail flicking around my calves as he pawed at the pair of black knee high riding boots. "Well, Crooks, if I wear those I'm going to have to wear them with my black leggings..." which would look great with my grey cowl-neck blouse... I thought, pulling that out of the closet and tossing it onto the bed, "and my dark wool blazer. Not too butch or femme, showing off my figure... Thank you." I took off the dressing gown and got dressed, hoping that there would be time for us to get some food first.

I was facing the mirror and duplicating the makeup charms (that Draco of all people taught me) as I heard a knock at my door. Is she early?! I checked the time and realized that I was running late and grimaced as I cast a drying charm on my hair, hoping it would turn out okay. There was a second knock at the door as I turned and waved my hand, releasing the wards to open it. Narcissa stood there in a flared black and white polka dot pinup dress and matching heels that accentuated her hair and left my eyes nearly unfocused as I took all of her in. The halter neckline went low enough to show off an amazing bit of cleavage and she caught me gawking at her. "Is this sufficient, Hermione?" I nodded silently, then realized that my mouth was still open and shut it, blushing slightly.

"Definitely. We have time for afternoon tea if we leave now." Narcissa beamed from the unspoken compliment.

"I would love that! Could we go to that coffee place again? Promise to not brain-freeze myself like last time."

"Well, now that it is the fall, you can get the pumpkin spice latte. It's served hot and it's better than pumpkin juice." I picked up my purse and kissed her cheek as we made our way out of Hogwarts, arm-in-arm, and apparated to muggle London.

Once we had our drinks and snacks in hand, we found a small table and sipped our coffees as we failed at subtly eye-banging each other. "You look amazing for a first date, Hermione." Cissy said nervously.

I nodded my thanks as I swallowed the banana nut bread. "And you're absolutely ravishing. As for this being our first date, we've certainly gone past the whole... first date zone." Narcissa raised an
"Are you saying we should skip the rest of this date and just go back to your place? Hope you can soundproof your room from your suite mate."

I choked on my mocha frappe, trying to remain cool in front of her. *Change the subject, Granger.* "So, if you weren't teaching at Hogwarts, what would you be doing right now?"

Narcissa's smile fell slightly as she thought about it. "I was supposed to just serve my husband's wishes, keep control over vital parts of the Wizarding World, attend boring galas and have lunches with high-ranking officials to ensure certain legislation passed."

I gave her a reassuring smile. "You're no longer married to him and don't have to do that. What do you want to do, Narcissa?"

"Be a Healer," she shrugged, "put my education to good use. Do some good, but also have and raise a family." I stiffened slightly at her words.

"Well you already have Draco." I said uncertainly.

"I've always wanted a little girl, though." Her eyes caught mine and I gulped. I took another bite of my banana bread for a diversion. "Don't you want children someday?"

I nodded quickly, perhaps too quickly as I swallowed. "Yes, well, someday... After I have a career set, and it's legal for us to adopt, sure." I took a sip of the coffee. "Before I came to Hogwarts I saw this girl get pregnant before she finished secondary school. She didn't have the time or money for University, and I couldn't understand why she decided to keep it when all she could get was a low-paying job that she was too intelligent for."

"Oh." Narcissa said, grimacing. "So you'd want to adopt in maybe five to ten years from now. I've just seen how Harry has been able to balance it all and thought maybe you'd enjoy having a child too."

I frowned at that. "Harry inherited his job and has a full-time stay at home mother. I could never be that, nor ask you to do that either. I mean, I would enjoy having a child someday, not anytime soon though. I mean, I'm still at Hogwarts for now. As for Harry, I'm not certain how he is going to explain to Teddy that he has three daddies and one mother outside of his biological parents."

"He may have lost his parents in the war, but my sister Andi is doing a great job alongside Harry and Draco in raising him." I cringed at that.

"Don't you think he'll be... confused... by having too many parents?"

"I don't think that there is anything wrong with having multiple people love you."

I cringed even more. "I don't get how Harry, Draco, and Ginny were in that... love triangle thing."

"Love is not always a simple thing, Hermione."

I scoffed at that. "It was easy enough for my parents."

"I doubt love is ever easy. Every relationship, even the most perfect one, has its own problems to overcome. For instance, don't you believe that you can love different people in different ways? Molly loves all of her children and her now ex-husband, right?"
"I suppose so."

"Then why can't someone romantically love more than one person? Just like how a parent can love more than one child."

"That's not how it is supposed to work, though. You love one person, with all of your heart, and there's no room for another."

"Oh, Hermione. You know I love Severus, and I love you."

"But you're not 'in love' with Sev because... you're a lesbian."

"True, but he offered to elope with me in order to break my arranged marriage with Lucius back at Hogwarts. I turned him down because I knew my parents wouldn't ever allow it since he was too far below my station as a poor half-blood. Severus was willing to marry Cissy? This must have been after Lily."

"Well I know for a fact that Severus is never going to break us up, and he has been your best friend for a long time, I get why you might kind-of have love for him."

"We've been through so much together; I will always want him to be in my life. To share in my joys, console each other's sorrows, whatever may come."

"Yeah, but you don't want sex with him, right?" I asked, and she could only burst out laughing at the thought of that. "See? That's different than three people trying to be a couple; jealousy will invariably get in the way and you'll choose one over the other." I looked at my watch, realizing we were almost about to run late. "Grab your drink, we gotta get to class on time." We made our way out of the coffee shop and started towards Regulation, which was only a block away.

Narcissa followed my direction, albeit puzzled. "Hermione Granger-Black, is our first official date going to be in a classroom? I heard you were a bookworm, but."

"It's actually at the shop where I got the equipment for our play room, which I hope to re-create in our next home. I hope Hunter is there... I'd love for him to meet Cissy."

Narcissa's jaw dropped as she gasped in surprise. "Our next home? Planning on sticking around then, Mrs. Granger-Black?" There was an appreciative yet seductive tone as she said that, and I blushed.

"Absolutely, wife. Now don't distract me too much in class now, okay? I'd like to learn new things to do to you." I said, winking at her as I opened the door for her to enter the BDSM shop and I could have sworn I heard her giggle in delight.

Narcissa's eyes went wide as she took in the store. Muggles enjoy sadomasochism as well, and they do it without magic... Her face was starting to hurt from the grin as a cute and scantily clad man approached them. A cursory glance informed her that not only did he work here, but he wasn't interested in either of the women. Or women in general.

"Hermione! How is Sparta, Princess?" The man bowed courteously. Princess? Am I supposed to curtsy back?

"Greetings, Hunter! I have but one loyal subject, but that's all I need." Hermione play-acted the part
of royalty and it made Narcissa titter in humor.

"This is your wife, huh?" Hunter said, looking the older woman over. "My... aren't you just fab! If she's Hermione, daughter of King Menelaus, does that make you Orestes or Neoptolemus?" Hunter asked, his eyes twinkling. Narcissa thought about the Greek mythology and decided to go with Aeschylus' Eumenides and The Libation Bearers.

"Well, since Orestes went mad due to his family but recovered while Neoptolemus was a ginger who gets killed by Orestes... I guess I'm the first one." Narcissa replied, enjoying the witty banter.

Hunter's eyebrows shot up happily at that. "And Sir said I'd never use my Literature degree here at work. Tell me, do you have a Pylades in your life, too?"

She thought about it and nodded, thinking of Severus. "Best friend for over three decades."

Hunter's face lit up at that. "You don't look that much older than Hermione, though. Did you like her dungeon setup, Mrs...?"

Narcissa's face split into a grin. "Granger-Black. But please, call me Cissy."

"Granger-Black..." His face went from a huge smile to confusion. "Your parents were dentists, right?"

"Um, yeah, they gave up their practice over a year ago..." She saw their eyes met as recognition flashed before them.

"They don't need to know I'm into-" Hunter began to stammer.

"-same here. Secret's safe with me. I heard of a gay couple my parents knew, but didn't make the connection." Hermione said, blushing.

Narcissa decided to cut in and save them from the embarrassment. "We're here for a class?" She prompted, pointing vaguely around in hopes to get directions.

Hunter nodded at that. "Yeah, BoundRopeJam, TNG, and Hitchin' Bitches are in the back room. Fill out this legal release form first, please."

After signing the paperwork declaring that we weren't going to hold them liable nor contact the police for whatever we see happen, I lead Narcissa past a wall of leather harnesses and strap-ons, trying to stay focused on the task at hand rather than dwell on the fact that the man who sang a musical to me about BDSM was friends with my parents. The room opened up to have a small platform that was circled in chairs as various people were in various states of undress while others were pulling out lengths of rope from bags and untying them.

"Rope bondage, Hermione? Our first date is a rope bondage class?" Narcissa said, kissing me on the cheek. "I am the luckiest witch in all Britain."

I directed her to a pair of open seats at the far end of the room and pulled two lengths of Japanese silk rope out of my purse, one the color of emeralds and the other of midnight sapphire. "I think we're both pretty lucky. Not all of our dates have to be like this; we can attend galas, go to charity events, and see some operas if you want."

Narcissa's cheeks were red. "There is no way that this moment could be any more perfect."
I took that like a challenge. "If you're good, we can have ice-cream and spankings later."

"I'll be real good, Miss." She replied suggestively.

A buxom brunette cleared her throat for attention to start the class. "Hello everyone, I'm Nona and I'm the leader of Hitchin' Bitches, and today is a mixer between my group, the 18-35 group 'The Next Generation', also known as TNG, and another rope group, BoundRopeJam. Today we're going to go over basic ties and rope safety. Does everyone have a partner to practice on?" She looked around and nodded. "Good, I'll introduce you to my demo bottom for today as soon as she gets out of the restroom..." I craned my head to look, and saw the back side of a blonde girl clad only in red lacy boy-shorts as she stepped her way up to the platform in the middle of the room. *She's half naked*, I thought, as she turned and I saw...

"This is Denton, and I should remind you that photography is strictly prohibited here." There was a few chuckles of dismay as my wife whispered into my ear.

"This the girl you met on your birthday?" My eyes were wide in shock as my wife gave an over-exuberant wave hello and muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "Nice rack, I can see why you got sloshed and snogged her."

"Ummm... yeah?" I muttered sheepishly. I couldn't help but notice her breasts now, as the nipples weren't covered with tassels like they had been in the bar that night.

"I'm not jealous, if that's what you're worried about. I know you love me deep down, and are loyal to making our family work." My heart swelled with pride from her adulation. *Focus, Granger.*

"...those are your pulse points, do not ever wrap a rope completely around them unless you want to lose that limb from lack of circulation. Always check on your bottom, feel to see if they get cold, or if the skin turns purple or if they complain about tingling or numbness." Nona said, as she unwound a coil of rope and had Denton's arms out and ready. "First I'm going to show you a basic single-column tie. Find the mid-point of your length of rope, we're going to call that the bight, and hold it up."

My rope was already marked in the middle so it was easy enough for me as I noticed others were checking me and my wife out, including Denton. *Did she remember me saying I was married? No, I wiped her memory of that night.* I might have said something the first time we got drunk together, though...

Cissy had her arm out as I copied the lark's head and began winding the rope around her wrist. "Oh, it's soft."

"Of course. No need to make something hurt unnecessarily." She bit her lip as she looked at me shyly. Holding the rope tight with my left hand, I lifted her chin up and kissed her quickly as the Compulsion sent waves of pleasure through us.

"You two paying attention or snogging?" Nona asked, and I held out the tie on her wrist to prove that we were following directions. "Oh, well done." My hands, however, gravitated to touch and stroke her skin and the chemistry between us seemed to flare our passions for each other. *I'm not entirely certain that it was the Compulsion after all.*

"Now you take the two ends and make loops, and slide under the rope wrapped around their wrist and tie it off. The type of knot doesn't really matter, as much as some of you might think. It's all about the wrapping and how the rope works against itself, not the actual knots being used."
I tied off the knot, seeing just enough slack around the wrist so there wasn’t any worry of losing circulation as I pulled on the length of rope, proud of what I did. "More fulfilling than just using Relashio." I whispered to Cissy.

"What did the instructor call herself? Nona?" I thought about it, and nodded.

*Spinner of the thread of life...* I thought, remembering the woman from Roman mythology. *This has to be a coincidence.*

"Did everyone get that okay? Good, now let’s try this same idea but on two wrists at once. The first knot was a single column tie, so this one is a double column tie. First we’ll make a lark's head with the bight just like before..." Nona instructed as she tied up Denton's wrists. I undid the first tie on Cissy's wrists, savoring every brush of skin to skin contact as I began on the new one. Judging from her own reactions, she enjoyed every touch as well.

I followed Nona's directions, but after I had the first part of the two-column tie done, I went ahead and took the excess length of rope and wound it around the ropes between the wrists in order to tighten them instead of going under the coil of rope.

"Oh that's brilliant." Narcissa replied, her heavy eyes gazing upon me.

Apparently I was a step ahead of the class as Nona pointed out that I must have had a natural talent in this. Narcissa, having both of her hands tied and I playfully tugged her closer to me moaned meaningfully as she curled up on me.

"It's like you were born to do quite a few amazing things." Narcissa said, her eyes glazed over as if hit with the Imperious Curse.

"And that's the look of being rope drunk. Better hold onto your girl, give her really good aftercare to keep her endorphins from crashing. Now let’s go ahead and switch partners, while Denton and I will go around and help make sure you got your ties down right."

I undid the double column tie, holding the rope up for Cissy to try doing to me. She shook her head, blushing. "I'm yours and only want you tying me up, not the other way around."

Denton approached us and Narcissa turned to face her, polite Slytherin smile in place.

I had Narcissa sit on the ground as I started to do a double-column tie on her ankles while attempting to start a conversation as if this were a normal thing. "Hello Denton. I thought you were single."

"I could say the same for you." It struck me how odd it was that I could have a conversation with her entirely topless and it seemed normal here. A few other people were somewhat undressed as well, which seemed to work for doing the ties and the body harnesses. The tips of my fingernails trailed up her slender calves as my wife restrained the urge to kick outward. *Ooh. She's ticklish...* I looked back to Denton but saw something just behind her as a body harness was being done.

"Did that man just put a knot right over her clitoris?" I asked, amazed.

Denton chuckled. "Wow, you must be new if you don't know the 'happy knot'. As for Nona, I'm just kind volunteering so I can get tied up a little. Who is your lovely companion here?"

Ankles now tied together, my wife was still able to sit in an almost regal way as she extended her hand. "I'm her wife, Narcissa."

Denton took a double take, awkwardly reaching out and shaking Cissy's hand. "I guess you two
have an open sort of relationship?"

I frowned at that. "No-" I started to say.

"-It's complicated, but for all intents and purposes, sure. She's still having to come to terms that my son is dating her best friend and his girlfriend. Well, his ex-girlfriend."

Denton backed off, trying to gauge if there was conflict. "Your son is old enough to date her best friend?"

"She nearly broke his nose when he was 13. He deserved it, though."

"Wow. I guess you two have some stuff to discuss."

Cissy smiled, and I couldn't tell if it was a friendly smile. "Oh, I know all about her snogging you on her birthday, and again at a pub. She didn't tell you about me, though?"

I scowled at my wife. "I thought it would make things more awkward by trying to explain it all."

"Hot ones are always straight, taken, or crazy." She muttered under her breath. "Hermione, you should have been honest up front. I've dated women who were in other relationships before; I just don't want to get accused of being a home-wrecker... which usually happens if she hides the fact she's married from me. I'm going to just... go now." Denton walked away as I felt ashamed of the situation.

"Well fuck a duck." I cussed as I started doing a new double column tie on her wrists, plotting to tie the two together as a hog-tie.

"You should have just said you were married in the first place." Narcissa replied flippantly.

"Doesn't really matter. I felt nothing when I kissed her, remember?"

"Do you feel something when you kiss me?" She asked, as I tied the wrists to the ankles, and she still pulled off looking svelte while sitting on the floor.

"Always." I said, leaning over to kiss her. I could almost tell that her pulse had gone up as our lips parted for the barest brush of tongues.

As we pulled away, a strange bit of movement had me looking back to the woman who was tied in a full body harness, and her face was contorted as her face itched and she begged her partner to scratch for her. Narcissa saw it too and giggled at that.

"Oh, that's got to be the absolute worst." I looked at my wife, realizing that there were many different ways to be sadistic to someone.

"You think that's the worst situation to be in? Aren't you ticklish?" Her eyes opened in horror as I grinned knowingly and had her at my mercy.

Draco was holding vigil at his boyfriend Harry's hospital bed when Severus and William finally entered the room, nervously carrying a bag that looked too dark to be blood. What's that?

"Alright, Draco, you might not want to be here for this." William said cautiously, "Harry, we have a treatment for you that should save your life. But um, we need to have you consent to this."

"Godfather, what is that?" Draco asked as Harry was still half-asleep.
"It's a potion that will save his life." Severus said curtly, "Now please vacate the room."

Harry lifted his head slightly, his face and skin grey as death. "wha... what is... it."

Severus' face was completely neutral as he stared down his godson. "Let me save him."

Draco's gaze went from Severus to William Granger, who pointedly looked away. "He's avoiding Legilimency? What kind of potion is this?!"

His grandfather was the one to crack first. "We were going to tell Harry and let him decide... just not tell you. It's the Brimstone potion."

He had heard something about this potion before, but couldn't recall exactly what it was. Harry, however, spoke up.

"What... is it?"

Severus turned to face Harry. "It will temporarily make you super-human both physically and magically... at the cost of overall life expectancy. I've used it once before and lost a few months in order to survive the last war. You've cleared the poison in your system; now we're attacking any vampire toxins you have and bypassing Bellatrix's curse that is preventing you from healing as fast as you should."

"How will this potion work? Aunt Bella crafted her wounds to reject any attempts at healing."

William spoke up as well. "It won't get attacked by Lestrange's magic because this potion is recognized as Dark, so there's a significant chance that you will be completely healed."

Draco understood what was going on, but still felt like there was a missing piece here. "What aren't you saying?"

William responded to that. "Harry could lose up to eighty-five years, but he would survive. He will die within 24 hours if we do nothing."

Draco gaped at that. "Eighty-five? That would mean..."

Severus cut in. "he would still live out a long life and die of old age fifty years from now."

William added a bit of hope. "The potion could also heal him entirely and he could lose almost no time from his total longevity. Harry, this is your call."

Harry gulped, nodding painfully. "Do it."

Draco held Harry's hand while William hooked up the intravenous line to the opposite arm. Severus began to strap Harry into his hospital bed, causing alarm from his godson.

"He might flinch and want to remove the needle." Harry nodded, understanding the need for this.

"Is the potion going to hurt?" Harry asked, his eyes meeting Snape's. The older man swallowed, eyes clouded in memory. Draco had never seen him work so hard to hide his emotions.

"-yes."

William Granger began administering the medicine, and the room seemed unnaturally quiet as it appeared that nothing was happening. The crimson-red potion began to drip into the line as it slowly crawled its way into the Boy Who Lived. *May he live even longer,* Draco prayed.
The line of red finally hit his veins and Harry flinched slightly, then relaxed. "Oh, it's just a little warm. This doe-" Harry's eyes shot open in pain. "AAGH! FUCK!"

Draco's hand felt like it was being crushed in Harry's, and fought to get his own hand free. Draco paled when he saw Harry's irises bleed red like Voldemort's. "Godfather!" he gasped, his heart pounding adrenaline to make him want to run in fear.

"It is fine, his senses are heightened, but the shape is still human." Severus said, instilling calm. "If his irises were shaped like a goat, then we'd have problems. This discoloration will reverse."

Harry squirmed and hissed on the bed, the sound of the steel joints buckling under the restraints as the pain began to subside. "Draco... dra... I can see... I can see the wards. This room was 'Mione's doing?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah, Harry. She's a ruddy genius."

Harry's head trembled, as if he tried to nod as well. "I can see where the seams are, and why it works..." Harry closed his eyes, his body convulsing in large spasms. His eyes shot open wide as soon as the shudders stopped. "Severus, I wanna get up. I need to get up! Gotta... do something! Get me my firebolt! I wanna fly like this!" His body seemed to vibrate with energy, though the room was muting all magic.

William looked nervous as he checked Harry's neck for his pulse. "It's heavy, fast, like he's running a marathon. How come he can see magic in this room?"

Severus answered, using his voice to calm the Gryffindor as much as possible. "No magic spells, charms, or curses can be cast here, and already active magic will be weakened. The ability to see the magic is a passive skill given by the potion, so it's significantly weaker here than it would otherwise be."

Draco bit his lip, pondering what this meant. This was where they could -play- together, and 'Mione made it as a present to mother as a way to skirt the Compulsion. Was the Compulsion always active, then?

Narcissa couldn't think about anything but fucking her wife as soon as they got back to one of their rooms at Hogwarts. Her head was swimming in endorphins as Hermione apparated them back to Hogwarts. The ropes were gone, yet the warmth they imparted was still there as she snuggled against her wife.

"So apparently you hit a head-space tonight that is known to occur when the body releases a lot of endorphins, and I have to ensure that you don't crash later tonight. I read up on sub-space, I think I can do proper aftercare." Hermione cooed into the Slytherin's ear. Cissy shivered at that as the door closed behind them and she realized she was in her own room.

"I know something we can do that will keep my endorphins up..." Cissy replied, kicking off her heels as Hermione put down her bag. There was an undercurrent between them, she could tell, as delicate fingers unzipped the dress and traced all the way down to the small of her back, making Narcissa arch in desire.

Merlin, have me! Use me to pleasure you! Her body seemed to ache in need as her wife's lips kissed their way down, undoing the clasp to her bra and letting the dress fall to the ground. Hermione's fingers slid over Narcissa's hip and squeezed, pulling the older witch back into her wife's embrace. Instinctively, Cissy's hips rolled as she ground herself into her lover.
"I think I know exactly what you need." Hermione's wand flicked and conjured a blindfold, which she tied over the Slytherin's eyes. "Now let's review what I learned today..." Narcissa felt her hands being pulled behind her back and tied together with the double-column tie, then felt those familiar digits crook themselves around the waistband of her lacy pants she wore for her. Narcissa shuddered as she was helpless and felt them forced down and then slowly dragged across her thighs, baring her glistening sex to the open air in the room.

"Yes, I need you. I need this..." Cissy whispered frantically as Hermione's wand-tip pressed against her labia, casting a subtle lubrication charm that wasn't ever taught in class.

"You need me to fuck you, don't you?" Hermione cooed, standing close enough so her wife's fingers grazed against the warmth of her own arousal. As the blonde tried to answer, Hermione's fingers went steadily in and felt her wife's vagina clench as she gasped. It was as though they were well attuned to each other as she curled her fingers up to find the spot that affected her most, causing Narcissa to shudder with each stroke.

Hermione's wand-tip pressed down and circled her most sensitive spot, making her wife's thighs clench and quiver as her back arched, whimpering and half-muffled moans enticing the Gryffindor to work her fingers in deeper. Putting her wand down, Hermione slips her left hand through her wife's hair and tugs it just enough to get her attention.

"Wha? Please don't stop, please..." Hermione directed Cissy to move, and the older witch shuffled at her wife's direction until she was stopped and bent over at the waist, face buried in a pillow. Okay, just don't stop please... Narcissa realized that she must have been bent over the back of the sofa in her teaching quarters, and that her wife was considerate enough to summon over a pillow for her comfort. She could feel her body begin to pulse against the fingers inside her and rocked into it, expecting the orgasm to crash through her when Hermione instead withdrew her fingers. Narcissa's naked quim shook with need, how could she be this cruel to me?

"Why did you st-" she panted, her arms shaking as well now.

"Want me to continue?"

"Yes, Mistress, yes..." Cissy could barely register the sound that Hermione was licking her fingers and moaning as well, just before sliding back inside her completely as she made a slow quarter turn and gasped as she realized that her wife had all four fingers inside her now. "More, more... I want all of you... please..."

A dark chuckle came from her wife's throat as Cissy felt pressure inside herself as Hermione got past the knuckles and could feel that the thumb was folded inside. Hermione stilled her hand as the Slytherin made every attempt to relax and not clench against the invading fist. "Patience, wife..." Hermione rasped as a distant part of Narcissa's mind told her that sitting might be painful for the next few days.

The Gryffindor took a slow and deliberate pace as she pulled out slightly and went further in, the joint in her thumb being the last barrier as Narcissa's own juices were running down her thighs. She pushed in, then out, and again. She kept this up until her whole hand went in and she kissed Narcissa's shoulder blade in victory, chuckling softly.

"We did it. I'm entirely inside." Narcissa was out of her mind in bliss, stretched beyond her wildest dreams and incoherently babbling out her pleasure. Hermione took the moment and cast the vibration charm on her wand again and held it against the Slytherin's clit, working her hand back and forth that went from tender lovemaking to frantic and rough copulation in a matter of minutes.
Hermione seemed to revel that she had this witch tied up and completely at her mercy, and her only job would be to come over and over again, so her wife could savor her cries of orgasm. "Come," she demanded with a throaty growls, pounding with her fist; Narcissa whimpered as her wife's words were a catalyst to her own undoing.

"Oh, fuck... OH, FUCK!" she exclaimed as she collapsed into the sofa, her face burrowing into the pillow as an unbelievable orgasm raked through her on command. Hermione kept her hand inside while her other hand deliberately pinched the clitoris through the hood, determined to bring Narcissa yet again. It didn't take long as the blonde couldn't help herself and her body crested and exploded as waves of pleasure ran over both of them, Hermione using her wand to untie the rope that had Narcissa's wrists bound behind her back.

Though shaky and trembling, Narcissa's hands had clawed and back of the sofa and held it in a vice-like grip. She gulped, panted, and took a few shaky breaths as she tried to stand up straight. Her legs and thighs seemed to be non-responsive as she began to laugh at the sight of herself. "You... you.. are a hor-horrible, cruel, and won-wonderful woman."

Hermione took off her jacket and top, slipped off her boots and leggings, and cast a cleansing charm on herself as she divested herself to be completely naked as she stood over her wife and got her eye contact. "How are you feeling?" She licked her middle finger and firmly put it over her hood and worked a tight, small circle. The Gryffindor's eyes were locked on Narcissa's, and it didn't require Legilimancy for the older witch to understand the unspoken command.

Cissy bit her lip as she turned to fully face her wife, licking her lips in anticipation as Hermione conjured a wooden chair to sit in and the Slytherin went down to her knees in order to lick her way up her wife's thighs. The sensation of Cissy's delicate fingers caressing her head with eager anticipation sent a thrill through her as she kissed her way up to her lover's quim.

"Good girl," Hermione coaxed, sliding her way down to sit at the edge of the chair, "now frig me with your tongue." Narcissa seemed to almost purr at that, obediently lapping and pushing into her lover's folds with her tongue, savoring the scent and taste as she pushed her tongue in and curled up to flick against the bottom part of the clitoris.

"...cissa..." Hermione moaned in supplication as the Slytherin eagerly worked her tongue in and out of the labia and slowly slipped two fingers in, enjoying the snug fit as her wife's walls closed in around her. "Fuck!" Hermione gasped at the surprising speed that Narcissa's fingers had as she claimed her, and her automatic clenching around them nearly drove her over the edge in an instant.

Bucking her hips in time with Narcissa's rhythm, Hermione couldn't focus on the fact that she was too tight for any more fingers. She felt her own moisture leak and pool on the wooden chair and start to trickle back towards her bum; she didn't need any lubricant for this and wished she had a towel under her bum. Hermione realized she was needy to a point that defied language, that words couldn't express adequately how much she needed her wife, and Narcissa felt that need within herself and how much she needed to be the one to get her off right then and there.

Hermione's hands let go of Narcissa's head and the blonde came up, gasping for air. Once she managed to catch her breath, she found herself getting kissed by 'Mione as her fingers and thumb pounded away both inside her and on her sensitive nub. She could feel the orgasm building from just the kiss between them, and it spurred the submissive to work harder and faster in order to get her Mistress off as fast and as hard as possible.

At that, Hermione pulled away from the kiss and arced her head upwards, body overloaded as she silently screamed her orgasm and felt her wife's greedy lips eagerly suckling at the swollen clitoris as her fingers kept curling over the same spot inside the Gryffindor with definitive forcefulness. It
wasn't until Hermione's hands forcibly shoved her wife's mouth off of her did Cissy finally cease pleasuring her.

The smell of sex and sweat filled the room, and neither woman wanted to move away from each other as Cissy's head rested on her wife's thigh, content as she felt Hermione's fingers shakily attempt to stroke her hair in a soothing fashion.

"Can I... uh... spend the night here?" Hermione asked breathlessly, "I don't think I can make it back to my room."

At that, Narcissa nodded, and tried to get up only to collapse and roll onto the floor and she started to laugh. Hermione looked down at Cissy as the laughter became infectious and she began to laugh as well.

"Sure, 'Mione... I don't think I can get up. Just summon me the pillow and blanket and I'll sleep right here." Narcissa said, her laughter breaking down into a quiet chuckle.

"Merlin! Did I shag you so senseless you can't get up?" Hermione said, trying to sit up in the wooden chair. "Oh god, that feels bruised."

At that, Narcissa cackled even harder, though it hurt her stomach. "Don't complain! You had your entire hand in me, witch!" The two of them were giddy in their post-orgasmic glow as Hermione stood from the chair, legs visibly shaking as if she weren't certain she could actually stand. Hermione stifled laughter as she saw her wife struggle with standing and walking.

"Come on, Cissy, let's crawl into bed." Hermione reached down towards her wife. "I'll lend you..." she chortled, fighting the laughter inside her, "a hand!"

Narcissa laughed so hard, she wound up curling into a fetal position from her stomach muscles doubling her over. "Stop it... I need..." she gasped, "to breathe." Cissy rolled onto her hands and knees and looked around. "Legs... nope." She muttered to herself as she started to crawl her way back to the bedroom.

Hermione staggered beside her and made sure the door was open as they went and collapsed into the bed together, her head resting on the Slytherin's chest, falling asleep to the sound of the blonde's heartbeat. Narcissa could tell by the change in breathing that her wife was out to the world around them as she kissed her forehead, glad that they had a great night together. "I love you so much, Hermione," she whispered into the night, "I love you."
Fleur was at the the Granger-Black Hospital to check on Severus, since he still had not returned to Hogwarts and Minerva was getting a bit anxious. As she made her way in, William Granger gasped in horror at her sight before schooling his face into professional neutrality. He had heard of the veela, but had not expected such an avian face.

"You must be Fleur; Hermione told me how you have fought bravely in the war and since then. Call me William."

Fleur flinched at the name, blinking back tears that she didn't know she had anymore. "I would rather not, Doctor Granger. Bill is my late husband's name."

William's face puckered like he had sucked on a lemon. "My condolences, I didn't know."

Fleur shrugged away the apology. "It's okay; lots of people died. At least he went down fighting."

The pause threatened to become the long and awkward kind. "Where is Severus?"

William pointed down the hallway. "He said he wanted to get some rest, be on-hand if there were any complications with Harry and the Brimstone Potion."

"Ce putain de crétin, se prendre pour Dieu!" Fleur cursed, ready to steam down the hallway. William's hand grabbed her arm for a split second before relinquishing it. He had his hands up to prove he was unarmed as she extinguished the fireball that had instantly formed in her left hand.

"Sorry, but... Harry survived. Draco is taking care of him. It worked out okay."

The Veela grimaced at the idea of using an Infernal-class potion to heal The Golden Boy, but was glad to hear that he had survived. "What..." she choked up, "what was the cost?"

William smiled at that. "He must be the luckiest man alive... Harry Potter only lost two weeks." Only two weeks? That potion has been known to eat up months and even years of someone's life!

"Harry is resting now?" William nodded, pointing down the hall to where he was asleep. "Severus is just across the hall, but I'm fairly certain he's fast asleep for the next six hours. He took something so he could forego sleep yesterday and he said it would catch up to him today."

Fleur thanked him and made her way down the hall and into the makeshift break room, surprised to see Severus so soundly asleep. I won't even bother to try and wake him, he actually looks peaceful for once. Instead Fleur conjured a blanket and covered him with it, feeling a tug at her heart as she saw his perpetual scowl melt away to a look of peacefulness.

I've seen you crack the barest smile, Severus. Fleur was set on seeing him be truly happy someday as she curled up on the floor by him, stealing one of the cushions and using it as a pillow at his feet and
using her remaining wing to cover herself for warmth.

I woke up refreshed and with the softest skin under my fingertips, and leaned forward to gently kiss the shoulder that was spooning in front of me. "Good Morning, Cissy." She arched and turned slightly towards me, her breast getting cupped by my hand as we pecked a quick kiss on the lips. There was a short chirp and Crookshanks was on the bed, walking his way up to me and began to knead on my stomach. I tightened my core muscles as he happily 'made biscuits' there. "Crooks? How did you get in here?" He ignored me as he kept going, moving up towards my breasts. Damned cat, doesn't he get he's a heavy kitty now?

"Floo network, I guess."

"Then he can go back to his other room and leave us be. It's Saturday and I want to sleep in." I pushed Crookshanks off of me, and he meowed dejectedly as he curled up at our feet instead.

"There's an exhibition match between Hogwarts' two inter-house teams today."

Fuck quidditch. I'd rather just stay in bed and cuddle with you. "Hmm. That's nice." I moved my head closer to her and nipped her neck with my teeth. "This is better."

She moaned, turning her head to expose her neck more. "You're right, it is better. It's like you know where all of my spots are..."

"I'm a fast learner," I whispered into her ear, my teeth grazing on the outer rim of her ear, "as you can see, I like to always go for an O."

Cissy guffawed at the terrible pun-turned-double entente, shaking her head slightly. I enjoyed the sound of her laughter and the spill of her hair on the pillows. "You know, for such a learned woman, I wondered why you gave up on Divination. I quite enjoyed it."

I kissed the back of her head once again. "Trelawney is a hack, trying to pull off an air of mysticism when all she can do is peddle her snake-oil. Heck, I don't even think Seers and prophecies are absolute. Fate can be changed."

Narcissa rocked her buttocks against me absently. "Elladora Black was supposedly a Seer. She never married and was always a bit odd, but her weather predictions always rang true."

"Well it's easy when you predict it's going to rain when you see a lot of dark clouds in the sky. That's muggle science telling you that the rain is coming. What happened to her? Some accident she never saw coming?"

"Actually she went mad, rambled something about a Harbinger that would save our family. It's recorded in the family spellbook I gave you."

I mentally shrugged at that. "Haven't gotten that far through it, then."

"Well dear, as much as I would love to stay in bed all day, I need to use the loo." Narcissa said, sitting up and summoning a dressing gown to put on as she got out of bed.

"You don't have to be shy on my behalf." I said lecherously, wandlessly flicking up the bottom of her gown so I could see her bum.
"Ah! 'Mione!" She playfully chastised as she made her way to the bathroom. Had she put on a little weight? I couldn't tell and shrugged it off. She still looked completely amazing to me and I wasn't sure how I was ever this lucky to have her. Running my tongue along my teeth, I knew I needed to brush before I kissed my wife again. I got out of bed and stretched luxuriously, the wooden floor cold beneath my feet as I waited for her to be done in there.

"So who is your date tonight?" I asked, trying to plan what I'd wear to the Halloween Gala.

"Severus. He hates this day ever since... well, he's going to get pissed and I don't want him to drink alone." The anniversary of Voldemort's first defeat is also the anniversary of Lily's death.

I looked around my wife's room, my attention caught on a Galleon. It was glowing. "Cissy, why do you have one of my contact galleons?"

Her voice was muffled but came through the door. "Huh? Oh, I asked around after you made the knuts and I found a spare one."

There weren't any spare coins, though. This had to belong to a deceased D.A. member. It had to be Neville's, Dean's, or Leanne's coin. I looked to see the message that was appearing on it.

Proudfoot in Ministry. -KB

"Narcissa, hurry up. I think we might be needed at the Ministry." I focused on last night's activities to form a Patronus, but excruciating pain shot through my right wrist that had me fall to my knees, and I couldn't be certain if I were screaming or not. It was worse than Crucio, if it could be believed. My vision tunneled, and I was glad to see my wrist wasn't broken nor bleeding, though it felt like it had been. A dull ache went through my knees and I realized that I must have fallen hard.

"Hermione! Are you okay?" Narcissa asked, her hand barely touching my back. The pain exploded through my wrist and the sore throat told me that I was indeed screaming as pressure banded around my wrist. What on earth is going on? I rolled onto the floor so I could look up at my wife, who was in a dressing gown and had her wand out with a fearful look on her face.

"What is it?" I asked, the crushing sensation now reduced to a dull thud.

"I can't seem to cast a diagnostic charm on you!" She said, panicking.

"Just get me a pain-relieving potion, please!" I begged, cradling my right wrist to my chest. I moaned as the painful throbbing continued but the room had gone silent.

"Hermione, I can't cast anything. Lumos! LUMOS!" Her voice went hysterical at that. "Salazar's whore, I can't... I'm not a squib! Come on, sparks are easy... no, no no nooo..."

Instinctively, I reached my right hand out and summoned the potion. It smacked into my palm and I downed it instantly. Relief flooded through my body as Narcissa's floo ignited and Severus' head popped in. "Cissy!" I exclaimed, and she pulled the sheets from the bed to cover up my nudity. His face seemed contorted in pain as well, but was probably handling it better since he was tortured more often than I was.

"Okay, the Floo Network is also working! Turn on the Wizarding Wireless! We're going to confine all students to their common rooms." His head flew back out as fast as it came in. He must be sending word to all of the professors.

Narcissa pointed her wand to her Wireless but nothing happened, and she had to get up and manually turn the knobs on for it to come to life. The voice was much more panicked and stuttering
than I had heard when St. Mungo's was attacked.

"...THIS IS AN EMERGENCY... UH... BROADCAST FROM THE MIN-
MINIST...MINISTRY OF M-MMAA-MAGIC. PUH-PLEASE DO NOT SEND ANY MORE
OWLS TO REPORT THE LACK OF MAGIC IN YOUR AREA, THE ENT-ENTIRE
COUNTRY SIDE HAS BEEN AFFECTED! A-APP-APPROXIMATELY TWE-TWENTY
MINUTES AGO, DEMENTORS WERE SEEN POURING OUT OF AZKABAN AT AN
UNNATURAL SPEED AND BYPASSING-BRISTOL-TO-THE-SOUTH... ST-STOPPING AT
ST-STO-STONEHENGE. IT IS THOUGHT THAT THERE IS A CONNECTION BETWEEN
KINGDOM HAS BEEN... UM... SQUIBBED."

The announcer was doing this live, and the fear and horror was evident in his voice.

"EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, UH... C-CURFEW IS IN EFFECT. PLEASE STAY IN
YOUR HOMES 'TILL FURTHER NOTICE. PUH -PLEASE REMAIN CALM, AND TO
REMAIN ON THE, I MEAN, INDOORS... BASIC SYSTEMS ARE STILL OPERATING,
BUT NOBODY SEEMS TO BE ABLE TO- OH MERLIN, I DON'T WANT TO DIE, I DON'T
WANT TO DIE- DEMENTORS ARE SWARMING THE COUNTRYSIDE, AND UH...
NOBODY CAN CAST ANY MAGIC! THIS IS AN EMERGENCY BROADCAST FROM
THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC. I-I CAN'T CHARM THIS TO REPEAT... UM... OH GOD!"

There was a crackling sound as something exploded wherever the microphone was, and the wireless
went to loud static.

Narcissa looked at me in shock as I rubbed my right wrist. "What?"

"You summoned that vial." She placed her wand into my hand. "Light up the room."

The room lit up as I cast Lumos, and I dropped the wand in shock. I can cast spells?

Returning Cissy's wand to her, I tapped the communication knut behind my left ear.

"Severus, I am still able to do magic. What about you?" My ear popped as his voice came in.

"I am; but only my left hand. I thought it had to do with the Dark Mark, Draco?" Background noise
of fighting and yelling came through next.

"Yeah, my arm felt like it exploded and I couldn't cast with my right hand, so I took a chance and
tried my left."

Putting it together, I tapped out a quick message on the contact galleon, 'Watch for Trixymort, DE.
Proudfoot Imperioused. -HG'

"Proudfoot under the Imperious Curse? This is bloody ominous..." she muttered, pulling her P-90 out

"It's the only thing that makes sense; unless he switched sides willingly."

"He'd die first. Lucius wanted to see if I could seduce him back in the first war. I willingly failed that
task."

Draco's voice returned, voice thready with panic. "I'm sending Aunt Andi, Teddy, and Harry to
Hogwarts. Sev, 'Mione, grab any guns you have. Cormac is pretty certain Aunt Bella is... oh, just got Sev's Patronus. Mother, defend Hogwarts, protect my boyfriend and his god-son."

Narcissa nodded, wincing slightly as she got up. "Are you okay?" I asked, worrisome.

"Sorry, I feel really sore this morning; it hurts to sit, squat, and stand up." She didn't sound too upset over that though.

"So I did a good job last night, right?" I smirked as I asked.

Narcissa frowned as she looked at her limited ammo. "No time to flirt, my love. Herpy! Get Hermione a change of clothing and her tactical robes."

The diminutive elf popped into existence almost instantly, carrying the clothing in one hand and a box in the other. "Headmaster said you might need something with 'more kick', Mistress."

I saw the paintball pellets were red instead of the normal color. "I don't think these are sleeping potions."

"Conflagration Potion. Immolation upon impact." Narcissa replied, "Sev made these specifically to kill the undead." She loaded them into her rifle. "We're not taking any chances now. Be careful."

Severus had activated the suits of armor to protect the school just as Hermione joined him just outside the front doors by the Great Hall. He saw Hermione's message in the Galleon and agreed with her assessment.

"Proudfoot being turned may be the only explanation for why he is working with them. And as Harry so eloquently stated, no Auror would willingly betray the Ministry. Fairly certain they are charmed to resist betraying."

Hermione saw the Galleon and was surprised. "How did you get one of those?"

"Neville." He stated simply. Hermione frowned.

"We need to get to the Ministry." Hermione said, shoving her remorse aside. As the pair of them made their way downstairs and out of the castle, suits of armor raised a hand in salute to the Headmaster.

"Can't believe Minerva got to enchant the Guardians before me."

"Severus, I saw what you gave my wife... thank you." He nodded stiffly. "I also heard you offered to propose in order to keep her and Lucius apart."

"If you are worried, rest assured I have no such amorous designs upon her. She is family to me, and I will go to considerable lengths to protect her."

"Do you have any for Fleur?" His lips pressed thin in frustration.

"Not you too. If you're going to engage me in this mindless girl prattle, should I expect us to braid each other's hair and charm our fingernails different colors?"

She smiled at that, and Severus remembered that she had some of her wife's memories. Slytherin's Snake, she knows I'm doing this in order to distract her.

"You didn't mind the black nails when Cissy did it to you while you listened to 'Helter Skelter'. Why
do you avoid the topic? You two have gotten close and now it feels like it's a case where the lady doth protest too much."

"Have you forgotten her husband passed away recently?"

"Yeah well that's life. And we were in a war. Right now we all should be embracing any sliver of happiness we can have."

Severus' jaw clenched at that. "Take your own advice, Granger."

"I am. Why do you think I spent the night with my wife?"

"Good. She deserves to be happy. As for why I am showing restraint with Fleur, people I love have a habit of winding up dead. Better to deny my heart and not tempt fate."

"Of all the asinine things to - you're breaking her heart out of some sense of nobility? You and Harry are just the same."

Severus was struck silent at that. He stated to open his mouth in reply but seemed to think better of it. The coin grew warm in his pocket and they both pulled out and checked them at the same time.

**Fenrir, Proudfoot here. No Bella. DA has guns. -DM**

"It was a full moon last night Sev, how is Greyback even conscious?"

"The moon has no sway over him anymore. He and his beast are one and the same. Neither of them can do magic, so I believe it should be relatively safe to apparate in."

"Except that the D.A. are using guns!" Hermione protested. Tapping her Galleon, she asked for a safe location to arrive. Within moments, Severus had her hand in his as they apparated into the Atrium.

His final thought as Hogwarts twisted away was that the delicate hand in his was the wrong one.

What had been an unusual morning had quickly devolved into bedlam for Draco. He had spent the night before with Harry, enjoying the side effects of the Brimstone Potion as he obediently straddled and rode his bed-strapped boyfriend. *Harry can get quite demanding when he's thinking with his cock.* After waking up and kissing his sleeping boyfriend, he felt mildly concerned at the fast-moving fog he saw outside the window. When his Dark Mark exploded with pain, he knew it wasn't just fog outside. He freaked out when he couldn't cast any protective wards, but had the crazy idea to use his left hand instead. When the spell worked, Draco's worst fears were confirmed.

*Only death eaters can cast spells.*

Draco had apparated to the Ministry to report the imminent attack to Cormac in the Auror office when the knut behind his left ear chirped to life. As he turned the corner, he saw Hit Wizard Peasegood disemboweled and had written 'Proudfoot Imperioused' with his own blood in the floor.

*Good man, using his last moments to alert us about his attacker.*

When he was younger, Draco used to secretly envy Harry's adventures; riding on the back of a centaur, flying on the hippogriff, being in the triwizard tournament, undermining Umbridge and
teaching an underground DADA class, and befriending a werewolf.

Now, terror flooding through him as Greyback was indiscriminately slaughtering people, Draco wondered how Harry ever survived his childhood without massive mental and emotional trauma.

*Maybe we all are a bit traumatized,* Draco thought, trying to cast hexes with his left hand. He had a pistol in his right hand, loaded with rounds that were clear in color and seemed to have a glittery fluid inside. Cormac said to use these rounds on werewolves, and had an assortment of different colored paintball rounds in reserve.

Multiple clicks were heard as McLaggen and other DA members unloaded at the werewolf Fenrir Greyback.

There was an acrid smell on the air as Draco saw a wall splattered with the paintballs begin to bubble and dissolve. *Acid rounds?* He took a closer look and realized what the glitter was - silver shrapnel. *This will definitely kill werewolves, but possibly kill humans as well.*

Severus and Hermione made their way into the fray, taking cover behind the overturned desks as they assessed the situation. "Why are we cowering if they can't throw spells?" Hermione asked.

A MoM employee flew through the air overhead and Severus did his best cushioning charm as the witch slammed into the wall behind them. She was dazed, but otherwise alright.

"I believe there is your answer." Severus replied coldly, peering over the barrier. Draco had set up an impromptu protection ward that kept the werewolf out, but was not a full shield to keep everything out. McLaggen was able to see through a distant doorway and had his sights zeroed in as he popped off a few three round bursts at Fenrir.

"I'm out; could use a little help here!" Cormac called out as Katie handed him a new magazine and he slammed it home and worked the lever. Hermione slung a *Confringo* hex and it lobbed in a nice arc, blasting the doorway and part of the wall open so Cormac could have a better shot. Draco marveled at the strength of her spells until he realized she was lucky enough to be able to cast with her right hand.

"TRAITOR! KILL THE TRAITOR!" Draco's head spun around to see the witch that Severus had saved was now ineffectively trying to cast Dark Magic at him. *Sleepers, of course!* Draco's spellwork with his left hand left much to be desired, so he swapped out the red ammo for the standard sleeping charms and drew his weapon at her. As he had her in his sights, she had lunged towards Severus, attempting to grapple and physically beat him up.

"Shoot her, Draco!" Severus said, putting his wand away and blocking her punch as he side-stepped her. Severus' fist landed square on her nose, blossoming crimson as blood began to flow out of her.

"Get out of my shot!" Draco replied, fearful of shooting the wrong target. The bloody witch grappled with the Headmaster, screaming at the top of her lungs that he was a dirty blood traitor. Cormac's own rifle quit going off as Fenrir must have pulled back, but Katie noticed something coming from the opposite side of the split hallway.

"Switch to blue! Blue!" She had her own rifle up, the sleeping potions flying out with a puff of air at a semi-automatic pace as the rest of the group took in the fast-moving crowd of Ministry workers crashing like a wave upon the shore. *Proudfoot had been really busy at this, hadn't he?* Draco though as he slammed home the alternate magazine and began firing into the oncoming crowd, watching the bodies collapse as the sleeping potions took effect.
Ron had spent the night watching Lavender Brown transformed as a werewolf in the Ministry-provided cage. Once she turned back into human form, he politely turned his head away after tossing her a change of clothes to get into. She seemed exhausted as she was finally dressed, but her senses seemed jumpy and wanted to go get breakfast rather than sleep in. Judging from the clothing that she had him hand to her, these were indeed dates.

The two of them were in a lift to go to the cafeteria when the lift shuddered as an alarm went off. Despite the alarm, the lift continued on its way down without the witch's voice that described the various levels.

"I always wanted to know how to mute that." The silence didn't last long as the Minister's voice cut in.

"ALL AURORS AND HIT WIZARDS REPORT TO THE NINTH FLOOR! PROUDFOOT HAS BEEN SPOTTED WITH FENRIR GREYBACK. ALL OTHER EMPLOYEES ARE TO REMAIN CALM AND LOCK THEMSELVES IN THEIR OFFICES. PLEASE REMAIN CALM, AND WE WILL HAVE THIS SORTED OUT IN SHORT ORDER."

Ron and Lavender let go of each other's hands and pulled out their wands, giving each other meaningful looks. Both were a part of the D.A. but declined to join the Aurory after Cormac field-promoted all D.A. members into fully-fledged Aurors. There was no way an Auror written off as dead should have been able to just walk into the Ministry of Magic, much less with a Werewolf in tow. Ronald knew there had to be a traitor in the Ministry, perhaps this was one of those so-called 'unmarked' that Harry warned him of.

"Ron, I'm scared." Lavender said, "Last time Fenrir almost ate me and made me into this," She gestured at her face, "in my dreams, he used to promise to finish the job. Now he wants to mate with me in wolf form."

Ron's lips pressed against her forehead protectively. "I won't let him touch you." It made the youngest male Weasley feel right for a change. It had been awhile since he felt like the hero, and this was the first time he was doing something without Hermione and Harry since the Gryffindors chanted 'Weasley is our King' in his honor. The lift shuddered to a sudden stop, doors jerking open with an unusual squelch. They found themselves on the eighth floor and passed the now-rebuilt Fountain of Magical Brethren in the Atrium. They heard the unmistakable sounds of panic and screaming, but a lack of wand-fire. Probably for the best, lots of people trying to cast magic all in one place would cause a lot of accidents.

It wasn't until some witches rushed past them in order to get to the lifts in order to escape the Ministry that Ron realized that something was up. None of them had their wands out as their high-pitched voices all muttered something indecipherable to him.

"What were they going on about?" Ron asked as Lavender tried to cast the Hominem Revelio charm. She frowned as she apparently mis-aligned the spell and tried again, to no effect.

"Ron, I can't do magic."

"Lav, maybe try an easier spell?" Ron suggested uncomfortably. He didn't want to try a spell and confirm that he also couldn't cast anything.

"Ron! Fenrir is downstairs and I'm defenseless!" She ran back towards the lift and hit the button impatiently. "We need to get out of here!"

Grimacing, Ron attempted to shoot sparks out of his wand. Nothing came. The sense of impending
doom he was trying to ignore settled heavily on his heart as he, too, tapped the Lifts' call button repeatedly.

Fleur tapped the knut behind her left ear after she heard the commotion in the Ministry. "Severus, no visual contact on Trixymort?" She kept her eyes peeled and hands aflame at what once was Malfoy Manor, now the site for the new magical hospital. The pair of them had taken the floo network to secure the site as Viktor was pacing the top of the building, his rifle at a low ready with conflagration rounds loaded. He looked to her and she shook her head quickly.

"Keep firing, Miss Bell! Fleur? None whatsoever. She's not been a part of her attacks as of late, though. Maybe she's holed up somewhere, letting others do the dirty work." Severus replied.

Draco's voice cut in. "I don't think her tactics have changed that much; this feels like a feint. A really good feint, with all of Proudfoot's sleepers attacking us! Throwing garroting gas!"

Hermione could be heard next as a potion vial crashed in the distance, making the assailants cough and gag. "Agreed; the last time Severus went after the Dark Lord's remains, it was a trap. I'll check in with Angelina and Lee at Azkaban with the Galleons." Fleur wondered about that; if maybe they should have had at least one person with a communications knut for instant information. The Veela peered into the distance, her avian eyes fixated on the stationary fog that has lingered in the distance.

Viktor spoke up to her. "All is quiet here." He sneered as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. "Too quiet."

"You see any movement out there?" Viktor shook his head. "If they come, I set them on fire. Like Nazgûl." The former Quidditch star smiled at his Tolkien reference, and looked to see if Fleur understood.

"The Ulairi will burn at my hands if they get within range." Fleur and Viktor stood ready in the silence as time ticked on. Too much time has ticked on...

"Any response from Azkaban?" Fleur asked hesitantly. The silence lingered on.

"I can go check on them," Narcissa filled the void, "Hogwarts is secure enough and Herpy can pop me over there."

"No!" Severus replied automatically.

"You're protecting Harry! He's not one hundred percent yet, and you two can't do magic anyways!" Draco interjected.

"I forbid it, wife. Stay where you are," Hermione said with finality. Can she actually do that, order Narcissa and make her obey? "I'll go; I'll stay disillusioned-"

"Bloody hell, step-mum, take the cloak!" Draco said, and Fleur understood that they were next to each other in the Ministry.

"Okay, if I don't respond within two minutes, everyone but Cissy converge at the south shore of Azkaban. Use my House-Elf, Fleur."

"But 'Mione!" Narcissa exclaimed.

"If you don't hear from me, you don't have a wife to worry about anymore. I'll take every
precaution.” Hermione replied, the sweep of fabric barely audible as she pulled on the Invisibility Cloak. In under a minute Hermione was frantically reporting visual confirmation of Trixymort and the destruction of Azkaban.

"Hermione, is this Trixymort?" I asked. "You're not supposed to be invisible to me." "I'm sorry, Harry. I don't know what's happening." "It's all right, Hermione. We'll figure it out." "I was huddled under the Invisibility Cloak at the furthest shore from Azkaban. Pulling the omnioculars out of my bag, I saw that the Island was overrun with a handful of... vampires? Inferi? They seemed somewhat sentient, if rabid. But my Hominem Revelio spell told me that they were dead, despite the fact that they were running and eating people like you'd expect in a muggle "zombie" outbreak. Fast, creepy zombies.

"Trixymort is still in Bellatrix's former body, but she has a new mask on... fucking hell, she's wearing The Dark Lord's skull." I said into the knut communicator.

"What about the guards? Any survivors?" Draco asked, and I could hear discouragement in his voice already.

"No, they are being... eaten. I think they are still alive, too." My stomach churned at the thought of that.

"Do you require assistance?" Severus asked tersely. Do I? I'm completely invisible to them, and it looks like Trixy... oh, no.

Bellatrix - no, Trixymort - made her way out of the prison with a cluster of people behind her. My pulse throbbed and choked me as I recognized Antonin Dolohov alongside her among the quickened, ravenous undead. They weren't even looking at him. Moments later, she produced a few port-keys and the prisoners were gone.

"Slytherin's Snake, this was all about a jailbreak!" I screamed, finally getting the attention of the undead. They all turned towards the sound of my voice and began to run in my direction. Good going, Granger. Focusing my magic, I transfigured the ground before me into a pit of lava and watched all of the undead creatures stumble and incinerate themselves to a final death. A few of them were at the edge and crawled to relative safety. "They got away with portkeys." I said glumly. They could be anywhere now.

"Looks like Fenrir is also retreating, 'Mione." Draco added as I cast Fiendfyre to splash down and kill the remaining undead. This used to be too difficult for me. Now it's too easy.

Static came through my communication knut as a different voice cut in. "We traced the illegal portkey as arriving here. Putting up anti-apparition wards for the Ministry and most of London." Was that Kingsley?

"Royal?" Severus asked over the knuts, "How on earth did you get one of these?"

"I visited with Harry, saw what he had, and made my own. You've got to stay a step ahead in order to survive, you know," Kingsley made his own knut and can hear us. Fascinating. I then wondered if anyone else could essentially hack into the knuts.

I flicked my wrist, making the fiery serpents slam into and immolate the undead remains, and called out to Herpy to get me into the Ministry to face off the Death Eater who left a scar on my chest.

Lavender was panting as she smelled the coppery-sweet smell of blood on her tongue, and she followed the delicious scent all the way to an eviscerated Ernie, who had a stasis charm over his gut that must have happened before magic quit working for everyone. "Ron! We need Dittany!" she
cried out, panic tunneling her vision. You're still human; he's not food. You're still human...

"Saw... Proudfoot..." Ernie said painfully, "so I hit the alarm. Then some jackass hit me with Sectumsempra."

Her eyes raked over the wound that was no longer bleeding profusely. Was there still enough blood? "Did you get a good look at your attacker?"

He shook his head as Ronald fished out the potion from his robes. "No, but I'm pretty sure it was a disillusioned wizard. Smelled like a bloke." She fought the urge to sniff him as she took the dittany and started to apply it to the wound, his skin smoking as it re-knit itself at an accelerated speed. He whimpered in pain as Lavender did her best to ignore her inner beast's desires to take him there.

"That must be the Unmarked traitor!" Ron exclaimed, taking the pistol off of the Auror and checking the clip. "Sleeping potions?" Ernie nodded stiffly.

Lavender couldn't do any diagnostic charms, so she checked his vital signs manually. The pulse at his neck was strong enough that it made her clench her jaw in desire. "I think he'll be okay, but he'll need a Healer to treat the infection."

Ron stowed his wand and worked the slide on the pistol. "Can you carry him? I'll secure the floor on the way back." His girlfriend nodded; they didn't want to let many people know that she had some residual werewolf characteristics such as the heightened senses and some of the strength, but they would worry about Ernie knowing later.

Ron took the lead as Lavender scooped the injured wizard into her arms. As they made it back across the Atrium, the lift dinged ominously. Ron had the pistol sighted as the doors opened to... nothing. Not nothing, there's a slight shimmer... Ronald pulled the trigger and watched the tiny blue sphere fly towards the target and -

-suddenly jerk back towards him. This isn't bloody fair. Ronald had to fight his natural keeper instinct as he dodged instead of catching the projectile. Lavender twisted away from it as well, but Ernie wasn't as lucky as the plastic bead broke upon impact and knocked him unconscious.

"We're okay. Stop him!" Lavender shouted as wand-fire came from the disillusioned wizard. Ron dodged the stunner hexes easily as a silver knife flew from the cafeteria behind them and embedded into the werewolf's back. His girlfriend fell to the floor in a crumpled heap as the now-sleeping Ernie spilled across the floor. The lift doors dinged open again as the Lavender jerkily got back to her feet and put the knife against her own throat, eyes glazed over from an obvious Imperius Curse.

"Let me go, Ronald. Or she dies." Adrenaline was pumping through Ron as he kept the pistol up and ready to fire again.

"Who are you!?" Bloody coward, invisibly hiding behind my girl like a human shield!

"Let me go, Ron!" Lavender walked backwards into the lift, pressing a button to close the doors. Ron lowered the muggle weapon, acknowledging the futility of the situation as the doors shut, face screwed up in fear.

"I'll save you, Lav! I'll save you!"

I popped into the Ministry with Herpy on my arm, my own wand out and ready to kill Dolohov.
Looking around, I saw I was standing just behind a modified blood-and-rune inscribed shield that was of Draco's design, and Cormac and Katie were firing conflagration rounds towards the fast-moving vampire-inferi (vamp-feri?) hybrids as my step-son and Severus were dueling Trixymort and Antonin. I knew I had burned all of the Inferi that were at Azkaban, so these must have been instantly created from the Sleeper Ministry employees that we had shot unconscious. It only takes one of those damnable undead to bite a few of the unconscious 'Sleepers' and presto, instant undead army.

"HERPY!" Trixymort shouted, and my eyes widened in fear at the sight of the bone-white mask that seemed to be fused to her face now, "what are you doing here?"

The diminutive House-Elf cowered slightly, but kept her arm up defiantly. "Opp-posing you!" I am still under the invisibility cloak, I realized, and let the Darkness out of me as I fired the Killing Curse at the Lich.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

"BAD ELF!"

I fell over, stunned, as the force of something exploding and splattering all over me. I blinked red out of my eyes only to realize I was wearing the remains of my loyal House-Elf. The green spell hit Trixymort directly, but nothing happened. The Death Eaters looked in confusion at each other for a split second as they redoubled their efforts to kill everyone before them.

"Hermione, get out of here! We can't afford Trixymort to win the Elder Wand!" Severus whispered through clenched teeth. "Besides, you can't kill the undead with that curse."

Cormac and Katie turned their weapons onto the final vamp-feri and it blazed into a fiery final death before shooting towards the Lich. She whipped up a shield that all of the pellets hit and ruptured before they could even touch her. Through the fire and the smoke, I saw Trixymort cackling madly as her shield was impenetrable. I scrambled back up to my feet, the hood of the invisibility cloak almost slipping as I stood by Snape. Dolohov hid behind her while Severus and I sprayed molten lava out of the tips of our own wands, hoping against all hope that this would be enough to burn through her shields.

"You can't destroy me, Harry Potter! I am beyond living, beyond death itself! I, Lord Voldemort, will crush you like the insect you are!" Merlin, she actually thinks she is The Dark Lord? She really has lost it! The lava began to fall and pool on the ground, darkening as the air all around us grew thin and dry. If we didn't stop, we'd burn the Ministry down right here.

The lift dinged open, and I saw Lavender calling out to them. She betrayed us? That bitch! "Boss! Time to go!" I glimpsed a silver knife at her throat, only to realize she was holding it on herself and that her eyes looked clouded over. Steady, Granger. She's under the Imperius Curse.

Dolohov made his way quickly to the lift, ripping the knife out of her hands only to stab her in the gut a few times as he got off on it. He looked her directly in the eyes, licked the blood off of the silver knife, then forcefully kissed her on the mouth. As he pulled away, I could see blood transferred onto her lips from his unshaven beard.

"Ugh, it's been so long since I've stuck me a witch! Shame you taste like a filthy blood-traitor!" He turned towards the Lich, "Oi! You said we had to find the mudblood, right?"

"I have to kill - Harry! POTTER!" Trixymort screeched, her black hair frizzing chaotically as if she quit washing her hair when she died. The light gleamed off of the white skull that was now part of
her face, and I thought I could still see where sinew and ligaments connected the face and jaw to the bone. She really is wearing Voldemort's skull on her face. A black sort of light shot out of her wand and crashed against Draco's shield, tendrils jutting out and forming pincer-like protrusions to stab at the shield as if looking for the weak spot. It looked like sentient... shadow... that can exist around light? I knew I would have to ask Severus exactly what he and Fleur had been facing lately.

"Mum, we have a date with destiny." Lavender said hoarsely, blood seeping into her outer robes. The Lich turned at that, and her body language instantly went from hell-bent depraved killer to cheerful Hogwarts student. Between the demented poise and the serpentine-human skull attached to her face, Trixymort looked... beautifully broken. But undead, immune to the Killing Curse, and dangerous.

With another flick of her wand, the shield she had exploded outward like shattered glass. The force of it hit and buckled against Draco's shield charm, but it held firm. She spun on her heel and went to the lift, plucking the knife out of Dolohov's hands and turning to throw it at us. Her eyes lingered on the exploded remains of the House Elf, and I couldn't help but remember the duel that started all of this. Trixymort laughed for some reason (perhaps she remembers killing dobby?) as she put her hands on Lavender's head, poised to snap the witch's neck in a heartbeat.

"No, I've got a better idea." Her laugh morphed into a little-girl giggle that felt like nails scraping on a chalkboard in my head as she shoved the bleeding witch away to fall onto the floor. The Lift doors closed and the Death Eaters made their escape. I ran to help her, cleaning the wounds with a terse cleaning charm.

"Lavender, are you okay?" I asked, panic in my voice. I ought to go after them, I thought as I tapped the communication knut. "Kingsley, seal the Ministry! We can't let them get out!"

"Already done, Hermione. Floo is shut down, Goblin anti-apparition and anti-portkey runestones are activated. Where are they going?" I had wondered how come nobody just apparated into the bank vaults...

I shrugged as Severus and I exchanged a look. "No idea. Not down to the Department of Mysteries, I hope." Katie stood over the fallen body of Fenrir Greyback, and unloaded the rest of her magazine on the remains. The body spasmed as the silver got into his veins, the poison burning him from the inside out. Without blinking, she switched over to the red ammo and set his dying body aflame.

"Die, you deserve worse than this for killing Collin and turning best friend, you sick bitch." It chilled me to see Katie Bell look like this; but she's nowhere as bad as I am. This must be how others see me.

Draco gave a dark bark of laughter beside me. "They won't get far." He seemed more pale than usual as Bob simply appeared out of nowhere.

"They won't make it down to my floor, Draco's ward penetrated the rest of the Ministry beneath us."

"Thanks, Bob. That was the idea." Draco's eyes and face went slack as the exhaustion hit him. Below us, we heard multiple explosions flowed by massive cursing. "She won't crack it."

Well that's good, right? I thought, wondering what made Draco's shield impenetrable as my diagnostic charm showed that Lavender was critically wounded. "You need a Healer, your wounds aren't healing."

She coughed blood, wincing at the pain. "I'll heal, I always do now." Blood began to pool beneath her. "Ever since the change, I've healed everything. But I always feel the pain, and I have the
hunger." Lavender screamed as her body kept trying to heal. "It usually is faster than this though. Nor does it burn this damn much!"

Severus closed his eyes, and I could tell he was replaying the battle in his head. When his eyes opened, I saw the answer in them. The blade was silver. "We have to get her to a Healer."

Floo was shut down, apparition and portkeys aren't possible... "Let's get outside, there's the Knight Bus." I tapped the knut communicator. "Fleur, we're en route via the Knight Bus. We have an injured werewolf."

There was only a moment of silence before her voice responded. "Understood, we'll keep your path as clear as possible. If Dementors show up, our cursed fire should do the trick, or at least scare them off." At least that's in our favour, Granger.

Cormac came to my side and helped the wounded werewolf up, her arm propping over his shoulders as they limped toward the lift. Perhaps the Fates will be merciful tonight.

Narcissa was alone at home. She did not know what was going on, and it unnerved her. In the past, she had been left waiting for Lucius to return from a Dark Revel or some other unknown mission. There was no way of knowing where he was or if he'd even return alive. As much as she loathed him, she preferred the relative security of being to the Malfoy patriarch.

If Lucius died, she did not know where she would live, how she would be able to provide for her son, or if she could survive the Dark Lord's wrath. Well we survived it after all, but my wife and son are now in harms way.

She tapped her knut communicator. "Sev, status?"

"In pursuit of your sister, Dolohov, and a few others. We need to reinstate magic, can you fly to Stonehenge?"

"Existing magical modes of transport should still work. We've got an injury going to Sa... Granger-Black Hospital before we take the Knight Bus there. We believe the Dementors are in league with the Lich Trixymort and have disabled magic somehow."

"Injury?! Tell me it's-"

"I'm fine, love. It was Lavender." Hermione replied, soothing her nervous wife. Unexpected peril for my wife is the new normal since the last time I looked at my Arithmancy equation.

"Okay, I hope the Healers there can help. Sev, do you want me to go up against Dementors while I am unable to produce a Patronus?"

"Scout for us, use the conflagration rounds if they come after you. We aren't at full strength and need Intel."

"Is my son alright?" Cissy asked, hoping to hear from him as well.

Draco's voice panted with exhaustion. "Yes we're all fine mother, please go and be safe!" Poor boy sounds tired, what did he do?

"Cissy, it would behoove us if you could fly to Stonehenge as quickly as possible. brooms should still work." Sev was all business once again.
Something crossed the Slytherin's mind. "Why fly? Where is Herpy?"

"Herpy died, my love. Your sister took him out before leaving for a date with destiny."

"Damn, we'll have to mourn and bury her later then. Wait, Sev, did she say destiny?" I really needed my Arithmancy equation up and running now...

"Her unknown assistant did; do you think she's after Fortuna?" Slytherin's Snake, if the Fates are in play, could she be as well?

Hermione's voice came through next. "Dolohov mentioned a mudblood, so I think she's after me to win the Wand of Destiny. Cissy, get to Stonehenge, tell us what they have done to the stones there."

Narcissa gathered her new-found courage, slung her P-90 over her back, and went to her closet to grab her broom. As she flew out of the castle, she pulled a button off of her tactical robes that activated a disillusionment charm. It wouldn't be too effective in flight, but it would be better than nothing once she lands and confronts the Dementor swarm.

Some good deeds seem to get rewarded in the oddest of ways. I remembered covering for Harry and Draco when they almost got in trouble for rescuing me from the troll. I seemed to be rewarded by telling that white lie by making two friends who would be my constant companions for the next seven years. Now I have Ron and Katie by my side, carrying Lavender on a makeshift stretcher into the lift.

"We certain they aren't going to double-back and find us?" Cormac asked, his weapon at the ready even as the lift doors shut. I was left hoping that they wouldn't try to use any tracking spells to find me. Better leave the Invisibility Cloak on, then.

We all made it to the top level of the Ministry and they let Severus and myself take point. The hallways were completely empty and devoid of life, and I was certain that any sounds we made would echo loudly. Severus made the 'come here' signal with the crook of two fingers and the rest of the group followed us to the exit spot, the Muggle red telephone booth.

"Are we all going to fit in there?" Katie asked, nodding to the makeshift stretcher they had the laid-up werewolf on. Cormac went ahead and entered the phone booth, then seemed to lean his head back out towards us. "Magic still works; we just can't cast it. As long as both doors are open you three should go through just fine." Ron shrugged and went ahead, pulling a pained Lavender and Katie behind him. Cormac nodded and took point on the other side as the rest of us queued up to get up to the surface of Muggle London.

"This is a bad idea." Draco said, eyes drooping as he seemed to be falling asleep on his feet.

"Are you well, Draco?" Severus asked, concern evident in his voice. Draco nodded sluggishly.

"Tapped out, that shield was... a lot." We all made it through the Muggle telephone booth and found ourselves with our wand-hand up, calling for the Knight Bus to pop into existence and pull up for our rescue.

"That shield included the entire bottom floor, didn't it?" I asked, uncertain what we could to for him. Draco holstered his wand, giving into the exhaustion as Severus recognized the look and picked the young man up, using a lightening charm as he put his godson over his shoulder. It looked as though he had carried Draco many times in the past when he was just a little boy, and a strange pang seemed to go through me at that. Okay, Granger, don't get all sappy all of a sudden.

While some good deeds get rewarded, other good deeds, like today, seem to do the opposite. The
inside of the triple-decker bus was unusually crowded for this early morning, and all of the witches and wizards on the bus were either trying to get off of the bus, or back on the bus once they saw the state of us leaving the Ministry.

"I want off of the bus!" an elderly witch said, "The Ministry must still have magic and can protect us!" As if on cue, Lavender screamed in pain.

"Look at the state of them!" A wizard stated simply, "The Ministry is buggered to hell."

Stan Shunpike was trying to sort out the various people as Cormac pulled rank and was getting wizards and witches to move upstairs to make room for the horizontal Lavender that Ron and Katie were carrying in. I decided to keep the hood up and stay invisible, just in case.

Severus dropped Draco into the first seat he was able to empty with his piercing gaze as the bus lurched into motion. "Destination?" Stan asked us.

"Mal-sorry, Granger-Black Hospital." I stood out of the way and hoped nobody would bump into me.

The conductor looked down at our injured friend, who was still whimpering in pain. "Is she going to be okay?"

Cormac interrupted. "Stan, we're all going directly to the Hospital first. No other stops before. Understood?" Stan nodded as he watched the new Aurors take an inventory on their remaining ammo. "I'm out of blue, Katie?"

Katie shook her head. "Two rounds left. I was about to have to start torching innocent people."

"Do you have any pain potion? Please, it's getting worse..." Lavender clenched her teeth and arched her back as the silver from the blade was countering the werewolf's natural ability to heal. Severus seemed to realize this as well as he asked for Katie's rifle, checked that it was a sleeping pellet in the chamber, and shot the werewolf. The wizards and witches nearby gasped in shock, and Cormac had to explain that it was only to let her sleep rather than be in pain. Katie took her weapon back, frowning at her final round.

"How long will it last?" Katie asked, uncertainly keeping her weapon pointed at her friend.

"For a human? Up to 12 hours. If we're unlucky, maybe 12 minutes for a fully transformed werewolf." Severus' face went oddly cold, and I wasn't certain I wanted to know what he was thinking.

"So why even bother?" Katie asked, but the look on Ronald's face was answer enough. *It was the merciful thing to do.*

Severus' eyebrow arched as he replied, crossing his arms. "Because the last thing we need is a recently-turned werewolf going out of her mind with pain. She needs to keep control on her emotions and her abilities." Some of the passengers gasped and started whispering when they realized that the injured girl was a werewolf, and even more of them moved up to the second and third level of the bus. "Stan, ask the driver how long until we get there."

Stan called back, "At least half an hour; we've got a lot of Muggle stuff to navigate around."

I seemed to be confused at that. "As I recall, the Knight Bus could seem to 'pop' from one place to another."
Stan shrugged. "All of the hot-spots we can do that in London are down. You lot have any idea why?" He then looked around, confused. "Who said that?!"

Frowning, I lowered the hood of the cloak to reveal my head. *Maybe this would still be enough to protect me?* "Sorry, Stan." He still looked at me with confusion.

"Have we met?" He went from confused to flirty, dusting his uniform off. "I'm Stan Shunpike, who are you, dearie?"

"Hermione Granger-Black. You'd have better luck flirting with my step-son Draco; he fancies blokes more than I do," I said, effectively shutting him down. He looked like he was facing The Dark Lord himself.

"You're Narcissa's new husband-um, partner." He smiled nervously as he seemed to cower right then and there. *He knows I killed Lucius and The Dark Lord, so he assumes I'm more dangerous than the two of them.* He turned back to the driver and started to urgently whisper to him.

Glad to have him quit flirting, I knelt by the sleeping werewolf and checked her vital signs. *Now's a bad time to remember that I'm claustrophobic.* She seemed calm as she lay there sleeping, though her pulse and temperature were running a bit hotter than normal. "Is this normal for a werewolf, or is it because she's fighting the infection?"

Severus shrugged. "I do not know, I can only assume that the blade wasn't pure silver because she's still trying to heal it... or she's an exceedingly powerful werewolf."

I winced at that. "Fenrir turned her, so she could be." Lanvender's eyes shot open and she bolted upright in her cot, startling all of us. Severus quickly cast *Incarcerous* and magical ropes sprang to life and strapped her down. She grunted as the air was pushed out of her, teeth bared in pain.

"What?! Damn, this hurts!" Lavender said though clenched teeth.

I looked at her eyes and saw the pain and panic in them. "Lavender, it's okay! We shot you with the sleeping charm, but you woke up faster than we expected."

Cormac was standing behind her, eyes wary. "Much faster." I could tell he his grip on his rifle tightened, and I knew it wasn't loaded with any sleeping charms.
Two hours ago, Bertrand sent word by owl to INTERCON about the the UK becoming Squibbed as he was pressed into service to protect the school. Deputy Headmistress McGonagall gave him one of the modified muggle weapons of Snape's design and a set of tactical robes. He was waiting for a reply from his bosses when he saw Narcissa Granger-Black, widow to the most powerful Death Eater who avoided Azkaban after the first Wizarding War, fly away from Hogwarts and begin to disillusion herself. Truly the world has gone mad when she and Snape are the heroes out to save us, he remarked as he stood sentry along with Hagrid at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

"Mister Hagrid, where do you suppose she is going?" Bertrand asked, pointing at the blurry dot speeding away.

"Who is goin' where? I dun' see nutin'." Hagrid replied, loading and cocking his crossbow back to fire. At least he knows to not wave it around while talking.

"I just saw Narcissa Granger-Black take a broom and fly off, disillusioning herself somehow even though none of us can do magic."

Hagrid shrugged at that. "Beats me. But she wouldn't abandon the school without good reason. Though, I don't know why she's taking a broom when I've got a herd of trained Thestrals here. Much faster than any ruddy broom made."

They have bloody domesticated thestrals?!

His inside jacket pocket knocked against his body, indicating he had a reply from his superiors.

Reports of mis-aligned spells have come in from the west coast of France. You are to investigate this and stop it from spreading any further into Europe.

Only if she had a really good reason, eh? "Mister Hagrid, where are these Thestrals?"

Stan sat down in his chair, head craned around so he could stare at Lavender. His wide, fearful eyes turned onto me. He seemed to get calmer as he realized I was there to protect them all from the werewolf we have strapped down. The bus jerked from a hard lane-change, and I used the make-shift stretcher to steady myself as other witches and wizards fell out of their seats. Why on earth didn't they ever bolt real bus seats down in this thing?

Lavender grabbed for my hand, so I gave her mine and she clenched it like a life-line. Her hand clenched as she grimaced as more pain seemed to spike through her body. Her mouth was open as if in a silent scream, her body jerking in sharp convulsions.

Severus spoke directly into my knut communicator due to the noise in the bus. "Something is wrong."

I turned so I could talk directly into his ear instead of broadcasting it. "Yeah, let's not start a panic though."

"What are you experiencing, Miss Brown?" Severus asked.

"Ron…" She called out to her (boyfriend?) "It feels like…" Lavender writhed again, hand crushing mine until I almost had try to jerk my hand out from hers.
Ron touched her face as their eyes met. It felt invasive to be this close around them right now. "Snape needs to check you. Can you let him do that?"

Her eyes clenched shut as she nodded. "Yeah."

Ronald nodded to Severus. I started to let go of Lavender's hand, but she held me tightly, as if scared to be released, so I kept holding her hand. It crowded us as Severus leaned over me to check her vitals better than I could. If Sev needed me to take a chair so he had more room, I would, but it seemed like I was doing more good here calming her down.

Sev did his best around me, but Lavender convulsed so violently that I was certain she would have hurt herself or me if she weren't strapped down. I squeezed her hand and spoke into her hear "Lavender, it's okay. He wants to help."

"No..." Lavender whimpered, eyes fixed on something far away.

Ron stroked her hair tenderly. "Let Snape do his job, Lav-Lav," he said, kissing her forehead. For the first time, I was okay with their little pet names for each other. It was then that I saw her skin start to change, and it hit me what was about to happen. She is about to shift form. "No, Lavender! Don't change into your wolf form!"

"I can't stop it... it... wants me to..."

"What wants you to, Miss Brown?" Severus asked quickly.

"The Lich, Trixymort... she can... this can't be right."

"She only has control over the dead though." I said.

"Pull over!" Cormac said, "We have a problem!"

"I can't hold on... it's... calling me."

Ron's eyes widened as he recognized the signals. "That's not possible, the full moon is over now."

"It's my blood, it's calling out through my body... it wants to shift..."

"She got some of Lavender's blood on the knife, she can do blood magic." Katie said in a panic, aiming her rifle directly at Lavender. Only one round left.

Stan called out to us. "We're on one of their motor-highways, we can't pull over here!"

Cormac yelled back. "Get off the motorway! We need her off now!"

Ron was nervously stroking her hair in an effort to keep her calm. "Lavender! Keep-"

Her hand was almost crushing mine as she pulled me in to hear her whisper in my ear. "I won't... remember... anything when I change." She gulped, wincing. "Understand? I will be wild... hungry."

"Fuck." I muttered under my breath, but she must have seen my comprehension as she relaxed slightly. She trusted that I would stop her no matter what. I clenched my jaw as I nodded slightly. Ron won't ever forgive me if I have to kill her.

Narcissa had not played Quidditch in decades, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being
tailed while flying. She felt free up here, even as she was about to do what could amount to a suicide mission just to grab intel in order to restore magic. *Sev, you better be right about this hunch of yours.* Craning her head, she looked directly behind her but saw nothing. Rolling her head from her left shoulder to her right one, she checked the skies above her in a clockwise manner. Still nothing.

*I still sense someone there,* she swore to herself. Pulling up on her broom, she climbed quickly and performed the sloth-grip roll in order to drop her chin to her chest and check her six below her. She couldn't help but be giddy as she was in the air, but sure enough, she was being tailed by some idiotic wizard on a thestral.

She wasn't certain who he was, but since he wasn't attacking her she took it as a good sign. She could even swear she heard him say, "That was fuckin' impressive." Cissy went horizontal as the man on the Thestral caught up to her and she pushed her broom to match speed and direction.

"Bastard?" She asked, face scrunched up in confusion.

"It's Bertr... You're having a go at me, aren't you?" He asked as Cissy's face split into a grin. "You're just like Snape, I swear..."

"Rolls their eyes at INTERCON, fancies witches so you don't have a chance with either of us?" Narcissa joked happily, feeling the wind in her hair for the first time in ages.

"Something like that. Look, you're off to do something important, and I can only guess it has to do with the fact that almost nobody can do magic. INTERCON has tasked me to investigate the cause because it has spread to Normandy and is on its way to Paris. I can help!" The Thestral flapped his wings, struggling to slow down enough to stay abreast with Narcissa and jerked his head to indicate that she should hop on as well. "Um, we can help." Narcissa frowned momentarily, then grunted with effort as she elevated herself enough to hop off of the broom and land on the Thestral and put an arm around Bertrand while she tucked the broom under her other arm and she shouted out her destination to the wizard.

The flight went from a matter of an hour to mere minutes, as they landed from the northeast, just behind the Heel Stone. Cissy put down her broom, readied her P-90, and reached inside of Bertrand's tactical robes and pulled the button off that would release the disillusionment charm. "Stay quiet, I'm just here to observe what the Dementors have been doing." Bertrand nodded, his eyes wide in fear at whatever he saw at the stone circle. The thestral looked around and began to pretend grazing like any other horse. *The bloody thing is trying to be incognito... maybe Dementors can't tell the difference?*

Cissy looked at Stonehenge; Dementors were creating a dense fog as they floated around the Sarsen circle (now nothing more than just a vague horseshoe shape) while a few other Dementors seemed to be busy lifting and rearranging the bluestones. Narcissa patted her left side, remembering that Severus had left her the charmed spectacles he had gotten from Bob. *They looked oddly like the ones that Luna had when she freaked out in my classroom.*

In front of every Dementor, Narcissa could see something she could only interpret as cold air in front of their mouths. Rather than it looking like the moisture from one's breath on a cold morning, this had the look that it was constantly being sucked in. None of the Dementors seemed to notice them, judging from their faces and how their 'breath' seemed to be at a small rate. *I really don't want to see what it looks like when they are sucking on people's happiness with these spectacles...*

The fog that the Dementors make was completely transparent here, and she could see the distortions being made as they all floated in the air. A few of the Sarsen stones were bright amber, and Narcissa could only guess that they glowed with a type of magic she could not comprehend. The bluestones,
however, appeared purple and glowed darkly as the Dementors went about rearranging them. When a bluestone got close enough to the Sarsen stone, the amber glow would seem to be smothered out by the purple. Narcissa tapped the knut communicator and whispered behind her hand, hoping to muffle the sound even more.

"I see them. The Dementors are smothering the Sarsen stones..." As as Sarsen stone went dark, the ring of Dementors seemed to increase their 'breath', and Narcissa wondered if they were breathing in whatever Magic was there. Some of the floating robed figures slowly went and switched places, taking over the work of lifting the bluestones. **This was a pattern for them now; the Dementors were working together in a routine in order to feed off of the stones...** Cissy gasped as she realized that they were essentially working like leeches and draining magic out of the world.

Kingsley replied on the knut. "I think Severus and Hermione are busy with their own emergency. Misses Granger-Black, can you disperse the Dementors with a Patronus?"

Narcissa grunted in frustration. "I don't have magic either, but it seems like they are... drinking it down here." In the corner of her eye, she saw Bertrand pulling a slip of paper out of his pocket. He looked pale with fear as he handed it over to her.

*Paris has become Squibbed. All agents have been given Priority One Exemption to reinstate magic.*

"Bertrand!" Cissy muttered under her breath, "What does this mean?"

"It means magic is dying, and we have to something. NOW." Bertrand said sharply. "I have those conflagration rounds, think this will work on them?"

Narcissa nodded yes, but she actually wasn't certain. "It's a cursed fire, it's Dark, so it should."

"-should?" Bertrand seemed nervous as Narcissa winced.

"Nobody has *actually* tried throwing a potion at a Dementor like this before..."

"Bloody hell, if this doesn't work, then we'll need a Death Eater to come and produce a Patronus Charm. Where are they?"

"Dealing with my sister attacking the Ministry; Draco is keeping her from entering the Department of Mysteries." Bertrand let out a small sound of desperation.

"...where apparently you keep Outsiders in bell jars. You lot are barking mad." Bertrand raised his weapon, released the safety, and the two of them took on the Dementor swarm together.

Severus' voice whispered into my ear through the knut. "Did she say what I think she said?"

I raised my voice to the driver. "Pull over now." Severus backed away slightly, positioning himself between Lavender and Draco, wand at the ready.

The driver shook his head. "Can't, Misses Granger. Muggles will see us when we're at a full stop."

*We have to do something.* "We need Lavender out of here before she transforms."

Cormac moved to the front of the bus to talk to Stan. "Is there any place we can pull over now?"

The Driver's voice was barely audible. "No, we're about to be on the M4. No hot-spots near here because of Heathrow."
Lavender convulsed again, and the beast within her began to spill out as hair began to grow all over her body. She snarled at the restraints, and jerked against them so hard that McLaggen turned fearful eyes at us. "Ernie, we need to pull over right now."

Stan jumped out of his seat to face us and asked, "What the hell was that?!"

"Werewolf." Severus said dryly.

"Stopping would be good!" I yelled.

"Negative. If we stop, Muggles will see a giant triple-decker bus on their motorway." Ernie said.

I tried to keep my voice down and still be heard by him. "This werewolf is about to shift into her wolf form, so getting her off of this bus is more important!"

Stan gulped his fear down, but it rose almost instantly. "We would never have let a werewolf onto the Knight Bus in the first place; this is for Wizards and Witches only!"

Severus' mouth curled at that. "Not more of this racist rubbish; she can restrain her bestial side outside of the Full Moon."

"Then why is she about to change and eat us all?!"

"Someone has her blood and is forcing her to shift." Severus looked down at the girl. "She's hurting because she's fighting it."

"We got no off-ramp for the next fifteen kilometers. Can she hold it off that long?"

"Lavender?" I asked, hoping for the best.

Her eyes were golden yellow. She shuddered again and I was certain she was going to crush my hand if she didn't let go.

"Lavender, are you still in there?"

"Yes." Her voice held an edge of predator in it.

"Seven minutes, hold on 'till the off-ramp and then we'll stop."

"I'm ... not sure I can." Her ears were starting to grow more pointed, despite her struggles. Ron had tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Hold on, we'll get out of the bus, and tie you down good. You won't hurt anyone." I couldn't make the lie sound believable.

She clenched again, and I had to jerk my hand out of hers this time, else my hand would be useless for anything. "Sorry," she whimpered, then screamed again, but this time the scream turned into a howl.

Katie backed up and knocked over her chair. The Driver looked behind at us through the mirror. "What the hell?!"

"We need that exit." I exclaimed impatiently.

"Almost there, Mum." Ernie said, stress evident in his voice.
Lavender shuddered, snapping one of the ropes that held her down. I instantly replaced it. "Won-won!"

I backed up so Ronald could have some privacy with her. I kept my wand trained on her, however. Constant Vigilance. "I'm here, my love."

"Shoot me. McLaggen has the silver rounds."

Ron was utterly shocked at that. "What?"

"Shoot me, before I change.' She winced as her arms started to stretch unnaturally, and she grunted in pain. "I don't want to hurt you or anyone else. There is no giant cage here like back in the Ministry."

"Lav, I know you can hold on. We can figure this out. 'Mione's brilliant at th-"

Lavender screamed, and a trickle of blood came out of her mouth. She licked it up with animalistic zeal. "Ron, I'll attack you. I'll... I won't be me, understand? ... I can the beast rising. Please, shoot me!" She turned to McLaggen, eyes burning with need. "Shoot me!"

Cormac shook his head. "We're trying to save your life, not end it." Lavender slammed her head back down, looking at the ceiling of the bus while her mind must have been far away.

"Won-won!"

Ron touched her reassuringly. "I'm here, Lavender."

"Please don't let her change me ... use me like this ..." She resumed screaming until she ran out of breath. Despite her fighting it, I could see her muscles and ligaments trying to rearrange under her skin; I could hear the joints popping and grating in ways that were unnaturally painful. She was fighting the change to the very end, slowing it down at the cost of making it all the more excruciating.

Cormac pointed to the people around Lavender and Katie. "Can we move the civilians out of harm's way?"

Katie scoffed at that. "Where is safe now? We're still on the M4 right by Heathrow!"

She was right, there was nowhere safe to go. We were all trapped on here until we pulled over and if Lavender became a full werewolf before that, we were all in big trouble. Shit, shit, shit!

The screaming gave way to another howl. Fur flowed out of the skin as her bones finally shifted and her shins turned digitigrade as if it grew another joint; the magic in her blood finally crushed the human form from the inside and was remaking it in the wolf form. Blood seeped as her skin tore apart to let fur take its place, and I had a minute thought about what kind of contamination lycanthrope blood had. Lavender thrashed in her cot as she grew, breaking the magical ropes we conjured that had held her in place, and Katie raised her weapon to shoot her to sleep once more.

"NO!" Ron shouted, hand slapping at the barrel of the AR-15, the shot going wild. McLaggen and I dodged the potion-filled pellet and heard it break just behind us. The bus' horn went off as I spun my head and saw Ernie deep asleep, face-first into the steering wheel. Stan lunged for the wheel, grabbing it as he fell over and jerked the bus sharply to the left, tires screeching to a halt while the bus began to tip over.

They had to make the bus a triple-decker, I thought, because they don't know the basic muggle laws
Thinking fast, I used the Elder Wand to cast *Incarcerous* on everyone in the bus, hoping that would be enough to protect everyone. Severus cast a bubble of protection around himself and the unconscious Draco as the pavement became visible through the windows on the right side, and I heard muggle vehicles slamming their brakes and honking their horns as the Knight Bus finally became visible to them, crashing onto its side as it was rear-ended and the glass shattered all around us.

I could hear the screams of surprised witches and wizards from the top two decks as I tapped my knut communicator. "*Knight Bus is down. I repeat, Knight Bus is down. Statute of Secrecy has been breached.*"
Squibbed: Dementors seize Stonehenge

I opened my eyes, and I didn't like the fact that I wasn't certain if I lost any time there. *At least my spells held, and the passengers were mostly okay.* All of us on the left side of the bus were now dangling just over a meter from the ground. Severus looked to be judging where he would land, cast *Finite Incantatem* on himself, and grunted as he landed on his feet between the unconscious passengers. "Bubble Head yourself and the rest of our team." He barked, pulling a thick-red vial out of his robes and drinking it regretfully. I could hear muggle vehicles slamming on brakes and rear-ending each other while horns blared in the distance. "I've got a few sleeping potions I can toss out there, might keep the Muggles from seeing too much. Can you deal with her?" I nodded as I saw Ron, Katie, and Cormac come to. Severus was a blur as he ran out of what was now the broken back door of the bus.

I went ahead and put bubble-head charms on everyone, letting them know that everything will be okay. *Can we get the Knight Bus upright again? Will it resume driving and become invisible to the muggles?* My mind was reeling with problems, and the Statute of Secrecy really wasn't high on my priority list as I saw the whimpering werewolf resume struggling against her bonds. *THINK GRANGER, THINK!* I chided myself as I considered conjuring silver bands to restrain her, but dismissed it because conjured silver wasn't enough to stop a werewolf. *Not to mention the burning sensation might agitate her even more.* I added more magical rope to restrain her to the bus' floorboards, but Lavender's struggle was starting to make the bus itself buckle. Ron was *(ineffectively)* yelling at her to calm down while Cormac searched his pockets for anything but his conflagration ammo. "Do you have any silver ammo?" Cormac yelled, and Katie shook her head in terror. "Hermione, let us go!" Katie yelled, and I remembered that we were still tied onto the bus.

"Sorry!" I canceled the spell for us and we all fell to the ground, trying our best to not step on the passengers on the other side. The ropes snapped again, and I knew it was too late. The werewolf broke the ropes and unrolled onto the ground by us, claws digging in for any purchase it could find. I tried to ignore the screams of the passengers who were getting clawed up as I tried stunning Lavender unconscious. *You know this spell is like casting aquamenti on an active volcano, Granger.*

I had scrambled back a few rows, half-straddling a bleeding witch on the floor before I had even realized it. Cormac's yelling ceased as a clawed hand sank into him and threw him like a wad of crumpled paper. I wasn't certain if he was still alive or not as I resumed casting *incarcerous.* Ron was pleading for his girlfriend to remain calm, but was noticeably backing away from her.

I couldn't seem to keep Lavender restrained, but apparently it was enough to turn her attention on me, and she was mad. I saw claws, sharp teeth in powerful jaws, and bloodthirsty eyes on me. I heard the tale-tell click and air puffing sound of gunfire, and instantly smelled burning fur. *Katie shot her with the cursed fire.* Before I could wonder if the fire would spread, the acrid smell of burning fur and the bestial howl of pain told me that the single shot wouldn't be enough.

"AGAIN!" I yelled, making the conscious decision that some of us might become collateral damage.

Katie froze, though, as the werewolf turned on her. The blur of motion had Katie crumpled quickly, blood flying as claws and fangs attacked her in less than a second. *This was about to be a slaughter.* I changed spells and used the strongest banishing charm I could do with the Elder Wand. "**DEPULSO!**"
Lavender flew through the air, making an exit through the front windshield and far enough away to not injure anyone else. Katie's neck was worn open, rifle broken in half, and scarlet pouring down her tactical robes. I took a breath, then another. *Katie was dead. Focus on the werewolf.* Lavender was on the M5, and running freely off the exit ramp. I looked at the sign and fear took over me. **Tunnel Road E. Heathrow Airport.**

*Across the M4 was a hotel, behind that was Sipson, a small village. We're stopped right by bloody neighborhood with children...*

I climbed over the panicked passengers and took the weapon off of Cormac. I didn't even want to know if he survived this or not.

"Misses... Hermione?" Stan called out, leaning over Draco. "He wanted you to take this." The Conductor held the RAP 4 pistol by his thumb and forefinger, visibly uncomfortable with the muggle device. I took the pistol and ejected the magazine. *Silver rounds, good!*

"Thanks." **GET OUT THERE, GRANGER. QUIT STALLING.** I climbed my way out through the missing front windshield of the Knight Bus, and saw a super-fast Severus flying around the werewolf Lavender, throwing vial after vial to break on her.

"Hermione, she's no longer responding to the sleeping vials, and my spells are useless!" Severus called out, grabbing a familiar black potion vial and throwing it at her feet while flying directly up to avoid the effects. As the glass shattered, darkness expanded and it left the werewolf agitated yet disoriented. I had to adjust for gravity as I aimed the rifle at her, and started firing the conflagration rounds at a slight angle to land on or at least near her.

*I have Draco's pistol with the werewolf rounds as my backup. I just need to get her to come back towards me so I can make the shots count.*

As the cursed fire rounds hit their mark, it took two or three hits to set the black, distressed robes on fire. An unnatural shriek of came from the Dementor, one that scratched the inside of the Slytherin's skull like forks on unglazed ceramic, as the robes burned and the skeleton beneath began to dissolve in the sunlight.

*Salazar's Mudblood Whore, it works!*

The remaining Dementors that were congregated around the Sarsen stones all turned towards us at the same time, and gave a collective threatening hiss that seemed to drop the temperature to freezing. Cissy heard the sound of a muggle vehicle go by, but she wasn't about to turn around to see who had arrived. Bertrand, however, did.

"Muggle... tourists?" Narcisa regulated her breathing and began to step sideways to increase the distance from the Dementors coming towards them.

"What are you two doing? Oh my god! The Stones!" They must be seeing the bluestones float on their own, since they cannot see the Dementors...

"Get out of here!" Bertrand yelled, slipping a vial out of his jacket and, checking the color, lobbed it into the oncoming phalanx of Dementors that were swooping towards us. A skeletal Dementor hand slashed at the vial, hoping to knock it away. The small vial exploded into a large ball of fire, and the mass of Dementors that were clustered together caught on fire and screamed as they burned and dissolved in the sun.
"What.. what just happened?" Another muggle tourist yelled out.

"We're fighting dangerously Dark creatures you can't see, so get out of here!"

Narcissa was shocked at his flippant admission of Magic. "You just revealed magic to them!"

"INTERCON said we had a Priority One Exemption. The Statute of Secrecy doesn't matter anymore." They just... suspended it?

Narcissa turned quickly, wasting a bullet on the Heel Stone so they could see she was shooting fire. She heard Bertrand throwing another potion vial as well as shooting at the Dementors, but it sounded too close to her. By the time she had her rifle back up and firing, the cold chill raked through her body as some of her worst memories came unwelcome to the forefront of her mind. The world seemed to grow dark as she re-lived the death of Lucius.

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I had to remember that painful day, the day when everything changed. I was panicked, desperate for anything to save my son and myself... and I took matters into my own hand, even as I knew an angry Dark Lord was coming and might kill us all.

Dobby seemed to take one jerky step to the left as Bella's dagger sliced through the bone and cleaved off his arm. Narcissa recalled thinking how odd it seemed for the house-elf to move like that. As if he had been shoved...

Harry dropped Draco's wand, and she wasn't sure why, but Cissy banished the wand under Hermione's crumpled body, hoping against all hope that she could just take Draco and run, get some money from her Solicitor and survive in the shadows like the Golden Trio had. As soon as she did it, she knew she was sacrificing Hermione to fight and die there, since her magic wouldn't work so soon after being tortured by her sister Bella. This is war, Cissy, and sometimes innocent people have to die. Besides, Bella was the only reason I stayed around here with Draco, but she is no longer the sister I once knew. Narcissa pulled Draco back into a hidden passage, where she had kept an emergency portkey to get to France. She hoped David Mallett would take her in and hide them for a bit, maybe give them both entirely new faces, but she wasn't sure. It was all a big gamble at this point.

The only thing she was sure of, though, was the mudblood would die. That's why she was surprised when the Bonding attached to her body and soul seared in pain as it changed, transferring itself to a new person as she turned fearful eyes to her husband, cleaved in two.

The bloody brat pulled it off?! Gasping, Narcissa felt a pang of guilt as the Compulsion renewed itself despite the decade of despising Lucius muting it, and she was compelled to cast her strongest shield around the Granger girl... Shite. She's my new Husband.

The words were out of her mouth before she could even think. "Stop! We must respect tradition!"

Bella looked confused and disconnected, head tilted like an errant puppy that didn't know why it was being punished.

Not getting to kill and torture muggles would be seen as a punishment by her.

"What are you talking about, Cissy dear?"

Narcissa panted as she caught her breath. "The mudblood... defeated my husband... in a legal duel, on his own property." She met her sister's eyes, straightening herself with a conviction she hadn't had since Hogwarts. "She wins his estate by default."
Fenrir snarled at that. "Witches cannot marry witches."

The Ice Queen raised an immaculately sculpted eyebrow at him. "And yet, Fenrir, I can feel the bond taking hold."

"Let me defeat her, then, and you can be mine." The glint in his eye let Narcissa know that it would be a cold day in hell before that would happen.

Bellatix stood tall, recalling her upbringing. "You know nothing of Pureblood Tradition, beast. Go find something to eat."

Narcissa grabbed a bag of Galleons and tossed it to Fenrir, full of aristocratic grace. "Thank you for your services. Leave." Fenrir looked around, took the gold, and loped away with the snatchers.

Draco stepped from behind Cissy. "Mother, Po- the boy said that The Dark Lord was on his way! We need to prepare!"

Bellatrix's eyes widened in fear. "MY VAULT!" Narcissa watched her sister take the hidden passage to the hidden apparition spot in the Manor.

Narcissa kept her wand up, but not pointed directly at her new husband. *(Or do I call her wife?)* The thought that she could be with another witch finally felt like some sort of Pyrrhic Victory, as The Dark Lord was probably coming to kill them all and this wasn't her Gryffindor.

Hermione's wand was still pointed at the remaining pair, frozen in confusion as she realized she was standing behind a shield that Draco's mum conjured. "What's going on? What tradition are you speaking of, who has been bonded?!"

"We're bonded; you and I." Narcissa gave a sharp bark of laughter. "In the 'Till death do we part kind of way."

Draco shrank at what he knew would come next. "He will want to question her, possibly use her to his advantage."

Hermione's face went from confusion to horror. "Voldemort's coming? We have to go!" She jerked back, face twisted as if she sucked a lemon. "Why did I say 'we'? What happened to me?!"

Narcissa frowned as she faced off with her new wife. The girl was brilliant, full of magical potential, and quite beautiful, though covered in blood and on the wrong side of the war. If the situation had been different, perhaps she met this girl before the first Wizarding War, she could have grown to love her.

"I'm sorry Miss Granger, but I want to survive. *Obliviate.*" She directed Draco to take Hermione and lock her in the dungeon as she heard an apparating pop right behind her. She gasped in shock until she realized it was her life-long friend, Severus.

Severus surveyed the room, upper lip curling in apparent disgust at the dead body of Lucius Malfoy. "I suppose the poison we were giving him didn't act fast enough."

Narcissa laughed at his dry, morbid humor, but the laughter came out more like hysterical tears.

"Severus, what's going to happen? I wanted this day to come, but-" She gasped, trying to not hyperventilate. "-not like this. Sev?"
"Tell me, what happened?"

"The ruddy Trio got captured, brought in, and my sister tortured her because of the Sword of Gryffindor." She looked at him, and realized that his face was trained to give nothing away. What is he up to?

"Go on."

"Dobby must have popped in, sprung the boys, and they tried to come up and rescue Hermione. They left, she got left behind, and she killed Luce."

"How did she get a wand?"

"I... slipped her Draco's wand when I saw Potter drop it. I swear, I did it without thinking. Hermione was just there."

"What aren't you telling..." His eyes opened a fraction as he figured it out. "She inherited you."

Narcissa nodded, body quivering.

"I... Sev, I'm okay with this. I really am, I just need... I want us to survive." She turned her face away, trying to hide tears from falling. Severus realized this and took a gentle tone with her.

"After the debacle with Marcus Flint, The Dark Lord is unhappy with the... caliber of his followers as of late. Perhaps I can persuade him to replenish his ranks with suitable half-bloods like myself." The look they exchanged was reminiscent of this same conversation that happened eighteen years ago.

"I can start working on the Andromorph Potion."

Narcissa nodded at the plan, hating herself as she realized what would have to happen. She could save Hermione, but it would involve sacrifice.

Just survive today. Moralizing can wait until tomorrow.

I wasn't sure if the wolf saw me, or knew where the conflagration rounds were coming from as it was shrouded in a dark cloud. I was looking to see her emerge from one side while Severus was floating overhead to watch the other. He nodded, signaling me to open fire on her. Don't think of it as a her, as Lavender. It is just a mad werewolf that will kill all of us.

My nerves were like sharpened steel as it felt like time itself slowed down. It makes you think that you have all the time in the world; the moments you will re-live over and over and question your actions. Having had and used a time turner for a year, I know that time doesn't actually slow down as much as your focus and mind kick into a type of hyper-drive. Everything is crystal clear, everything feels more real even though it will come across as a blur the next day. Ron was yelling from behind me as I saw the werewolf, covered in blood, start to run out of the cloud towards the hotel and Sipson.

I raised the assault-style rifle up, stock resting against my shoulder, and shot a three-round burst straight at it. Gravity caught up with the pellets and splashed fire onto the wolf's calves and heels. She - no, it - flinched in pain and stumbled onto the ground with human clumsiness. The werewolf's head turned in my direction, pain and rage glinting out of the amber eyes. It was coming for me.

I didn't have time to worry about Ronald as he started to run towards her. He wasn't blocking my shot yet, and I didn't know how many rounds I had left, but fire was my friend as I pulled the trigger. Stay out of the way, Ronald, please! Ron seemed to jerk upwards, hanging by his ankle out of the werewolf's reach and I realized that Snape had done it to save him.
The werewolf came straight for me, and I unloaded the rifle into the head. Fire blossomed and seared the face, the acrid smell of burning hair thick in my own nose as I realized that her airways were searing shut. The werewolf gasped as if having an asthma attack, claws tearing at her own throat, and collapsed face-down onto the pavement. Lavender was still. *Was she dead?* The sound of a motor overhead faded into my awareness, and I realized that the airport probably had a helipad nearby. *I think we just made the news...* I cursed to myself silently and wondered if I would need my solicitor to keep me out of jail for breaking the Statute of Secrecy.

Ron stood beside me now, and I was vaguely aware that he had his own rifle pointed at me. He said something, but I couldn't understand it. *Didn't matter, a Lich was on the loose and I had a dead werewolf in front of me.* I was too focused on the target. I had run out of ammo, and I wasn't certain if she was dead. I walked to stand over her and let the rifle swing back on its strap. I couldn't recall slinging the rifle onto my back; I knew I was going into shock and everything was about to get a bit blurry. *I had to focus. I had to be certain.* I dropped to one knee beside her, and could either reach for my wand to check her vitals, or Draco's pistol with the werewolf ammo. The weight of the pistol was getting a bit too familiar now as I worked the slide to chamber the first round.

"Don't!" Ron pleaded. The werewolf twitched, and I wasn't about to double-guess myself while this close. *Not while she was under the control of blood magic.* I unloaded the pistol into her chest, straight into her heart. I could smell the acid burn its way in and silver particles seep into her bloodstream. *Now she was dead.*

"WHY? WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!!" Ronald shook his rifle at me emphatically. I knew he wasn't about to shoot me. *He's not a cold-blooded killer. I am.*

I could tell there was something new in my voice, a flatness that should have unnerved me. "I had to. It was my job." I holstered the pistol and got up, stepping away from the dead body. Ron knelt over Lavender, wracked with grief as he sobbed. He looked at me then, and his gaze held the weight of a man much older than Ron should have ever looked. His eyes were judging me, and I could tell his disgust was about more than killing Lavender in self-defense.

"You didn't *have to* do this. You *didn't have to.*" I prepared myself to dispose of the body. *Not Lavender, the body.*

"Step away from the werewolf, Ron. I have to do this. The last thing we need is a dead werewolf reanimated by Trixymort into a new kind of inferi.*

"SHE'S FUCKING DEAD BECAUSE OF YOU!" Severus landed and bound Ronald, pulling him away from the body. I looked at the Headmaster and wondered if Fiendfyre would work. He nodded, and I was taken aback at that.

"I won't let it get brought back because of Trixymort."

"HER NAME IS LAVENDER BROWN! I LOVE HER!" Ron broke down into sobs. "Let me give her a proper burial, at least. Please. PLEASE!"

I shook my head as my gaze was torn between watching the body and Ron's hateful glare.

"Severus, pull him back some more." I shouldn't wait for the body to be reanimated by Trixymort. *I didn't even want to imagine how deadly this could become under the Lich's full power.*

*I WILL NEVER FUCKING FORGIVE YOU IF YOU DO THIS!*

*I know, Ron,* I thought as I wordlessly conjured Fiendfyre from the Elder Wand.
It was easier now.
Severus was able to get the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad deployed to set the Knight Bus upright, repaired, and sent it on its way in a matter of minutes after magic was restored. INTERCON sent its own team of Obliviators to deal with the muggle tour group at Stonehenge, while the magical fallout over Europe was minimal. *I'm amazed Cissy and Bertrand pulled that off on their own.* His best friend was unconscious in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts alongside Hermione, and a grief-stricken Fleur was sitting outside of their private room as Harry was finally discharged to light duty. Severus hated himself for doing it, but he reinstated the glamour to hide his friend's baby bump and made Poppy take a wand-oath to stay silent about the pregnancy.

Harry wasn't happy about the state of the Wizarding World; he was out of commission for a few days and Bellatrix Lestrange apparently just walked into the Ministry right after a jailbreak. Cormac had his arms crossed and rolled his eyes as the three of them were trying to put together a report for Kingsley.

"Cormac, I specifically did NOT want to have to leave you in charge because I *just knew* you would lower the protocols and standards and just make everyone from the D.A. an Auror!"

"Harry, we needed wands out there, protecting the public! And call me McLaggen!" Cormac retaliated angrily. Severus could tell that McLaggen had expected this to be his crowning achievement, to prove he did belong in charge of something. *There is a lot of ambition in that Gryffindor.*

"And, pray tell, McLaggen, what made you think you needed to have modified muggle weapons of my design stockpiled and handed out to the Aurors?" Severus kept his features still, but was livid to see his ammo perverted into much more lethal countermeasures. There were at least 5 versions now, and he was still uncertain what they all did.

"Jealous I improved on your idea, Snape?" He scoffed audibly. "Sleeping potion. It was a good idea when you made the conflagration rounds, so I doubled your order and designed a few more types."

Harry's eyes widened at that. "What else?"

"Black ones have Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, don't think we'll need much of that. Silver ones were for werewolves, and the green ones here." Cormac seemed to button his lips at the last one.

"What do the green ones have inside them?" Severus drawled.

"Um, poison. Just a blend of various venoms." Cormac shrugged. "It wasn't that expensive..."

"You're trying to justify the cost? Let's see, while I was out, you named yourself and eleven others full Aurors, designed lethal ammunition, and sent them out into the world with the muggle guns and no formal training? What if Katie had green ammo on her today, in the Knight Bus? What if that fell into muggle hands?!" Severus had never seen Harry this livid.

"Okay, so I'll pull the green ammo. We got magic restored, right?"

"Narcissa and Agent Bertrand did that, with the red ammo. Not you. You got Hit Wizard Peasegood and four new Aurors killed in one day!"

Cormac stood up against Harry, chest puffed wide in defiance. "That was NOT my fault! Blame Bellatrix! What have *you* been doing, Potter? We needed people out there doing something, not
"You think I've just sat behind a-" Harry said incredulously. "You have no FUCKING clue what I've done and risked!"

Severus sneered at McLaggen, thinking about how Fleur lost a wing to a mad vampire and Harry had his boyfriend hold a vigil with a wooden stake in his hand in case Harry turned. "Trust me, Mister McLaggen, there were people out there looking for the rogue Death Eater. They combed the earth, and faced the very thing nightmares from from. The odd void of Dementors in Europe, the abrupt change in the Romanian Ministry?"

"Well I never heard anything about that." Cormac said, almost petulantly.

Harry finally snapped. "That's because secret missions are supposed to remain secret."

"Well the public needs to feel protected."

"Nobody was going to feel safe while the whole country was Squibbed. Since you went ahead and made everyone an Auror, you can take them all through formal training like Neville and I did."

At the mention of Neville, Cormac shot a challenging glare at him.

"Rumor is that you killed him, Potter. Couldn't share the credit, could you?"

"I don't have to answer to you. Neville died fighting for what he believed in. Set up a training schedule; we'll be using Hogwarts' Room of Requirement. Understand?" Harry isn't even going to ask permission first, is he?

McLaggen sneered his smile. "Yes, sir."

"Now, go." Cormac huffed as he left the Auror office. Harry exhaled in frustration while Severus chose his words carefully.

"I'm glad I have you and Fleur still; probably the only ones who will listen and do what needs doing."

"I happen to agree with McLaggen's sentiments, as much as it pains me to do so."

"What?!"

"I disagree with his methods however."

"You cannot be serious."

"I am; there has been too much done by myself and Miss Delacour. She needs rest, and to return to her teaching. I have a school to run and to be unusually forthright, I do not trust the Ministry at this time."

"All the more reason for me to keep you closer Severus."

"Albus would disagree. Keep your wits about you, Harry."

"I can't do this without you, Severus. Please."

"I was never meant to survive the war, Harry. It's about time you fight your battles on your own. Cross reference Ministry workers who either survived the attack or were unexpectedly absent that
Ron felt utterly alone. Home felt empty now; it was just his mum and Percy there now. Dad's run off with a muggle tart my age, Ginny is off being a Quidditch Star, Charlie is still studying Dragons in Romania, and George has his joke shop. Ron couldn't believe that his brother actually fired him from the joke shop, either. So I'm not as creative as Fred was, but I could man the register. Instead, George kept on the attractive witch behind the counter, mentioned something about always arriving promptly on time and having the proper attitude. Ron knew how to smile and play nice to the customers, his brother just had it in for him. Besides, Ron always meant to join the Auror ranks. He just needed some time first.

What Ron didn't expect was to have to answer to, of all people, Cormac McLaggen. Ron never really forgave him for knocking Harry out in Quidditch when he played Keeper in his place. Ronald always thought that it would be challenging, but ultimately easy to be an Auror alongside Harry. Now he's realizing that he's going to have to answer to McLaggen and go through training without Harry by his side...

"Hey Ron? Mum said dinner is ready." Percy called from the stairwell.

"I'll be right down!" He replied. Meals at The Burrow were uncomfortably quiet, reminding them of everyone who was no longer there. Molly had a hard time cooking for only three people, and once realized that she had cooked Arthur's favorite dish and threw it out immediately.

As Ron sat down at the table, he saw Percy fidget with a small box in his fingers. "What you got there?"

Percy's head jerked up and he sheepishly pocketed the box. "Um, nothing." Molly's wan smile told Ronald that she knew what was going on.

"I think she'll say yes, Perce." Percy was going to propose to someone?

"It's been years since we've seen each other. But I've got until the end of the year to marry, or else..." Ron frowned at that. He had thought about marrying Lavender, until the law was passed that effectively banned him from marrying another Pureblood. He thought the law was stupid; they should have only forced the evil Purebloods to marry muggle-borns. At least they ended that nonsense about homosexual marriages. He used to think he and Hermione might wind up together someday, but Ron had finally decided that Hermione was damaged goods ever since the Malfoy bitch got her claws into her.

Don't think about it; don't imagine a naked, sweaty Hermione panting as Narcissa Malfoy had her own naked body pressed against her, putting her fingers and tongue inside her... Hermione putting her own tongue inside where Draco Malfoy was born! Merlin, she killed Lavender, even as you begged her not to!

Ron shuddered at that, feeling dirty and disgusted as he knew that Harry was sucking off Malfoy's little prick as well. What the fuck does that family have that I don't? The bloody Malfoys took away both of his best friends, and the feeling of being alone struck him even harder as Percy sheepishly showed off the small engagement ring he had purchased earlier that day. Ron realized that Percy and his mother were expecting a response as the delicate ring was being shown off, so he affected a polite smile and nodded.

"Yeah, it's great." Hermione fucking murdered the only woman who loved me. And my best mate is letting Draco bugger him.
"You know, Ron, if you aren't engaged by January, the Ministry will pair you up. Might not be so bad; you're guaranteed to not get paired with any snooty Pureblood girls from Slytherin." Percy remarked.

Ron shrugged at that, not really caring about whatever witch the Ministry told him to marry. He wouldn't love her, but he wouldn't hate her either.

"Exactly how are they going to pair people up, anyways? Am I expected to... you know?" Molly asked.

Percy shook his head kindly. "I think women past their child-bearing years are exempt. At least, that's what Del-

The back of Molly's hand rapped Percy on the shoulder. "I'll have you know I'm not that old yet. I just... don't want anyone after Arthur."

Percy frowned at that. "So, you don't like the marriage law?"

Molly winced at the admission. "I think it could use some... compassion... for those who have already spent their lives together. I mean, it has some good ideas in there."

Ron snorted at that in agreement. "Like breaking up 'Mione and the Frigid Ice Bitch." That made Molly titter while Percy guffawed. Molly served dinner while Percy tried to think up of the best way to propose to his former sweetheart. Ron realized that even though his family may have shrunk, that they were still good people.

I opened my eyes, and the blurry sight of my mum disoriented me as I took in the ceiling above me. *Why is she at Hogwarts?*

"Hermione, looks like you're finally up. What do you last remember?" *Killing Lavender Brown while Ron screamed that he'd never forgive me.*

"Um," My throat felt dry and scratchy. "I was on the Knight Bus, and I had to cast Fiendfyre."

"You're right, this just looks like Draco's exhaustion, Poppy." She replied, putting a glass of water by my bedside. "Did she over-exert herself magically?"

"I'm right here, mum." I said, rolling onto my side to grab the water. Behind her was my wife, who had bandages on her body and looked much worse for the wear. "Cissy!"

"Shh, 'Mione. She's been out as long as you have been, I reckon."

"What? What happened to her?" I sipped the water slowly as I took in Narcissa's injuries.

"From what I've read in the papers, she and Agent Bertrand reversed the... 'squibbing' of the UK. Took on a hundred or so Dementors." She had a crumpled up copy of the *Daily Prophet* in her hands. It was November, and the headline *Scorned Shrew Silences Quidditch Star* was followed by a byline by none other than Rita Skeeter. *She got her job back?* I looked back at my wife, and pushed the Skeeter problem out of my head for now.

"Why is Cissy bandaged up?"

"They used some sort of magical fire in their guns to scatter the Dementors. The flames got a little too close to her and she passed out when the Dementors swarmed her. If it weren't for Agent..." My
mother took a steadying breath. "Well, the theory is that there is a tether between you two and when Narcissa depleted her magical reserves fighting the Dementors... I don't really get this level of magic. It's too abstract."

_This was pretty surreal, my muggle mother explaining magical injuries to me. Madame Pomfrey was behind her._

"Best that you get some more rest, Hermione. You're healing for two right now. Have some chocolate." She handed my mother a vial of strengthening solution. "That's for Draco." I bit into the dark chocolate and savored the flavor as it melted on my tongue. _I'm eating this because Cissy ran into Dementors?_

"Where is dad? Why are you here?" I thought for a second. _How are you here?_

My mother smiled kindly. "Well, your father is back at Granger Hospital, treating the minor cuts and injuries, then he's got a Potion Abuse group session. I swear, muggle psychiatry is completely foreign here, and I'm glad to share my wisdom of PTSD and non-magical first aid with Poppy here. I'm just checking in on you and the others to be able to have first-hand diagnosing experience with magical illnesses. Oh, and Winky brought me. Headmaster Snape thought it would be beneficial to both us and Winky to work together."

I looked down to see the demure house-elf by my mother's side. "Winky is sad to hear about Herpy, Master Granger. She was a good and loyal elf." A pang of remorse went through me as I recalled that, and my voice choked up.

"Thank you. You be a good assistant to my parents, okay?" _I used to want to free them all, now I'm just glad to see them safe and well taken care of._ I wondered if there was any way to include the treatment of House Elves in the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, like basic labor laws.

"Speaking of assistants, your former beau Viktor has inquired about a job. Apparently he's been unemployed for a while now and his citizenship status forbids him from working in the MLE. You wouldn't be offended if I hired him as security, would you?"

I shook my head, confused at this. _No, not at all._ _Why is he looking for a job, when he could play Quidditch professionally?_

"Okay, good. I'll see you later, then. Winky, can you take us back to the hospital?" The house-elf nodded and the two of them vanished. I tried to get back to sleep, but couldn't get myself to. Not while I saw how hurt Narcissa was. _Would she have risked this if she had never known me?_ I thought about how much the world had changed since the war. I'm now married to a Slytherin, Bellatrix is an undead Lich eating Dementors, and the friend I thought I might marry someday hates me now.

It was, I realized, a really good thing that she and I wound up together. She fights her battles in different ways than I do, but together we have done some amazing things that could not have happened if we were by ourselves. _If I had researched it better, I could have rescued my parents from Australia through legal channels, right?_

"Hermione, you got a letter. Looked important." I looked up to see Cho Chang, holding a newspaper and an envelope.

"Oh, thank you." The seal told me it was from my solicitor, so I went ahead and opened it first.
"I don't get how you Gryffindors have friends; you've been hospitalized every month so far. I've already worried myself sick. Be careful out there, okay?"

I smiled, touched at her concern as I began reading. *Misses Granger-Black, pursuant your actions... pleased to inform you that the International Confederation... suspended the Statute of Secrecy... WHAT?!* I jerked my head up, shocked at the pronouncement.

"Everything okay?" Cho asked.

"The Statute of Secrecy was suspended?" I asked. Cho shrugged at that.

"The last 24 hours have been pretty strange; if it had been suspended, its been reinstated." I looked back down at the letter and kept reading.

*Your wife, working alongside Agent Bertrand, has been recommended for an international award along with a cash reward for reversing the loss of magic in Europe. I have recommended that any monetary award be donated to the War Orphans Fund. "Wow. Narcissa as an international heroine."* I put down the letter and took the *Daily Prophet*. It was dated October 29th.

"She's not the only one." Cho said, pointing at the headline. "I hope that this story gets drowned out; Rita's a vile piece of work."

**RITA REDEEMED! NEW BOOK REVEALS ROMANCE WITH REGULUS BLACK, DEFECTOR FROM YOU-KNOW-WHO!**

"I don't even want to read that trash, do I?" Cho shook her head sadly.

"No, it's all stuff that can't be proven. That she was *instrumental* in helping a now-dead Death Eater try to make You-Know-Who mortal again. And today she's back at mud-slinging at your wife, writing that Viktor got too old for her taste."

I handed back the newspaper, pissed at the blonde insect.

"How was Hogwarts?"

"Completely quiet, the stone gargoyles and the suits of armor just watched the perimeter until Severus and that Agent came back with you two. It was scary, at first. You know; no magic for anyone at the school, we were all like muggles. Of course, the muggle-born students adjusted easier while the purebloods seemed to have more respect for those who didn't grow up with magic."

"Sounds like Fleur's classes are going to be a lot easier now." I mentioned, reaching over to the next bed where Narcissa was. My fingertips could almost brush against her. "Cho, do you think you could help me?"

She looked at me warily. "Help you do what? You two are in the Hospital Wing."

"I just want to be able to touch her. She's my wife, and she has been hurt."

She stood still, reticent. "You know you can't, um, do anything in here, right?"

I was taken aback. "I want to hold her hand."

Cho lowered her eyes as she apologized. *I'm gay, not crass.* She awkwardly reached for Narcissa's hand and leaned it over so I could hold it. It was cold; much colder than I would have expected. I nodded my thanks to my suite mate while I let my hand warm her up.
"It's going to be okay, Cissy. We made it. We saved magic today." I had no idea where TrixyMort, Dolohov, or any of the other Death Eaters that escaped went. But I was home when I was with her. And we'd be okay.

I startled awake, uncertain as to why I felt so alert. The weight in my left hand made me clench for a moment as the free-fall sensation ended. *I am with Narcissa. We are safe.*

As I looked around, I saw Viktor sitting by my bed silently. *His proximity must have woken me up.*

"Hey Hermione. I just wanted to make sure you would be okay with me working around your parents." He looked past me and over towards my wife, and I realized he was keeping his voice down so as not to wake her.

I shrugged, uncertain how to respond to that. *I mean, it shouldn't be weird, right? Then the thought flew out of my mouth before I could stop it. "Why aren't you playing Quidditch?"*

"Hermione, you saw the World Cup. What team wants someone who would willingly make them lose? Besides, endorsements are where the real money is. But Draco is refusing to listen."

"What does Draco have to do with it?" I asked as I remembered that Malfoy Industries had serious investments in Quidditch equipment and endorsements.

Viktor frowned at the question. "I thought that my original contract with Lucius might honored with Draco, but alas it seems not."

"Um, I'll... talk to my son, um, step-son about it." Viktor's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Oh, no Hermione, I don't mean to trouble you about that. I just..." He sighed as a pained look crossed his face. "The wizarding world has changed immensely in so short a time. I almost wish we could go back to how it was, you know? It was... simpler."

"Everything looks simple when you aren't really involved in it. I used to worry about passing my exams, and now... well, I still have the N.E.W.T.'s in the spring, but I'm also dealing with the Ministry getting taken over by Chief Warlock Ogden and his lemmings in the Wizengamot."

"You're not a fan of this new marriage law either?" Viktor shrugged.

"They went off and 'defined' marriage to tear existing relationships apart and force people to marry with regard to blood status!"

"But you're muggle-born, you're not really restricted from your choice in men." I winced at his reply, realizing that he wouldn't get it.

"I'm perfectly fine with having Narcissa as a wife, actually." Viktor frowned at that, realizing his mistake.

"Oh. I didn't think... well, what are you going to do? Let them choose a wizard for you?"

"I really have no idea. I think I'm going to oppose this through every legal maneuver my solicitor can find, short of emigrating."

Viktor nodded in consideration. "If you're in need of a wizard, you know, to have a sham marriage with to keep you and um, your wife and you together... I'm here."

*Did he just half-arsedly offer himself for marriage as if he were jumping on a grenade for me? How*
Narcissa was glad that they rented out Leeds Castle for this special day as she stood by the Vicar, waiting to see her wife walk down the aisle like a proper bride. They would do it right this time for everyone, including the international media that was swarming outside the gates. Jean and William were in the front row on the bride's side with Ginny and Fleur as bridesmaids. My Hermione would want to walk herself down the aisle, wouldn't she? Jean looked already ready to cry. Severus was her best man while Draco and Harry finished off the wedding party. I already had a Maid of Honor and all that girly claptrap, and this way I have my best friend, my son, and Harry by my side.

Besides, Hermoine is finally getting the proper wedding she deserved all along. Narcissa wondered what her wife was going to look like, considering that David Mallett spent all day on her hair and makeup, it had to be spectacular.

The Slytherin chose to wear something out of the regency period with a modern twist; black leggings that tucked into riding boots, a cream colored collared blouse with a plunging neckline, matched with a snug silver vest and navy tail coat that brought out her eyes. She was pulling of a femme version of the literary Mister Darcy, which suited her just fine. Judging from the looks of some of the women there, it was absolutely dashing.

Her sister, Andromeda Tonks, was at the back of the room and directing Teddy to carry the pillow with the rings up to his godfather Harry. Teddy was dressed in a dapper little suit and every woman in the room felt a tug on their heartstrings as the toddler chuckled happily and made his way to the front. Draco took the pillow with the rings as Harry scooped him up and rested the boy on his hip, beaming at both Draco and Ginny. The three of them might be an unusual couple, but they made it work.

The only other Weasley to make the wedding was George, and it was like an old pain to her heart. Hermione really wanted them at her wedding, but apparently some wounds run too deep. She knew that Ron wouldn't be here, but had hoped that Arthur and Jennifer would have. A bit of motion caught her eye as everyone began to stand and turn towards the back of the room. It left her breathless; the eggshell dress had an empire waist and kissed the ground perfectly, regency-era-inspired cap sleeves, and white gloves that went all the way up to her elbow. Her hair was perfect ringlets cascading down either side of her face, and was pinned into place with a series of tiny flowers that served as an anchor for a veil that she declined earlier in the week. Hermione had said that there would be no surprises here, and Narcissa promptly agreed. She's radiant as my Lizzie Bennett.

Her eyes were watery already as she made her way towards Narcissa and it wouldn't be long until they both cried tears of happiness together. Hermione mouthed the words "I love you" as they joined hands before the Vicar. and Narcissa silently replied I love you too mentally, making the pair of them want to cry all the more.

The Vicar cleared her throat as she addressed the room. "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today to make new the vows of Marriage between these extraordinary women. Though their beginning was unconventional, and their path has been challenging, they stand here today to declare and solemnize their love and devotion to each other in Holy Matrimony. Before we begin, if anyone has a reason that these two should not be wed, speak now, or forever hold your peace.

Narcissa's eyes were captured by Hermoine's that she didn't see the Vicar's wand out, slashing entirely through Severus and disemboweling Draco before binding Hermione in thick, magical ropes and turned the wand onto the Ice Queen herself. Cissy's eyes darted back and forth as she heard
Harry gasp and try to heal Draco as his blood poured out over the floor. With a flick of her left hand, the Vicar's face changed as a glamour shimmered away to reveal the cold, dead eyes of her sister Bellatrix. The Bone-white skull she wore as a mask was now covered in blood and dust, as if the woman quit paying attention to her own body's needs once she became a Lich.

"I have an objection, dear sister! You have an abomination growing within you!" Narcissa looked down, and her stomach was as flat as ever as she couldn't make sense of the words. Hermione looked at her with shock and betrayal.

"You're pregnant?! You didn't tell me, you've hidden this? How- WHO?!" The Gryffindor turned angry as she believed that her wife had cheated on her. "It was Viktor, wasn't it!" She screamed, spittle hitting Cissy in the face.

Narcissa shook her head, ready to deny it as she felt a pain unlike anything she had felt before in her abdomen. It was sharp fire pushing outward as blood exploded from her, mysterious bits of flesh and meat that made no sense on the ground before her. Cissy fell to her knees as the pain fully hit her, and her vision narrowed as she realized that she had suffered the modified entrail-exploding curse.

Our daughter is dead...

She bolted upright in bed, gasping and panting as she trembled from the nightmare.

"Love? Are you okay? You scared me!" Hermione gasped, hand feeling warm as Narcissa realized she was freezing cold in the Hospital Wing.

"I uh... nightmare." She replied, hand clutched securely on her wife's hand. *We both are alive and well. It was all a horrible dream.* Narcissa tried to smile but found herself trembling and ready to cry. Hermione struggled as she got out of her bed and embraced her wife.

"You're okay, sweetie. It was just a bad dream. We're here now, and we're okay." Her hands were comforting as a kiss was placed on the older woman's forehead.

"Okay... what... Last thing we- I... Stonehenge. The Dementors! Did we," Narcissa gulped, licking her lips, "did we restore magic?"

Hermione nodded happily. "We lost maybe a day in here; but you saved magic. And the International Confederation is hailing you as a hero."

"Lovely. Our business is all over the tabloids, isn't it?" Hermione winced as she pointed at the stack on the table.

"Witch Weekly has an article called 'Are they or aren't they?', speculating if we're going to find men to marry or defy the Ministry and stay together. The *Prophet* is still going after you and Krum, though."

Narcissa rolled her eyes. "Of course. How bad was it? Let me guess, 'Teacher tantalizes teenage heart-throb'?"

Hermione's face soured. "*Scorned Shrew Silences Quidditch Star.* By Rita Skeeter."

"Well she got back on her feet quickly, that mosquito must have smelled blood in the air."

"She's claiming she was a war heroine by helping your cousin Regulus betray and bring about the end of The Dark Lord."
"We'll settle that account someday. For now, I need to repay you for keeping me alive after the Dementors swarmed me." Their eyes met and Hermione was surprised at the look she saw in them.

"I um, wait. What? You want to...?"

"Yes. Besides, we need this. We both need to recharge and our Bonding will assist us, Miss. You've got the toys and equipment in your room, right?" There was a mischievous glint in her eyes that made Hermione's heart pound in anticipation.

Hermione had a knowing smile at that. "I do, but I'd like it if maybe you were in charge tonight." Her eyes were coquettishly flirting. "Maybe I can earn points for Gryffindor."

Narcissa surveyed the room and set out the toys she was going to use while Hermione prepared herself in the bathroom. She was wearing her midnight blue formal teaching robes as her wife stood in the doorway, every bit of the naughty schoolgirl reflected in the modifications of her school robes. Cissy smiled to herself for the surprise she had in store for her.

"Kneel for me." Hermione complied, her nipples erect through the blouse so her wife knew that she wasn't wearing a bra. Narcissa sat on the edge of the bed, legs crossed at the ankles like a proper Pureblood witch might do. The way her eyes trailed over the Gryffindor's body made the girl flush and even more turned on as she primly unfastened the top of her robes enough to expose her breasts. A solitary finger traced around her own areola as Hermione subconsciously licked her lips in need. The desire was like a fiery tether between them both as they felt drawn to each other, to bring the two flames together to burn higher than either could alone.

"Come." Narcissa said through half-hooded eyes.

Hermione started to get up when Narcissa stopped her. Hermione looked at her wife, confused. Narcissa gave a small smile as she said, "Crawl to me." Even though Narcissa nearly whispered it, Hermione heard it for the command it was. The Gryffindor wasn't used to seeing this kind of dominance from Narcissa and she thought that she might enjoy it occasionally.

Hermione came towards Narcissa on all fours, and did it slowly enough to come across as almost predatory. *Staying in control here is going to be a challenge,* Narcissa thought as she slid her bare left foot forward, allowing the robes to fall mid-shin. Hermione leaned forward and kissed the exposed skin, as if in worship of the woman before her.

"Stop." Narcissa said, almost sharp. Hermione pulled back and looked up to her wife. When Narcissa was certain she was back in charge, she ran her hands over her wife's curls, stroking them in a petting manner. "Hermione... I um, I'm not used to being Dominant with you... What if I mess up, push you too far? I don't want to have that hurt us... I..." Narcissa stuttered.

"You won't hurt me. Like you said, we both need this tonight. I'm used to being in control in the bedroom, but I want to give it up to you. I *want* you to have this, because I do love you, and know you won't harm me." Hermione took a deep breath. "Use me, Cissy."

Narcissa looked into the deep chocolate eyes that looked at her. She saw the truth in her wife's eyes and knew that Hermione was right. She realized Hermione would say something if she got uncomfortable; they did trust each other with their lives in battle, so why not with sex? *I can do this.* Narcissa's smile was genuine as she pet Hermione again, fist her hands into her hair, pulling with a sharp tug at the back of her head, and forced her wife to crawl up onto her own bed on all fours. The cold feeling of metal came with a ratcheting sound as Hermione was restrained with the muggle handcuffs and a quick push had her face-down to the mattress.
"Now behave or else I'll... punish you." Narcissa said huskily as Hermione nodded with a whimper. Narcissa tilted her head to look up her wife's skirt and was pleased to see no knickers present. She let the back of her fingernails trace up the inner thighs, with just enough force so that it wouldn't tickle and instead be teasing. Leaning over her wife, a nip at the top of her ear with teeth made Hermione moan as Cissy expertly avoided touching her wife's labia.

"You think you're being a good girl, don't you? But we both know naughty girls don't wear their knickers... I may need to punish you for being the naughty girl you are. Then I'll give you the fucking you deserve." Narcissa she smiled as she saw Hermione's thighs quiver in anticipation, arching her back in need for her desire to be quenched.

"Oh no, my sweet Gryffindor. Soon I'll make you beg for it." Narcissa said in a low voice. Hermione whimpered as she felt the fire grow inside of her. She knew Narcissa would satisfy her needs, but she first had to obey her wife in order receive that sweet mercy.

Narcissa smiled as she placed her hand firmly on her wife's magnificent ass. She made a slow, sensual circle as she rubbed the cheeks and audibly whispered, "Good girl. Now let me hear you count."

Before Hermione could ask what she meant by that, she felt a sharp sting as the hand spanked her. She gave a yelp in surprise, endorphins rushing to her bum while Narcissa rubbed the spot with her hand. Hermione moaned then, and her voice was laced with need as she said, "One."

Cissy spanked Hermione again and again, slowly increasing the intensity over time. Hermione's inner walls clenched but she still counted her way to ten.

"Mmm. Good girl." Narcissa said, her left hand reaching under and unbuttoning the white blouse. "Thank you Cissy."

"Time for a reward." Narcissa said, her voice low as she cupped then squeezed a breast. Hermione's whimper turned into a sharp intake of breath as Narcissa pinched the nipple expertly before doing the same to the other breast.

"Tonight, I own all of you. I own your body. I own your orgasms. Understand?" Narcissa asked as her lips were brushing against Hermione's.

"Yes" Hermione said instantly. Narcissa enjoyed herself as she pinched and rolled the nipples between her fingers. She pulled away, smiling as she heard Hermione's quiet protesting sounds. She knew she could tease the Gryffindor all night this way, but decided to be merciful. Almost merciful, Narcissa mused as she slid two fingers into her wife and saw her rock her body back into it, wanting more depth. Cissy pumped the fingers in and out to leave the girl shaking.

"Goodness, you're so wet... Did you know spanking makes you this wet?" Narcissa asks.

Hermione shook her head, unable to get coherent words out.

"I asked you a question. If you are unable to speak, I can stop..." Narcissa threatened playfully.

Hermione panted as she steadied herself. "No, I didn't know. But I like it. I like you doing it."

"Good girl. Now I want you to come for me like the slut you are." Narcissa's fingers worked inside and pounded on her g-spot, and Hermione flinched, reminded that her wrists were cuffed together. Cissy moaned at the sight of this, knowing she could get off if Hermione did.
It didn’t take long before Hermione cried out, her walls spasming around the fingers inside her and collapsed into the bed. Narcissa smiled at that, rubbing her wife's back as she was coming back into her own mind. Cissy undid the handcuffs but made it apparent that they weren't done yet.

"Narcissa? Do you want me to get you off as well?" Hermione asked, feeling a need to serve and please her wife like she never had before.

"No, I have other plans. Bring your head to the edge of the bed." Narcissa said. Hermione obeyed, uncertain as to what would happen next.

"I have a challenge for you. But I'm not certain you can handle it." Narcissa purred into Hermione's ear.

"I can do it. Please let me prove myself to you." Hermione begged.

Narcissa smiled and stood over her wife's face, raising the hem of her dress to show her the dark green strap on she was wearing under the robes. Perfectly hidden while I was sitting down at the edge of the bed, now I'm going to fuck her with it.

It was only sixteen centimeters long, but it was wide and looked large as it was so close to Hermione's face. "Then be a good girl and use your mouth on it." Narcissa ordered. Hermione gulped but complied, opening her mouth to suck on the toy. The sight of her wife being submissive and doing this made Narcissa moan, which coaxed Hermione to put more effort into her fellatio.

Narcissa recognized it and cupped her wife's head in order to guide her as she started to thrust with her hips a bit. When Hermione flinched back with a gag, Cissy pulled away in worry. Hermione refused to give up on this, however, and she clamped her hands down on the Slytherin's hips and pushed herself to take the cock even further down her throat.

Narcissa chuckled at that, seeing the overachiever refuse to back down as Hermione was getting turned on by hearing her wife's sounds of pleasure. The biggest sexual organ in the human body is the mind, Narcissa recalled hearing once, and she felt like she could mentally get herself off just from this.

"Oh, Hermione, you're a good little slut, aren't you?" Narcissa muttered mostly to herself as she pulled away. Hermione whimpered at the loss of the toy in her mouth, until she realized she was being put back into the doggie style position on the bed. Narcissa crawled up onto the bed behind her and put a quick kiss on her back to let her know where she was.

Narcissa pushed the strap on into Hermione with only some resistance, but when she hit the hilt, the ridged portion of the faux cock curved right around her wife's clit. Hermione rolled her hips at the sensation, greedily taking in all the pleasure she could get from her wife fucking her this way.

"I'm going to come with you, 'Mione. Don't go until I tell you to." Narcissa said as she bit her lip, the thrusting in and out as she heard and felt Hermione's moans change as she was at the edge of orgasm.

"Oh please… Cissy, please let me come..." Hermione begged, uncertain she could hold off her orgasm. A sharp swat on her ass cleared her mind as Hermione's skin began to go into a cold sweat as they rocked into each other.

Another swat with her hand made Hermione melt into her wife, which Narcissa took the opportunity to cast a lubrication charm on the Gryffindor's ass. Hermione tensed as she realized what just happened but a few coaxing words relaxed her again. Narcissa's thumb was over her wife's entrance,
doing light circles as her hips continued their merciless pounding into her cunt. Hermione began to moan at the new sensation and prepared herself for what was about to happen.

"Do you want me in?" Narcissa asked quietly, her thumb working the girl nearly speechless again.

"Do it." Hermione rasped, need taking over. She needed to be loved, to be used, to be fucked and penetrated and needed beyond comprehension. Narcissa gently eased her thumb inside with deliberate care. Hermione shuddered.

"Oh... Cissy, that's good. Don't stop..." Hermione weak voice said, her heart smiled as she continued to fuck Hermione. For a while the room was only grunts, moans, and Hermione's growls of pleasure.

"You're close." Narcissa said, bragging to herself.

"Please… Please… I can't keep... " Hermione begged for her release.

Narcissa groaned and smiled at that, idly wondering how soundproof the walls were here. She pounded away while her thumb worked its way in and out as she finally permitted her wife to orgasm. "Do it, let it go, let us both fucking come." The fiery tether was stronger than ever as Hermione's rocking went erratic as they both had powerful orgasms rip through their bodies at the same time.

Hermione's voice was wordless as her moans and screams were pure gibberish as her muscles clamped down so hard that Cissy couldn't thrust in anymore. She pulled her thumb out, slowly but gently, while Hermione convulsed in pleasure from the crashing waves of orgasm.

"Good girl. Very, very good girl." Narcissa said as Hermione flopped onto her side on the bed, slipping in and out of consciousness.

"Thank you." Hermione mumbled, possibly asleep. Cissy removed the strap on, cast a cleaning charm over themselves, and transfigured her clothing into comfortable pajamas as she nuzzled the back of Hermione's head, covered in unruly curls.

"You're going to pass out, aren't you?" Cissy asked, smiling at her handiwork. Hermione never replied.

Narcissa snaked her hand around her wife and snuggled into her, glad for the role reversal this time and wondered when they might do it again as she drifted off to sleep as well.
I woke to Narcissa's plaintive "Ugh, Herpy! Coffee." It was like a sucker punch to my gut. *Wait, that's the amazing sex we had that I'm feeling. And guilt.*

"Herpy died, Cissy. She protected me from your sister." Cissy's face evoked shock and grief in a way I never wanted to see on her, melting into a cold resolve.

"My sister died a long time ago. I'm going to miss Herpy. But, I can order coffee as part of the faculty here... oh, crap. We're in your room. Nevermind."

I got up and out of bed, moaning gently at the slight soreness I felt between my legs as Narcissa bolted into the bathroom.

"Um, okay speed racer." I muttered, assuming she had a more pressing need to use it.

"Oh, sorry!" I heard my wife say as she exited the bathroom quickly, closing the door behind her. Her face was beet red.

"Cho?" I asked, and she nodded guiltily.

"Something tells me we should have cast *Muffliato* last night." Cissy said with a wince as we heard the toilet flush and our door to the bathroom opened up. Cho pointedly looked at the ground as she awkwardly stood in the doorway.

"Um, that would have been nice, Professor Black. Anyways, the bathroom is all yours now." Cho turned and went back to her room. Narcissa sheepishly went into the lavatory while I dug through my dresser to find school robes that were within regulation.

I had better only modify one set just for... non-academic reasons. I thought, blushing at the memory of last night. I checked the food and water levels for Crookshanks and idly wondered where he was last night.

Narcissa opened the door again, and I heard the sink running. I went in and joined her as we both began to brush our teeth. *When did she start leaving a toothbrush in my bathroom?* My mind wandered on to yesterday's conversation with Viktor as I spat and rinsed. *He was willing to marry me so I could still live with my wife? What about Narcissa?*

"Okay, Cissy, how come Draco is flatly refusing to re-enter talks to do any endorsement deals with
"Viktor?"

"Because he's got a good head for business, that's why." Narcissa scoffed. I stared at her in shock. *Why was she being so terse about this?*

"I don't know how you come to that conclusion; Hogwarts' curriculum last year with the Carrows and **being a Death Eater** don't seem to be the best way to learn that." Narcissa huffed, frustration clear in her voice. *Wow, I didn't realize this was such a touchy subject.*

"Who do you think he learned his business sense from? Someone had to run Malfoy Industries during the war when Lucius was in Azkaban. Didn't you wonder where all the snatchers came from?" *What is she talking about?*

"I thought Malfoy Industries was a legitimate enterprise!" *She hired the Snatchers, or repurposed employees from illegitimate businesses to hunt down the muggleborn?*

"It was, until Lucius got pinched. Our stock when down and we had to make ends meet by getting back to basics." *Oh, Merlin.*

"Basics?" I wasn't certain I wanted to know.

"Where do you think the Malfoy money originally came from? So yes, we were taking over protection for the whores on knockturn alley, bribed the MLE to turn a blind eye as our people took over the smuggling business. How did you think the bars got their constant supply while the rest of Diagon Alley was falling apart?" *The Malfoys were a crime family; I think I always knew this to be true but wanted to ignore it.*

"You're saying my company did organized crime?"

"No, I'm saying **my** company did. Yours is completely clean and I hope to keep it that way. And while I ran Malfoy Industries, I minimized the violence and casualties, even protected you and Harry after you two followed my son to Borgin and Burkes!"

My jaw dropped. "You knew about that?"

Narcissa scoffed at that. "Fenrir smelled you, but I wasn't about to risk Draco's mission from The Dark Lord by giving chase." She huffed as charmed her makeup on in the mirror. "You didn't have enough evidence to prove anything either, so I ran the Arithmantic Equations and did what was best. And what's best here is not investing in Viktor anymore."

"So my suggestion is immediately thrown out? You haven't even run the numbers, have you? Maybe ask for a bigger cut since you see this as a risk."

"The answer is still no, Hermione." *I can't believe she won't even listen to me.*

"I thought we were a family."

"Oh, don't pull that. From a business standpoint, it's a bad Call!" Narcissa replied slowly, anger in her voice.

"Well, we owe Viktor. He had a contract with-"

"-oh fuck Viktor!" Narcissa spoke over me, moving to leave my room. *How dare she walk away from me!* I grabbed her by the arm and spun her to face me.
"Tell me, was the Daily Prophet right for once? He become too old for you perversion, is that it?"
She didn't respond, and it sent me over the edge. "Answer me!"

Narcissa's jaw clenched, and I could tell she was fighting the Compulsion. "Is that an order, Lucius?"

My vision tunneled onto only seeing her. That cunt! "Don't compare me to that man!" I killed him and saved you from him, Cissy!

"Don't act like him then!"

"Act like him?" I scoffed at that, repulsed at her suggestion. "Have I ever beat you? I'm better than he ever was, Cissy. Or would you rather have that Death Eater prick instead of me?"

Narcissa's eyes narrowed as she looked down on me. "You need to do more than surpass the very low bar Lucius set if you want to be a decent wife to me."

"And you need to do more than hand me little passive-aggressive notes saying I'm 'abusive' to you and tell me how you want to be treated!" Narcissa pulled away, and I realized my hand was clenched firmly onto her arm.

"Hermione, let me go!" She tried to wrench herself away, and I instinctively pulled her back to me. She can't leave, she has to see she's wrong!

"NO! Tell me what I'm doing wrong!" I need to stop. I should stop. But I can't... I've gone too far. She's pissed me off, she needs to apologize! Don't let her go! Don't let her walk away and ruin this!

"You are hurting me!" Narcissa yanked her arm free, massaging it with her other hand. "And you're being... unnecessarily cruel. It's the Dark in you."

It's not me, it's not the Dark. It's her. It's her forcing me to be in this sham marriage, Bonded to her with this fucking Compulsion! "I am this way because of you, Narcissa!"

Cissy backed away from me, shaking her head with her eyes wide in fear. "No, you're not. You did this all by yourself."

"I don't even fucking remember that day right! All I have are flashes of memory, putting a wand in my hand..." I had to know. My hand pulled out the Elder wand before she could blink.

"LEGILIMENS!"

Dobby seemed to take one jerky step to the left as Bella's dagger effectively removed his arm. Harry dropped Draco's wand. Cissy banished the wand to roll under Hermione.

I already knew this; she pretty much put the wand in my hand.

Narcissa was shielding her son, ready to just pull Draco alongside herself and run out of the large room.

She was looking to run, I can see her trying to calculate her next step.

I looked on at the memory and realized that Narcissa was going to leave me alone to face off against Lucius, Bellatrix, and Fenrir.

I saw Narcissa pulling her son to the side of the room, as if a hidden passage might be there.

This was my house, and I didn't even know of this location. Narcissa had to know I couldn't defeat all three at once.
That was when it all fell into place in my head.

*She set me up to be killed. She left me there as a sacrifice to buy herself some time.*

I watched myself, in a moment of sheer terror and panic, use the first spell that came to mind and I cut Lucius in half. The blood sprayed out in all directions, as I now saw his death from the both sides of the room. It was horrifying and surreal; there was no way I should have been able to do that while outnumbered. Then I saw Narcissa double over in pain, as did the other me, but I couldn't recall the pain. I couldn't remember this cease-fire.

**Why don't I remember this part?**

Narcissa gasped as she forced herself back up, and realization hit her. I saw the shock in her face, and could tell the Compulsion took immediate effect as she cast a shield charm around the memory-Hermione before Bellatrix and Fenrir could retaliate.

"Stop! We must respect tradition!"

I saw confusion on Fenrir's face, and disappointment from Bellatrix. She wanted to keep fighting, to keep killing. There was almost nothing human left in her anymore, and it chilled me to my core. The other Hermione looked confused as well, her head tilted slightly as if straining to understand something. Her eyes flicked around while she kept her wand trained on Bellatrix.

What was I doing there?

"What are you talking about, Cissy dear?"

I could see her trying to choose her words wisely. It chilled me that I was standing right there, yet none of this looked familiar. "The mudblood... defeated my husband... in a legal duel, on his own property. She wins his estate by default."

Fenrir snarled, dismissing the idea entirely. "Witches cannot marry witches."

Narcissa straightened herself and, though she was shorter, seemed to look down at him. "And yet, Fenrir, I can feel the bond taking hold."

Fenrir grinned, baring wolf fangs while in human form. "Let me defeat her, then, and you can be mine."

Both Narcissa and Bellatrix seemed to think that a horrid idea.

Strangely enough, Bellatrix came to her sister's rescue. "You know nothing of Pureblood Tradition, beast. Go find something to eat."

Narcissa tossed a bag of Galleons to dismiss the werewolf. "Thank you for your services. Leave."

Fenrir left, his snatchers in tow and eager to count the Galleons they all received. The other Hermione tilted her head back upright, blinking slowly as she took it all in.

Why don't I remember this?!

Draco, who had been hiding behind Narcissa, finally spoke up. "Mother, Po- the boy said that The Dark Lord was on his way! We need to prepare!"

Bellatrix panicked as my lie fell apart. *She knew we had the real sword of Gryffindor all along. *MY VAULT!" Bellatrix ran past Draco and, sure enough, there was a secret passage to an apparition
Narcissa had her wand out, but it wasn't pointed at the memory-Hermione. She seemed relieved yet sad, and I could tell she understood she was now married to a muggle-born witch.

*She probably wished it were her precious Odette.*

The Hermione in the memory, however, finally seemed to understand what was going on as she yelled behind Narcissa’s shield charm. "What's going on? What *tradition* are you speaking of, who has been bonded?!"

"We're bonded; you and I." Narcissa laughed, and I could hear the desperation in it. "In the 'Till death do we part kind of way."

Draco shrank as he spoke up. "He will want to question her, possibly use her to his advantage."

I saw my own face shift from confusion to horror. "Voldemort's coming? We have to go!" I wanted to tell myself to run out of there.

An echo of panic went through me, and it was like deja vu.

"Why did I say 'we'? *What has happened to me?*!"

Narcissa frowned as she looked at the other me. She seemed regretful, but also resolved.

"I'm sorry Miss Granger, but I want to survive. *Obliviate.*"

As I finally understood what happened, I heard Narcissa tell Draco to lock me up in the basement until she could decide upon a plan.

The ground fell out from underneath me, and I staggered as I had to catch myself and sit down. The wand was trained directly between my wife's eyes. It wanted to be used, to punish the wicked woman before me. "YOU DIDN'T JUST GIFT ME A WAND! YOU SET ME UP TO DIE!"

Narcissa's eyes were red and focused on the wand-tip as tears started to roll down her cheeks. "I... I w-was desperate!"

Desperate? *So that justifies what she did to me?* She set me up as a sacrifice, then decided to erase my mind afterwards. "YOU. WIPED. MY. MEMORY!"

Tears rolled down Narcissa's cheeks as she continued her confession. "You did the same to your parents."

Rage flooded through me. "DON'T YOU DARE FUCKING BRING THEM UP! I WAS PROTECTING THEM!"

Cissy's voice dropped to almost a whisper, as if she were afraid and not wanting to spook a wild animal. "And I protected my son."

"NO! No, Cissy... No. *Protecting your son* would have been keeping him from taking the Dark Mark in the *first place!* You... set me up to... like a... lamb to slaughter." My throat was sore and burned as it felt dry. "*How can I ever trust you again?*"

"You can, 'Mione. I... I love you." Narcissa said, dropping to her knees before me. *This is all wrong. I'm... disgusted by her and her actions...*
"You don't love me. You never loved me. You sold me out and now you feel guilty about it. You feel stuck to me."

"I'm sorry my love. I really am, I didn't really know you then..." Excuses. I shook off the emotions that were trying to confuse me. Get rid of her.

"Get out of my room, Narcissa. GET OUT!" My door slammed open and I wasn't certain if I did that.

Narcissa nodded, shock etched in her face as she stumbled to her feet.

"STAY OUT OF MY LIFE!" I shrieked, banishing whatever I had on hand towards her. Cissy bolted out of the room, putting up a shield to protect herself as a stack of my thickest books and a pewter cauldron slammed against the walls and door on her way out. Eighth Year students looked in through the open door and quickly scurried past in silence. I could hear Narcissa crying as she made her way down a hallway, but I pushed it out of my mind as I idly fingered the Elder Wand in my school robes.

I am so done with that manipulative bitch. I slammed the door shut, put my wand down, and threw my coffee mug to shatter against the wall. I reached for anything, everything, and just stared to throw and destroy everything I could get my hands on.

Severus was on his way up to the Great Hall for Breakfast when he heard the commotion from the Eighth Year corridor. He made a detour, letting his robes billow majestically in his wake as students parted the hallway to give him leave. He came across the crying, crumpled form of Narcissa in the hallway, vanishing a pool of her own sick on the ground.

She's not one to vomit easily, what the hell happened?

"Clear the hallway. Now." Severus spoke, and the students who were moving away doubled their speed. Severus took a knee, dark eyes taking in his lifelong friend and trying to catch her gaze in his. If you can't talk, we can think to each other.

Narcissa's eyes met his, tears running down her cheeks as her face reflected the pain that was etched into her soul. "I don't want to talk about it."

Cissy, if an Auror walked in on this, he'd have you chucked into St. Mungo's to protect you from your husband.

"Well I don't have a husband, and according to the bloody ministry, I don't even have a wife. Probably for the best."

She's going to be a parent soon, and you two are going to have to get along for this to work.

Narcissa looked away in shame, and Severus realized what the fight wasn't about. "Oh, Cissy..." he muttered, and her red-rimmed eyes met his again.

"Cissy, you should have told-"

"-should have told her I'm pregnant? She won't care. She's left me, Severus."

You don't know that for certain.

"Yes, I do. She hates me now. She now knows that I left her for dead in order to live and save my
Cissy, you were in a war you did what you had to do. Any Slytherin-

"-she's not a Slytherin though! She's a fucking Gryffindor, just like Odette, just like Lily, and she does not understand us. We are not always good people but we try to do the right thing. She just doesn't see it." Her voice was cracking, just like her mindset was. Severus knew he had to be very careful here.

"She's too infected with Dark Magic and just learned I sacrificed her to save Draco." Narcissa sniffled loudly, speaking up. "And I won't beg forgiveness for wanting to survive."

"But in your example, she still dies." Severus said softly. Cissy's throat constricted with grief.

"Yes, well, I wasn't in love with her then."

"So you are in love with her now?"

"Yes. I am." Severus' heart broke for her, remembering how she took care of him after his breakup with Lily. Narcissa had to make sure he ate the first week, and acted as the go-between to return each other's stuff. She even told Sev (much after the fact, of course) that she let Lily know that she'd take care of him and wished her a happy future with James. Severus always hated the fact that he never got to give a decent goodbye to her; that his last memory was her being angry and that it couldn't end on at least a bittersweet hug and one last kiss. And he knew he would have to do the same for her now.

"She is going to be suspended for a week for assaulting a teacher, including being banned from the library." Narcissa's eyes met his, bewildered.

"That would be a first in Hogwarts punishments."

"You realize she'll never be allowed to set foot in your class again, correct?" Severus said it out loud, making sure she understood the gravity of the situation. "I don't want to try and force her to avoid you, since I'd rather see you to learn to get along. But if she attacks you again, I will have her expelled."

"Well, for now, I think us avoiding each other is for the best, Severus." Severus' lips pressed thin has he thought his next sentence.

You two are still Bonded. And you have a child on the way.

"Don't you think I know that? But if she's set on hating me, I can't change her mind."

"Cissy, you're just giving up? Where's your ambition?" Severus quipped. Narcissa was having none of it though.

"I don't know anymore. I'm tired, and I need to have her supporting me rather than attacking me."

"It was just a row. You two will make up." Severus' low voice soothed as he helped her up. He looked away, thinking to himself that Hermione is going to need a mentor to help her deal with being exposed to Dark Magic. I know just the person; if she doesn't kill them first. But Granger has to get this under control. As he helped his best friend up, he wondered what would happen if she didn't.
Fleur hated the looks she got from the students. She preferred being looked at in horror rather than pity. *Yeah, I only have one wing and can't fly anymore, why do they have to keep staring at me?* Worse was from the faculty. The worst was Severus. His eyes were sunken and hollow, and she knew they both had a string of sleepless nights in the past month. He even went so far as to ignore her knocking at his door at night when she just wanted to curl up and share a bed with him. It had been the best sleep she had since the war ended, and now she couldn't even have that. She was sure that he found her abhorrent to look at now, mangled and incomplete. She even started having back trouble due to the weight difference on her back.

The emergency faculty meeting after breakfast had been a surprise, judging from the looks of everyone. The subject, however, could only be about Narcissa's red-rimmed eyes and thousand-yard stare. Everyone was pointedly trying to avoid looking at the Slytherin, while Severus' eyes were nowhere else but on her.

"Hermione Granger-Black assaulted Narcissa this morning in her room before breakfast. I have decided to suspend her from all classes and ban her from using the library for one week. If she does this again to her or any other faculty member, she will be expelled from Hogwarts."

Minerva gasped at that. "Severus, she would never!" Her eyes flicked to Narcissa, and she frowned on the verge of tears herself. "There must be some sort of misunderstanding."

Narcissa's eyes were blue fire as she looked at the Deputy Headmistress. "My wife manhandled me, ripped through my head with Legilimancy using the Elder Wand, and then began banishing everything in sight at me as I ran out of her room."

Fleur regretfully spoke up. "I heard students who witnessed the last part of that; Hermione's a good friend of mine, but she was bang out of order there. Severus, she was doing Dark Magic with the Elder Wand again, wasn't she?"

Filius spoke up then. "Dark magic? I heard she saved a lot of lives when the Knight Bus flipped over. Something about a dangerous werewolf ready to kill muggles!"

Severus pointedly looked away. "It was Lavender, under the geis of blood magic forcing her into her wolf form. Hermione had to kill her. Twice."

"Poor girl." Minerva said. "What can we do to help her with this?"

Narcissa was huddled in on herself. "She needs to learn control of her emotions and own the fact that Dark is in her now. You know, exactly what I'm trying to teach in my class now."

Severus nodded once. "I have someone coming who will be helping her this week. I'm sorry Cissy; but you're too close to her."

Horace shook his head, pain etched in his face. "I never thought one of the Golden Trio would get ensnared like this." Everyone knew that Slytherin house held the most scars when it came to Dark Magic.

Fleur stood up. "I have a free period, may I go see her?" Severus nodded.

Narcissa raised her hand to stop her. "I um... I have a guest lecturer coming in next week, will you be free for a pint after dinner at the Three Broomsticks?"

Fleur nodded, wanting to comfort Cissy while not taking sides in the quarrel. "That would be great."

Severus spoke up as Fleur lead the faculty to leave the Headmaster's Office. "Inform Misses
I knew I was in trouble, I just didn't realize how much trouble I would be in. Fleur gave me the bad news, and the week suspension wasn't as scary as knowing that I'd be expelled next time.

*Keep your cool and avoid her. You can do this.* I knew I could still sit my N.E.W.T. exams with the Ministry, but it was a point of pride that I complete the year at Hogwarts. I stayed in my room and revised, and snuck down to the kitchens to get some food that evening. Ginny floo-called me that evening, and immediately after she heard what had happened came through the fireplace to console me.

"Harry attacked Snape in his third year and wasn't suspended." Ginny scoffed, flipping through my copy of *Quidditch through the Ages.* "I can't believe you own a book on quidditch."

I shrugged, feeling stir-crazy in my room and wanting to go do something. "Yeah, well, I inherited quite a library and Malfoy Industries was heavily invested in the International Quidditch Association."

"Yeah, Lucius was known for greasing the palms of the officials. But you'll be fine, it's just a week's suspension."

"The professors won't even give me the homework so I can stay caught up in my classes!"

"Merlin, you're actually complaining that you don't have homework. You need to get out more, come on." Ginny extended her hand to help me up from the floor.

"You seen my cat lately?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"Crooks? He's fine, probably off chasing garden gnomes or something."

We make it to the door as there is a knock on the other side. "Ginny?" I asked, one eyebrow raised.

"I didn't order you a stripper. This time." Ginny dead-panned. A beat later, she exploded in laughter as I rolled my eyes and opened the door.

Cormac stood there, eyebrows knitted in confusion as he took us in.

"La-a-dies." He somehow put an extra syllable in that word. I faked a smile. "Good evening. Hermione, Ginny. May we speak in private?"

I shrugged. "Anything you want to say to me you can say in front of Ginny."

Cormac smiled sheepishly. "This is of a very personal... um, nature."

Ginny shrugged. "She'll tell me anyways, down at the Hogs Head, in ten minutes." I nodded in agreement as she made her way out of my room.

"Okay, what's up?"

Cormac's head was turned to watch Ginny walk down the hallway. I saw his eyes shamelessly trail down the ginger's body and linger on her arse as she walked away. "Um, have you seen Harry? We're supposed to be doing Auror training here."

*Like he forgot where the bloody Room of Requirement was.* "That's not personal business."
"Well, I - okay. Harry's in his office. I actually came to talk to you about... well, because..." He sighed, the nervousness leaving Hermione curious as to what was going on.

"So, my sweet Aunt Dee-Dee has told me that I should marry a girl who is intelligent and not after my wealth or fame. Hence why I'm here."

_What? "No."_ I answered automatically.

"I'm so sorry. I ought to have asked your father's permission for your hand in marriage first."

"My hand is my own, McLaggen."

"What? Oh, right. Playing hard to get. I see, you're going to decline the first time and then I'll have to sweeten the deal, perhaps make some sort of pre-nuptial contract then?"

"No, I said _no._" He looked at me like he was confused. _He didn't have a plan in case I turned him down?_

"But, I'm handsome, moderately wealthy, and have connections in the Ministry."

"Let me punctuate my 'no' with the word 'hell' before it."

"Is this about my scar? I thought chicks dig scars. Harry as a scar..." _Bloody hell is he full of himself._

"It's not about..." I took a breath to calm down. "Slytherin's Snake, can't you take no for an answer? I'm quite happy with Narcissa!" His face flashed recognition. _About time he got it._

"Oh, you still wanna do women. I don't care, I still wanna do women too! Maybe we can do that together, what do you say?" Cormac winked at me.

I cringed in disgust. "You're a pig."

"Hermione, what do I have to say in order-"

"No."

Cormac looked at me strangely, then smiled as if he finally got the joke. "I shouldn't have played all my cards at once, should I? We've got another month before the law takes affect and the Ministry starts assigning people to wed each other, so I'll try again at the Yule Ball. Wear that dress you did back in the Triwizard Tournament. Something tells me you will fill that out a lot better now."

_He so doesn't understand a word I said, does he?_

Ginny was in the Hog's Head, sipping on her Quintin Black at the bar when a baffled Hermione came through the door. She waved her friend over, shaking her head at the gin and tonic she ordered.

"You've got weird taste."

"Cormac just proposed to me." _First Viktor, now Cormac. Who is going to ask her next?_

"What?!" Ginny slammed her glass down. "What did you say?"

"No, hell no, and then I called him a pig. It's like he doesn't understand rejection. And apparently he thought we'd have threesomes with the same girl."
"He always was full of himself." Ginny said as she rolled her eyes.

Hermione shrugged. "Yeah, not everyone can be as lucky as you to have two boyfriends."

Ginny exhaled a frustrated breath. "Yeah, lucky, that's me."

"What's happened?"

"Apparently I got on the team because I was dating Draco Malfoy."

Hermione nodded idly, then realized Ginny used the past tense. "Was?"

"I haven't heard from him lately. He's probably playing house with Harry or something. Can you believe two guys actually want to raise children together?"

Hermione took a long sip from her drink rather than answer.

"I mean, when I first saw them together, I thought it was hot. Then I worried that they only wanted cock, that they don't really want me. I'm a Weasley, so I must be good at popping out babies, right? They both reassured me that wasn't the case, that they loved me and wanted to have a family together.

"Except that I want to have my career first, while Harry is overjoyed raising Teddy as his own! I'm seventeen, and one of the men I love is off acting like dad while my actual dad is off shagging some college-age muggle!"

"You don't want Harry or Draco shagging their way through a Cambridge dormitory, though."

Ginny shrugged. "No, but that's what I'd expect. None of my brothers seemed to go off and sow wild oats once they left home. Except maybe Fred and George, but he won't tell a soul. What I'm trying to say is, I'm young and want to be young. I want to grow old with my boys, but I'm not ready yet. I'm not ready for my life to be over and be stuck at home either pregnant or nursing another newborn."

"Okay, hold on. First, have you told them this and second, why do you think you'd be stuck at home all day? Both of my parents worked while they raised me."

"Yeah, but that's different. They only had one child, and your spontaneous magic must have been small stuff."

"You'd have three parents, and Andromeda. I think you need to have a good talk with them."

"I'm pretty sure it's over. Harry broke up with me, and now Draco was getting too busy at work, and now we have stopped talking altogether. Frothy, get me another."

"Um, Ginny, don't you have practice in the morning?" Hermione asked concernedly.

"Yeah, you're not the only one suspended. Coach decided to bench me until further notice."

"Because you're no longer with Draco?"

"No. She doesn't know that yet. I miss them both, though."

"So why have you been benched?"

"I've been getting into too many headlines. Bad headlines. I can't help it that the press likes to follow
me around. Why do you think I chose the Hogs Head?"

Hermione got a second drink as well as two shots of fire whiskey. They both raised the shot glasses as Hermione made the toast.

"Okay Ginny. To men. The ones who want us, we don't want; and the ones we want, don't understand us."

"Or want other men." They clinked their shot glasses and swallowed down the cinnamon infused drink, both nursing their other drinks as chasers. Ginny looked at Hermione questioningly. "You want a bloke?"

"I'm bisexual, so I am still attracted to guys who fit my standards. I want someone intelligent, believes in equal rights for all. Not full of themself, and doesn't feel intimidated because of me."

"Sounds like Draco." She scoffed.

"He's my son in law, so no. Not at all."

"I can't marry him because of this stupid marriage law, because we're both Purebloods."

"Ugh! Did you know that Umbridge is running that?" Ginny's head swam as that piece of information settled in place.

"It explains why it hurts everyone indiscriminately."

They finished their drink, then got another shot and drink each. "Fuck the law." Ginny toasted, and Hermione raised her shot glass to that. As the night progressed, Ginny became more morose over the loss of her two boyfriends.

"Do you know what it's like to date two randy teenage guys?" She asked, staring at nearly empty glass. "It's magical, no down time if they want to take turns on you. Better if they both do it at the same time..."

"Um, Ginny, maybe some things are better left to the imagination." Hermione said, wincing at the mental image.

"No, it's a beautiful thing!" Her eyes were red and bleary as she tried to order another drink, but Aberforth cut her off. "My beautiful boys..."

After they finished their drinks, they paid off the tab and made their way back to Hermione's room. 'Mione knew that Ginny was completely pissed and didn't want her to try and floo back to her team tonight.

"Ginny, I think you better stay here tonight, you're a bit too drunk to get home on your own."

"Yeah." Ginny said, only slurring slightly. "Proba'ly shouldn't try to floo back like this. I'll take your couch."

Hermione changed into a blue satin nightgown and filled a cup with water as she crawled into her bed. "We can share my bed like we used to share yours at the Burrow."

Ginny squinted at her friend skeptically. "You aren't going to try anything funny, are you?"

Hermione's scoff of disgust turned into laughter. "I might be bisexual, but you've shagged the only two people I consider a brother and a son to me. Besides..." Her voice trailed off as she sadly
muttered to herself, "You're not her."

Severus hated himself. He hated the fact that he had been out-maneuvered and out-spelled every step of the way in trying to track down and destroy Bellatrix. Even with the counsel of the other Headmasters of Hogwarts' past, they were no closer to figuring out the traitors who were in the Ministry.

Phineas Black enjoyed seeing a Slytherin as Headmaster and seemed to get deference in any conversation, particularly over Albus. "Well, my dear boy, if they are indeed un-marked, then we shall only catch them in the act. When do we believe they have acted, and who was the target?"

Severus rattled it off, having committed it to memory. "Either the Quill of Acceptance or the Book of Admittance was coerced to divulge the list of magical students for that damnable Muggle-Born Registration Commission. Unspeakable 'Bob' can't recall nor read a large part of his notes in his office, and that department leaked the magical ability to make the name 'Voldemort' taboo. The time and location of the execution of the goblin Ragnok. Leaving Fleur and myself to die in Romania by Dominika's hands."

Phineas jumped in at that. "The Lich formerly known as Bellatrix made a deal with that Vampire, too. So the Unmarked are working with the Death Eaters."

Severus nodded at that. "Which suggests that the Unmarked that began as Lucius' pet project merged with Proudfoot's sleeper program. Either the Auror willingly betrayed the Ministry, or was put under the Imperious."

Albus smiled sadly at his protege. "Severus, I do believe you made a wise decision to depart from the Ministry for now. But perhaps you should invite Fleur into your circle of trust?"

Severus bit his tongue rather than reply as the Gargoyle informed him that there was a visitor demanding entry. He bade the Gargoyle to let her come up, knowing who it would be that late at night. The disgruntled brunette huffed as she made it up the spiral staircase and helped herself to Severus' cabinet and made herself some black tea.

"Such impertinence!" Phineas Black said, his shock turning into surprise as he recognized the girl. "Severus, is that Pendragon's daughter?"

Pansy Parkinson turned a look of indifference to the portraits behind the Headmaster. "I am; and it's late. What do you want, Headmaster?"

Severus smiled inwardly, glad to see she has done well since the war. "I'm calling in the Life Debt you owe me."

I woke up with a pounding in my head. I reached into my nightstand and took a hangover draught and followed it up with the rest of my water, glad that I began to stock up on my own potions a while ago.

The pounding continued as I realized it was my door. Bloody hell, I've been suspended, who needs me this early in the morning?

I waved my hand to open the door enough for me to yell at them, "Piss off!" before slamming it shut.

"Hem-hem." The unmistakable sound of Deloris Umbridge came from the hallway. "I'm here to fine-tune your Measuring in compliance with PoWFA."
"Bugger me." I muttered, getting up and putting a dressing robe as I walked to the door, cracking it open. I knew my hair was all over the place and I had on makeup from last night, but I didn't care.

"So you're having trouble categorizing people like chattel before forcing them into loveless unions?"

Umbridge frowned at that, book open to the page labeled Hermione Jean Granger-Black. "Just place your hand here."

Behind me, I heard Ginny waking up. "Hey 'Mione, got any hangover potion?" I refused to look guilty as the pink menace looked down at me in disgust, assuming I had taken yet another witch lover. Might as well play it up for the uptight bitch.

"In the nightstand, sweetie." I called over my shoulder, turning back to see Umbridge tapping her wand onto the page to add her own notes.

"Troublemaker, refuses to accept authority, takes a fancy to sodomy and other perversions..." I arched an eyebrow at her and replied before I could stop myself.

"How is this to help me, or are you simply enumerating my better qualities in some attempt to shame me to be more like the simpletons whom follow your decrees without question?"

"You consider sodomy a 'better quality', you impure girl?"

"I consider sex between consenting adults, regardless of type, to be a good way to relieve stress and enhance the immune system. It also keeps one from becoming exceptionally uptight and envious of others who are enjoying their own lives as they see fit. I think you underestimate the public and how they will rally when we refuse to submit to your forced marriages."

"You think you are more important than you truly are. You are mediocre, at the best. Your muggle upbringing has simply given you a large head, and filled your mind with a supposed superiority that is simply not there."

"I am mediocre? Funny, I hear that's what the Centaur Herd said about you."

"How dare you, you impudent-"

"-the fact that I am married to my wife scares you, doesn't it? It's different, and that's why you fear it. I saw your little pamphlets during the war, scapegoating the muggle-born as 'thieves of magic'. Mudbloods and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society, am I right? And that image of a tearful girl being choked by weeds? The symbolism in your propaganda was as trite as it was ineffective. Just like having Harry use that Black Quill, a Dark Artifact if I ever saw one, actually strengthened his resolve to be honest rather than parrot your lies!"

"I think I have enough now to pair you up with the perfect husband. Good day, Miss Granger."
I couldn't believe who was at my door. *Severus sent this... cow to help me?*

Pansy looked back at me with cool indifference. "I've got five days to teach you what your wife has a year to teach here at Hogwarts: how to deal with the Dark Magic in your soul."

"Piss off, Parkinson." I snapped, waving my hand to slam the door. The door refused to close, however.

"I know what you're going through."

I laughed at that. "You know NOTHING!"

Parkinson took a long breath as she conjured herself a chair to sit in. "Try me."

"You've been a bully since your first year here!" I exclaimed, thinking that she was the complete opposite of me in every way possible.

"I have been." Pansy said calmly.

"...including bullying me! Compared me to a chipmunk in fourth year! Do you deny that?!"

"I deny nothing, Misses Granger-Black." I scoffed at that. She's being quite bold about herself.

"You were even willing to hand over Harry Potter right before the Final Battle!"

"I was?" She asked coolly. *I couldn't believe the sheer gall of this woman.*

"YES!" I exclaimed, "So I have no fucking reason to believe or trust you!" Pansy lazily inspected her fingernails as I was twitching to hex her into oblivion.

"Do you honestly think that anyone was going to just hand over The Chosen One or let a solitary Slytherin get away with saying that?"

"Of course not! We all put our lives in jeopardy and were willing to DIE for him!" I replied, wondering how she could sit idly by. Her eyes shot to meet mine in a challenge, and I could just tell she was employing Occlumency against me.

"And exactly how many Slytherins wanted to be held as hostage before the battle? Or perhaps be forced to attack and kill their own families who had the misfortune of being lured into You-Know-Who's web of lies?" I stood there, confused at that.

"What do you mean?"

"That many students, crowded in and scared as The Dark Lord stood outside and threatened to kill us all? I had to do something before people lashed out in fear and started throwing spells and hexes!"

"But you were in Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad!"

"And I apparently got antlers and missed classes for a day, right? Anyone actually see me?" I
thought back on it, and remembered that I had only heard about it. *I saw Warrington in the hospital wing, but only heard about her getting spelled.*

"Are you trying to say you only *pretended* to sell out Harry in order to save him?" I couldn't inject enough sarcasm into my voice there.

"Save him? The Chosen One had everybody there to protect him. I was saving the Slytherins!"

I was floored at that. *Pansy was saving the Slytherins before the Final Battle.*

"Finally working it all out, Granger?" Pansy said snidely. "Yeah, we were both on the same side, using different tactics."

My brain seemed to be unable to wrap around that concept. *Pansy Parkinson was fighting The Dark Lord as well?*

"Parkinson, how were you - where were you when you supposedly got antlers?"

She flashed a grin as she replied. "Proving my loyalty and my ability to perform Occlumency to Albus in Spinner's End. I joined the Squad because my father swore it would be a good jump-start to become a Death Eater someday. I didn't want that and that blasted phoenix picked me up one day. I became plan B in case Headmaster Snape died. Only he and Albus knew."

I sat down at my desk, mind reeling at the implication. "Why didn't I know about this?" I shook my head as soon as I asked it. "Just like I didn't know about Severus. I..." I trailed off, mind still putting things together, "...you were quite the arsehole."

"You hated me as much as Harry hated the Headmaster, right?" Pansy smiled at that. "Then I did an amazing job."

I nodded, realizing I just paid her a compliment. "So you're supposed to teach me, what? Anger Management?"

"Something like that. Get dressed, we've got a lot to cover."

The door to Severus' quarters banged loudly as Narcissa barged in. He was thinking that he might have to adjust his wards to not automatically let his best friend in if she kept doing this.

"What the *fuck*, Severus!"

"Hello to you too, Cissy." Her face was white with rage.

"Why is Odette's daughter flying around with Hermione over the Quidditch Pitch?"

Severus turned his head out the window and saw two small dots in the distance flying over the trees. "Taking your wife out of her comfort zone, I imagine."

"I swear, Severus, if she gets hurt..." Cissy's threat was left unsaid as she took a few fast, deep breaths.

"I have every confidence that Pansy will help your wife come to terms with the Dark Magic inside her."

Narcissa rolled her eyes at him. "Pansy? The girl who you failed in potions, who is too daft to know when she's been dosed with a lust potion?"
Severus crossed his arms. "Potions were never her forte. Dealing with... what are you talking about, Cissy?"

She frowned at that, informing him of the run-in she had with Rita Skeeter.

"I recovered the girl and destroyed the evidence, Sev. Threatened Rita to boot."

"We've really got to work on reducing the number of enemies you have instead of increasing it."

"Please be serious, Sev. Why her? Why Odette's daughter?"

"She has experience in this."

"How does Pansy have experience?"

"She was being groomed to replace me in case I died during the war."

"She's just a girl!"

"She decided on this path just after The Dark Lord returned. She knew the risks."

"And she has been exposed to Dark Magic?"

Severus frowned slightly at that. "Repeatedly. She practically lived in it.

Pansy had her work cut out for her, but within two hours she had Hermione on edge, making things spontaneously explode as the Slytherin flew out of the blast radius overhead.

"How on earth did you ever succeed at anything, you daft bint! I bet you can't even Occlude because you don't have any control over your emotions!" She was glad that she made Hermione wandless for today's class, but she wasn't certain that the Gryffindor couldn't still kill her with a blast of uncontrolled magic.

"What the hell is this? You're just going to pick on me about every and any flaw you can find or make up?! Does Severus know your lesson plan today was to put me on a broom and hurl bloody insults at me all day?"

Pansy flung a stinging hex on Hermione, making the girl yelp in shock and pain as she flew by. Without thinking about it, Hermione was flying on the broom like a natural in order to catch and rip the smug girl out of the sky.

"See? You can fly well when you don't over think it. That anger and hatred is a part of you now; you're going to have to learn to deal with it and release your stress in constructive ways."

As soon as the Gryffindor looked down, she realized she was flying and promptly fell out of the sky.

"Levicorpus!" Pansy cast outward, catching the girl before she hit the ground. The close call gave Hermione pause as she was gently placed on the ground. Pansy landed beside her and dismounted her broom, checking her pupil for injury.

"Why are you doing this for me?" Hermione said, panting as her hands greedily clawed at the ground for reassurance.

Pansy shrugged. "Owed Severus a Life Debt."
"That's not what I meant. Why are you, well... how are you able to help?"

"Okay, well, this requires some backstory. I overheard my father talking to Lucius in my fifth year about wanting some educational changes since Umbridge was willing to do anything for the Ministry, and Minister Fudge was in his pocket."

"Was Delores allied with the Death Eaters?"

"Hell no. She's just that ambitiously amoral and wicked on her own. I bet if she were to take the Dark Mark, that would have been pink as well, she's that bent. They wanted the Carrows to teach at Hogwarts. I knew they were Death Eaters of the worst kind. Hearing the Ministry denounce homosexuality as unnatural and immoral while ignoring generations of trying to keep the blood pure is completely baffling, since they ignore the fact that the Carrows followed in the Gaunt family's path of incest."

"That's disgusting."

"I know; after Albus died and Severus named the Carrows as teachers, I knew things were about to get a lot worse for everyone. But I'm getting ahead of myself."

"I had no idea that this was planned years in advance."

Pansy nodded. "It was. My father wanted me to get into Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad, but I saw it for what it was: a way for me to eventually become a Death Eater. I didn't want that; I understood that the war was coming and I knew what kind of people they would want us to be like. None of the Slytherins had the option to join up with Dumbledore's Army, so a lot of us tried to remain neutral. I of course joined in hopes that I could fight the system from within."

"Did you know that Severus was a spy for the Order?"

"No; I thought he was actually spying on Dumbledore and was truly loyal to the Dark Lord. It wasn't until after Dumbledore was sacked that Severus came to me and performed Legilimency and I thought I was done for. He nodded with relief and helped me concoct the story of the antlers and having to go to St. Mungo's to have it reversed. Instead, we went to Spinner's End and I was told that I had been chosen as a Prefect back in my fifth year because I seemed to be a good counterbalance to Draco's ambitions to be a Death Eater. I was then given a choice; learn Occlumency and be groomed to take then-Professor Snape's place in case he dies, or decline to work as a spy for the Order and have my memory erased for the day. If I couldn't prove myself proficient in Occlumency, I would have my memories wiped and live out my life being none the wiser. Seeing as Severus survived the war, I was never truly needed as a spy."

"So have you done Dark Magic?"

"Hogwarts last year... it was horrible beyond comprehension. I had to. The Carrows didn't teach Defense Against the Dark Arts but actually embraced and employed Dark Spells. They didn't care to teach us how to handle the aftereffects of it, only how to use it. With great reluctance, I learned how to safely wield it under Dumbledore. One of the reasons why they were so few fights and injuries was because I controlled some of the most volatile Slytherins that year under the Imperius Curse."

"You blatantly used an Unforgivable?" Hermione asked.

"If you said anything that made you a blood-traitor in Alecto's Class, she would punish you with objectification and debasement. After Lavender Brown gave a strip-tease and lapdance to Goyle as punishment in the middle of class, the Gryffindors learned to keep their mouths shut."
Hermione raged at that, anger rolling off of her in waves. "She deserves to die for that!"

Pansy pointed at the Gryffindor with one stern finger. "That! That right there, your need to dish out revenge? That's partly influenced by the Dark Magic inside you. Before that, you'd have wanted them arrested and thrown into Azkaban for the rest of their lives."

Hermione sneered at that. "Jail is too good for them! What happened to the Carrows?"

"Harry left them tied up in Ravenclaw Tower. I made them jump."

Hermione's face fought between being happy and disgusted. "You killed them?"

Pansy shrugged. "The fall killed them. Leaving them tied up like that was irresponsible; they would have found a way loose and then go fight in the Final Battle and get a lot more people killed. So your first lesson is this: not every Dark Spell is 'bad', but you will have to accept the consequences of using it. If you're justified by your moral code, it's easier to deal with. If you do something in a brash manner, hurt an innocent, let your emotions rule you... the Dark hurts you more." She held her wand up and cast 'Lumens Nox.' The exact opposite of the Lumos charm happened; the wand-tip was swallowing up the light around it, making the area around her darker and a bit blurry.

"Wow, that's cool." Hermione said, mystified at the spellwork. Pansy ended the spell, and the area went back to the normal daylight brightness.

"That's technically a Dark Curse. It can save your life, but also tempt you to do more Dark Magic. Intent and self-control are key here, because Dark Magic is addictive. Let's go over to the lake for your next lesson."

Harry was pinching the bridge of his nose, idly wondering if his glasses were hurting him or if it was just stress. Cormac's really done one hell of a job here, but at least he's making above-average marks in Auror Training. Harry frowned at what the trainer, retired Auror Gawain Robards, had to say about his best friend.

It's like this boy thought that he'd automatically be good at everything because he had Harry Potter at his side to carry him through it.

Harry didn't like that assessment. He and Ronald had depended on Hermione to get them through their studies and when they had an essay due, but where Harry applied himself Ronald seemed to skate through doing the minimum needed in order to pass. Harry even knew that had they taken their N.E.W.T. exams, they would have never done well enough in Potions nor Transfiguration in order to even apply to be an Auror.

Even with the special dispensation from the Minister, Harry wasn't about to lower the standards any more for his best friend to work alongside him.

His floo lit up, and Harry turned to see Draco's face in the flames. "It's getting late, and I made dinner. Come on through and leave the paperwork 'till morning." In the background, he could hear the laughing of his godson and the soothing tones of Andi in his home. Harry knew that his job had not really gotten any more difficult, but the mood of his office changed dramatically since Severus and Fleur quit coming in to do any favors.

The Veela's fire is now permanently cursed and she can no longer fly after losing one wing, of course they quit.

Harry felt the weight of the world on him before as The Chosen One, but now that he was just Head
Auror Harry Potter, and he had a nine-to-five daily grind, it seemed... less auspicious. His stomach grumbled as he realized that the lunch Draco had packed for him went untouched today. *The charm will hold for another day.* He thought to himself as he put down his work for the day and took the direct floo connection home.

Draco stepped around him, giving him a succinct kiss on the cheek as he served the food and made sure Andi had some as well as she tried to feed Teddy in his high chair. The boy yelled inarticulately at the sight of Harry as the grandmother put down the spoon and waited for the excitement to be over.

"How was work, boys?" She asked as Harry came over and kissed the boy's forehead. The Auror rolled his eyes, not wanting to mention his disappointment in Ronald.

"Well, I got to do some good old-fashioned research and development over in Cardiff. Did you know that muggle storage technology seems to cycle through different mediums, each time getting more impressive? I mean, here in the wizarding world we're still using phonographs and box cameras that look ancient compared to the CD players and cameras where the photo just pops out of the device and comes to life!"

Harry smiled at that, remembering how one of his first toys was a broken camera that Dudley was going to simply throw away. "But they don't move."

Draco shrugged that off. "It's all in the developing potion, um, chemicals, as the muggles would say. The thing is, wizarding technology has lagged behind muggle invention because of the electricity. If I were able to develop a magical analogue, can you imagine the applications of that?"

Harry become more intrigued by this. "What brought this up?"

Draco's eyes lit up as he began his tale. "Well, I saw this thing called a 'walkman' as this bloke was jogging by one morning. He must have thought I was having him on as I asked about it, with the wires going into his ears and the replaceable cartridge being able to store music on it. And as I researched this magnetic tape technology, I found out that it was used in the early computers! Only, guess what they moved onto?"

"I'm going to guess that you know this already."

"Recorded discs! Sure, it's in a square envelope, but inside it was a very thin version of a record. That's when I found out that there's an even newer kind of disc, the compact disc. Sure, it's problematic to go jogging with," Draco shrugged that off, "But I am certain that they will figure out a way to keep the disc from skipping or use a different medium than the tape."

Andi beamed at her nephew. "So you want to invent the next big thing for muggles?"

Draco's eyes widened in shock. "No, not at all. Necessity is the mother of invention, and the muggles are brilliant at this stuff. Since wizards have magic, they don't seem to have that same sense of urgency or necessity. I just want to invent a type of battery that powers muggle stuff in the Wizarding World."

"Alright, so where do you start?"

"Natural resources, of course. I saw this story where lemons and potatoes were turned into batteries. I've made inquiries to a few aquariums that I'd like some electric eels for study. I know that muggles don't generate their electricity with massive electric eel farms, but there has to be some sort of structured chemical storage they do naturally like the muggle buggies have in their wet batteries."
"Brilliant, Draco." Andi said as she finally got the food into Teddy's mouth and not all over his face. Harry smiled as he tried the chicken curry on rice, finding bliss as he realized he was famished and truly felt thankful for his family of choice. *This can't last forever though, not with the MLE being told to prepare to enforce the new Marriage Law.*

As I sat at the edge of the Black Lake with Pansy, I idly wondered if I would have ever believed that I would be in this position. *Probably not.*

"You've seen how Slytherins compose themselves, right? We all seem disinterested and detached from stuff, maybe you think we're looking down our noses at you."

"Well, a lot of you lot do seem stuck up."

"The idea is to be detached from your emotions, to not let anger or hatred get to you and throw you off your goal. It doesn't come easy, but if you're able to keep your emotions in check, then Dark Magic doesn't have as much control over you."

I looked around, confused as to why we were here. "So why are we sitting here?"

"The Slytherin Common room is obviously underground, but what you probably don't know is that it's under the Black Lake. It gives an interesting ambiance, but it also reminds you that under the calm water you see at the surface, there are many things swimming around all at once that can distract you if you let it. Oceans can occasionally have a riptide, such an extreme undertow that you can't help but get knocked out of your normal place. If you fight directly against it, like some people do, you'll tire yourself out swimming nowhere as the shore line disappears as the water carries you out to sea."

"So first you have to learn to not freak out when the riptide starts to pull you away. Remember your goal, look for the shore line, and try to get back there by swimming at an angle. Sure, it looks like a longer distance than swimming directly back in the direction you were pulled from, but you will make it back to shore and you can get back to where you originally were. Get what I mean?"

I nodded, enjoying the analogy. *The way of Dark Magic will overwhelm you at times, but going with it or trying to fight against it are both futile ideas.* "So we're out here to admire the beauty of the lake?"

"In a way, yes. We're going to watch the sun set over the lake, and I want you to keep that mental image whenever you stress out or feel the need to make an outburst due to rage or anger." The Giant Squid floated by, one long feeding tentacle snapping up and taking out a red-throated duck that had been looking for fish. *They are already migrating for winter, it seems.* The more the duck flailed as it was drug under the water, the faster it would drown and die, which is what the squid was hoping for. I recalled the first time I had seen the Giant Squid kill a bird in this way; I thought it was barbaric and wrote my parents as a horrified first year student. They reminded me that this was a part of nature, and that perhaps I should keep clear of the Giant Squid just in case.

The bird honked as the wings struggled to take flight as the creature fell beneath the water's surface and a slurry of bubbles came up, signaling demise for the duck and dinner for the squid. Pansy watched the whole thing happen, face placid as the surface of the lake rippled from the motion and went still once again.

"The Dark Magic is always going to be there, just under the surface. The trick is knowing to not let it control you by preying on your emotions. Otherwise it will pull you down and you may never come back."
"Yeah, but when you're already drowning in it, remaining calm only prolongs your inevitable death."

"We're all going to die someday, Granger. When that day comes, however, you should fight like hell, but be smart about it. Don't make it easier for Death to take you."

"Are you always this morose, Parkinson?" I asked her, oddly comforted at the sight of the sun crossing the horizon, the sky orange and red as night crept into the air.

"No, I just have a healthy dose of fatalism."

My eyebrows shot up at that. "You know philosophy?"

Pansy nodded, looking at Hermione as if she were daft. "You know, I never took you for one of those narrow-minded fools who saw Slytherin as nothing more than thuggish brutes. I know the rumor; all the Dark Wizards are from Slytherin. Except Pettigrew. And Umbridge. And Regulus, Slughorn, and Headmaster Snape are all exceptions to the rule."

I frowned in apology. "Sorry, I shouldn't assume that."

Pansy shrugged. "Idealists get caught up in their prejudices, and justify their actions that way. Look what the Ministry let the Aurors do in order to 'catch the bad guy'. I'm more of a pragmatist, accepting that there are some things that I cannot change in the world." She looked at her pocket watch. "Want to have dinner here or would you be willing to go somewhere?"

I went from looking out over the lake to looking at Pansy, realizing exactly how calming this had been as my attention shifted. "Um, yeah, let's go somewhere. I don't want to be stared at in the Great Hall. But I'm going to want my-" She handed me my wand from an inside pocket. "Thanks. I didn't know you had it all this time."

Pansy smiled at that. "Well, some of us Slytherins pride ourselves in having more... diverse talents. Like being pickpockets."

I frowned at that for a moment, but saw how it could have helped me when I was on the run with Harry and Ron. "Yeah, well I'm going to keep my eye on you now."

She extended her hand for a side-along apparition. "Or, you know, seeding a hairbrush with pet hair in case someone tries to polyjuice into you. That's a common prank we pull on the firsties, like telling them to knick some wand polish from Filch." As we twisted into nothingness, I had to hand it to the Slytherins. Those brilliant, bloody bastards.

Severus sent a Patronus to apologize for not being able to make it to dinner, so he was surprised when he heard a knock at his door. I told Minerva that I was taking care of a distraught Narcissa, why is she checking up on me?

He used his wand to let the door open, placing a finger over his lips to request the intruder to be quiet. What he wasn't expecting was to see a shocked Fleur standing there, jaw dropped at the sight of his life-long friend asleep on his chest as he sat propped up in bed with a copy of *Potions Monthly* on his lap.

"It's not what you think, Fleur. She cried herself to sleep here."

"In your bed?"

"Why are you acting jealous? She's my best friend, and if you hadn't noticed, a lesbian."
"I um..." Fleur trailed off. "Right. I guess I should go."

Severus exhaled a calming breath as the Veela turned to leave. "Fleur, you can stay. I wasn't about to wake her and hoped the company might make me sleep better."

"Can't blame you here." Fleur agreed, taking in the sight of a sleeping Narcissa. "Do you love her?"

"In a way, yes." Severus admitted to the quiet room. "I may have been an only child, but I would have been proud to call her my sister."

"Sister?" Fleur asked. "I guess I had thought that-"

"-thought what?" Severus interjected, his eyes hiding all hope over her next words.

"It seems like you... Well, it seems like there is someone else in your life."

"There is nobody in my life." He replied tersely.

"Then what is it? I can't believe you're hung up on the ghost of an old lover." He didn't want to think of the women in his past, but he didn't feel right about moving on so soon.

"Please leave if you are going to persist on this topic. I would much rather get some well-deserved rest."

"I miss sharing a bed with you."

Severus nodded his agreement with her. He transfigured his bed to be a full king-size as a silent invitation. Fleur smiled at that, and climbed onto the bed, laying on her side missing the wing and slung her own arm around the Headmaster.

Perhaps it is time I admit my feelings and court this woman properly.

I popped into existence beside Pansy as she called out to a House Elf. "One more person for dinner tonight, Misty!"

An aged House Elf approached us, bowing in greeting. "Misses Granger, you honor us with your presence." As he raised his head, he said with a bit of authority, "please keep your clothing to yourself here."

As I tried to make sense of his direction, Pansy laughed as she lead me down an opulent hallway. "I forgot Kerley was friends with Dobby. Never mind him, he's the steward here and takes his responsibility over the other house elves a bit too seriously."

House Elves as in plural? "You must have a really large house."

Pansy winced at the term. "Actually, it's an estate. I live in the opposite wing from my parents to have privacy. Mom told me once that Mal-um, your Manor was almost as big as ours, but didn't have any stables." She smiled politely as she felt the need to back track. "But your gardens were superior, not to mention the albino~"

"It's okay. We donated the building to be a new Magical Hospital." I said dismissively. The hallway seemed to go on for at least a kilometer.

"I read about that. Where do you think you will live once you're out of Hogwarts?" She asked politely as we made our way to a sitting room. Wow, this place is huge and opulent. "Care for a
drink before dinner?"

I shrugged politely. "Um, gin and tonic?" Kerley was there with the drink in hand, polite smile on his face.

A moment later, Pansy had a glass of white wine in her hand as the House Elf told us dinner would be ready in twenty minutes.

The room fell into silence, and it felt really awkward to be nursing my low-brow drink in a room that looked more expensive than my childhood house. Pansy seemed to pick up on my nervousness as she tried to explain it away.

"The Parkinsons always seemed to enjoy being flashy with their wealth; I wouldn't be surprised if my and Draco's fathers used to try to one-up each other in any way possible."

A crisp woman's voice floated in as I turned to see who it was. "If a gathering of men does not include a certain amount of bragging and one-upmanship, I would have to question their collective masculinity." The woman before me was naturally tan and stunning, dark curls cascading past her shoulders and an amazing smile that could disarm any heterosexual man. The red silk sari she had on clung to her curves in a very modern way, accented with an embroidered pattern that made my eyes run down the length of her legs. She wore minimal makeup yet looked glamorous with the dark eyeliner that brought out the shape of her eyes.

Pansy spoke up to make the introduction. "Mother, this is Hermione-"

"-Granger-Black, yes." Her face was as guarded as any other Slytherin I knew. "I've read up on you; I don't usually believe much of Rita's character assassinations."

I felt relieved for a moment as even Pansy tried to recover. "Oh, yes. Um, Hermione, this is-"

"-Odette Parkinson. Pleasure." I nodded, my stomach twisting at the sight of my wife's ex-lover. Odette sat across from me, crossing her legs at the knee to maximize her shapely figure as I forced myself to not get distracted.

Pansy's eyes flicked from one to the other, confused at the exchange. "You two know each other?"

"Pans, go wash up for dinner. We'll meet you in the dining room."

Pansy Parkinson stood up, nodding tersely as she made to leave. "I'm tutoring her this week on the Headmaster's request." Her tone said something entirely different, and we all picked up on it.

"I understand. Just catching up with an old friend." The lie crossed her lips like it was the truth. Pansy left the sitting room as I took a longer than needed sip of my drink.

"You lie like a Gryffindor, but give nothing away in your face like a Slytherin." I responded in kind. Odette's face was completely unreadable, but I had enough of my wife's memory of her to see her biting the inside of her cheek.

"How is she?"

"She's fine." I said, refusing to admit anything to her.

"Astoria Greengrass sent me an owl. Apparently you've got the entire Slytherin House afraid of
Damn. That's actually impressive.

"It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both." I said succinctly.

"You quote Machiavelli, and you're a Gryffindor? No wonder she loves you." The words struck like a slap, and I didn't understand why.

I sipped my drink with derision. "She doesn't love anyone, particularly not me."

"Start treating her better." Odette said, standing up. "Come, let us have dinner so Pans can see we're not killing each other. She's as distrustful as her father ever was."

"Why do you care about her? You know the kind of woman she is, what she married into."

"She married into a powerful and wealthy Slytherin family, just like I had to. Pendragon was too old to be a useful Death Eater, but he supported the cause and I had to parrot that shite in order to be the good wife. At least he wasn't as twisted as Lucius was."

"So I should pity her because she had a horrible childhood?"

"She deserves compassion because she's your wife." I could hear the unspoken 'idiot' at the end there.

"Do you know what she did to me?"

"No, and I don't care. She was trying to survive, and you should understand this. You married a Slytherin, they do things differently and you need to understand where they are coming from."

"I never meant to be married to her, though! I was just trying to survive, and she set me up to die just to get out of there."

"So you two have that in common. And if I recall correctly, this all got started because you were dragged into her home. You broke the Taboo."

"Well, Harry did, so-"

"-you did the best that you could right then, including escape and leave her to You-Know-Who's mercy."

"Well that's different!"

"No, it's really not."

"Why do you care so much? You broke her heart. Does Pans know that?"

"She doesn't, and I'd ask you to not inform her. My life since her hadn't been as glamorous nor horrifying as Cissy's, but I do care about her. She was the first and only woman I fell in love with."

"What about Pendragon?"

"He was a decent man; died protecting our home during the Goblin Rebellion. He was in his mid seventies, was barely hitting the midpoint of his life."

"But you're almost half that!"

"I needed an arranged marriage in a hurry after..."
"You were found in flagrante with her."

"She told you?"

"I have an echo of her memories from our Bonding, before she um, shut me out."

Odette's eyes widened in shock. "Abraxas went whole hog to ensure her acquiescence. Probably never thought his son would lose her to a muggle-born."

"Did you love your husband, Odette?"

"Love is a luxury ill afforded to Purebloods in arranged marriages."

"Are you still in love with Narcissa?" I asked, uncertain why I was feeling jealous.

Odette turned away and kept walking down the hallway towards the dining room. "Like I said, treat her well."

"I'm done with her."

Her voice went cold. "Even better."

After dinner, Pansy took me up to her bedroom in order to show me something that she said would be quite beneficial to my training. We made our way up a staircase as I was bewildered by a bedroom as large as the Gryffindor Common Room.

"Hermione, I'd like you to put away the Elder Wand and only use your normal one. I believe that the Dark that has infested your soul is pushing you to use the Deathstick more, which in turn is making you have more Dark inside you."

"But Albus had this wand for years after defeated Grindelwald." I replied, offended.

"He knew enough to never do Dark Magic with it. Far as I know, he never cast a Dark Spell himself. He had Headmaster Snape and I there to do his dirty work for him."

I took in her room; it was modestly furnished, a poster of the Weird Sisters on one wall had the lead singer shaking his hips as he crooned into a microphone silently while the the drummer was sporting a pink mohawk while looking cool in the background. I never really understood the androgynous punk charm that they conveyed, though I could envy his ability with eyeliner.

"So I showed you how to think of your mind like a lake, that even though there are things just beneath the surface that can pull you under, it is calm on top. You are in control of yourself, and sometimes you need something to help you meditate yourself into a calm mindset." She went over to a phonograph and started a record. "I had to pay extra to get this cut on vinyl, but I heard this song on CD and knew I wanted to use it here to meditate. Come, sit down, close your eyes, and relax."

I hesitated at first, but sat down as I saw blissful tranquility cross Pansy's face. Her eyes were closed as the the opening riffs began, and I was surprised to hear The Cranberries' first big hit begin.

"Let the song fill you with light, wiping away the negative emotions you are harboring. Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. Slow and steady."

*Oh, my life is changing everyday, 
In every possible way. 
And oh, my dreams, it's never quite as it seems,*
Never quite as it seems.

I know I've felt like this before, but now I'm feeling it even more,
Because it came from you.
And then I open up and see the person falling here is me,
A different way to be.

"Is it helping?" Pansy asked, "if not, you can find a song that works for you."

I nodded, "No, it's actually quite nice." It was; it very much had a restorative feeling to me. I took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled it, releasing the stress and negativity that had been festering inside me.

I want more - impossible to ignore,
Impossible to ignore.
And they'll come true, impossible not to do,
Impossible not to do.

And now I tell you openly, you have my heart so don't hurt me.
You're what I couldn't find.
A totally amazing mind, so understanding and so kind;
You're everything to me.

Oh, my life,
Is changing every day,
In every possible way.

And oh, my dreams,
It's never quite as it seems,
'Cause you're a dream to me,
Dream to me.

As the song ended, Pansy switched off the phonograph and apparated us back to Hogwarts. She stopped at the gate and told me to get some rest because tomorrow was a big day.

"What's going on tomorrow?" I asked uncertainly.

"More practical exercise. And please heed my advice; lock away your other wand. It will always cause more harm than good."

I woke up to knocking at my door. Again. Who in the hell is waking me up this... oh, right. Pansy.

I flick my hand at the door as I sit up in bed, not caring what I look like only to see Fleur standing there with a giant smile on her face.

"Morning, sunshine!"

Okay, I wasn't expecting her. "Don't you have class to teach?"

Fleur came in, opening my curtains to let the sunlight in. "I'm letting the Eighth Year students do their own discussions this morning. Luna is oddly good at getting everyone involved. So, I'm here for you."

"I know we're friends and all, but if you don't turn your frown right-side-down..." I grumped,
wishing I had some morning coffee.

Pansy popped her head in through the doorway, the rich smell of heaven wafting in with her. "Actually Hermione, I asked her to be here. And I bring this."

I narrowed my eyes at her, but my nose picked up hints of nutmeg, pumpkin, and cinnamon in the coffee. "You can live today in exchange for that coffee."

Fleur giggled at that. "Did you know you're starting to sound like Severus? But in a cute, diet-soda kind of way. Dark yet bubbly." Wow, she's got it bad for him.

Pansy handed me the coffee and canceled the stasis charm on it. "Not a morning person, huh?"

I sipped the coffee and found it perfect. She had already added a splash of cream and one lump of sugar. "This is amazing. Where did you-"

"-Autumn Harvest blend. Figg's Grocer carries it. By the way, how did my mother know you were a coffee drinker, and how you'd like it?" Because I take it like Narcissa does. I shrugged, my mind racing to think of something to say and I re-used Odette's paltry excuse.

"We're old friends."

"Sure, whatever. Get ready, because today we're going to get dirty. Oh, and put away your spare wand." Pansy said conspiratorially.

Fleur put a consoling hand on the Slytherin's shoulder. "It's cool, I know she's got the Elder Wand."

Pansy looked like she sucked on a lemon. "Does everybody know this? Because really, I think you should keep it a secret and let the Aurors protect Potter since everyone thinks he's un-killable and therefore they can't get the wand from him."

I got up and cast a cleaning charm on myself just before I got dressed and finished my coffee. "I'm keeping it as close to the chest as possible. So why are you here Fleur?"

Fleur sat on my bed, looking around the ground for signs of my cat. "I wanted to help you anyways. Beauxbatons Academy actually had classes to help us on how to deal with the repercussions of Dark Magic."

I frowned at that as I got dressed in the bathroom, the door halfway closed for privacy. "Why don't we teach that here?"

Pansy sneered at that. "Because too many parents think that teaching how to handle Dark Magic is the same as teaching Dark Magic like they do in Durmstrang. In short, ignorant parents cause bad teaching."

I charmed my hair into a single braid and started to brush me teeth. "Pansy, I also don't want to be turned into a Slytherin clone like your mother."

"She's not a clone. Slytherin House just has a leg up in dealing with the Dark that is missing in the other houses. We embrace a philosophy that includes being patient over recklessness. Probably why Proudfoot was so susceptible to being twisted the way he was. The Ministry should have never authorized the Auror Guild to use Unforgiveable Curses with impunity. It was a free pass to let them all become corrupted." I spat and rinsed, unfortunately agreeing with Pansy.

Fleur spoke up as I cast a quick makeup charm and left the bathroom. "Madame Maxine always said
in order to clean your mind, you have to get your hands dirty." The three of us made it out of my room and made our way down the Grand Staircase.

I never realized how many eyes could stare at me at once, but once students scurried away from us, making a path so that we could get away from them faster. Fleur frowned in frustration beside me while Pansy looked bored, taking advantage of the parting crowd and lead the three of us out of the castle.

"Has it been this bad for you all this time?" I asked Fleur.

She nodded as we turned towards the Greenhouses. "Yeah, before it was all the straight men and lesbians drooling over me, now they either find me disgusting or pity me." Her voice went from sad to bitter. "I prefer their horror, it's more honest."

"That's how Slytherins got treated by everyone else from their first day here at Hogwarts. I hope the Headmaster's plan to intermingle the houses ends the animosity that they have been absorbing. Sorting Hat was right all along." Pansy said as they made their way to Greenhouse Seven, where Professor Sprout was waiting for them, clad in some sort of brown leather jacket and machinist goggles.

"Good to see you, Pansy!" The Herbology Professor said cheerfully, and Pansy actually got a hug from her. *I guess Professor Sprout embraces the Hufflepuff ideal of embracing everyone.*

"Pomona, I'm glad to see you again. How is your Venomous Tentacula?"

"Better ever since I increased security after... well. You know." Pomona said, releasing what looked to be incredibly strong wards on the greenhouse. *What on earth does she have in here?*

"Miss Granger, you are going to need some gloves for this. Come, sit down." I took the gloves that Professor Sprout handed to me and sat at the base of a small tree growing in the greenhouse. It was only a few meters tall, barely more than a hands span wide, and yet while it looked... insignificant, it seemed majestic.

Fleur gasped as she took it in. "You got... All the Gods and Saints, how did you get a cutting of Yggdrasil?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." She replied, eyeing a squirrel scurry up the trunk seemed to disappear.

"What happened to the squirrel?" I asked nervously.

Pansy seemed to understand this, and it put me at an unusual disadvantage. "Ratatoskr traveled to the World Tree, didn't he?"

"Fleur, what's the World Tree?" I couldn't place the names they were using, either.

"According to Norse Mythology, it is, well, *the* tree. It connects everything, in this world and the next."

"Like the afterlife?"

"No, other worlds. Like the realm of the Gods."

"I'm agnostic." I replied, shrugging in confusion.
"There can be magic, but there can't be Gods or any kind of Being that is the embodiment of specialized magic? Really?" Pansy asked sarcastically.

"I haven't had enough evidence to convince me." I said.

"We've seen prophecies come true, Hermione. Maybe not in the way we thought, but they have come to pass. Severus and even Draco pointed out the Fates seem to be in play now." Fleur huffed. "What about the one that Bertrand told us about in Romania, the one that sounds like it was talking about Bellatrix?"

"I wasn't in Romania with you." I replied.

Pansy was startled at that. "Hold on, The Fates are in play? Like the three with the tapestry?" Fleur shrugged.

"Hermione, Severus didn't tell you? Something about Elder's Bane[1], and... how Trixymort started eating Dementors. Draco swore he saw the Mórrígan just before Neville died." Fleur frowned in frustration. "Nevermind, I'll have to look it up and tell you about it later."

Pansy and Pomona exchanged a worried glance, but decided to continue with the lesson. "Hermione, I'd like you to try and open your mind. When you touch this tree, you're going want to extend your senses to include the tree itself. This is something that I hope to have all of the Seventh year students do in the Spring, but you're in a more immediate need to try this." The Herbology Teacher pointed to a smooth spot on Yggdrasil's cutting, and I placed my hand on there.

"I'm touching a tree." I repeated, trying to understand what the big deal is. Fleur, Professor Sprout, and Pansy also sat down and put a hand on the cutting's trunk as well, each closing their eyes and gasping as they did.

Pansy nodded, gasping again as she had to catch her breath. "Yes, I wanted you to try grounding yourself with an ancient tree, but this... is much better. I want you to feel the root system, and sense that there are things in this world that are older and larger than you could have ever fathomed. That this world has weathered so much more than you can even comprehend. Your emotions, your anger, all the Darkness inside you is but a flash in a cauldron, a tiny sliver of a second against an eternity of the slow progression of time."

I closed my eyes, imagining the root system under the the ground and my mind sank into the deep, cool earth. The root system didn't seem to stop, as I kept falling, tracing the system as it went back up in other areas across the globe. It went... everywhere... all at once. My mind, my consciousness was caught by some of the roots, holding me in place as I found a way to attach myself to the root and see everything around me.

_Everything is connected here._

"Hey, 'Mione, where did you go?" I heard Fleur call out.

"Down here?" I asked uncertainly. "I'm still sitting in the Herbology Greenhouse, right?"

Pansy spoke up. "We all are, physically. Wait... Ratatoskr is pointing you out. Oh! Travel back up the root you're on a bit."

_I can travel here? "You're not making much sense."

Professor Sprout spoke up. "Oh dear, you're over-thinking it. It's like flying, just let your instinct guide you."
Fleur's sharp intake of breath told me she was cringing. "She's not an air element, so bad example."

Pansy huffed indignantly. "I put her Gryffindor Know-it-all arse on a broom and I know she can fly, so quit thinking whatever it is and just let go and get your scrawny ass up here!"

Really, Pans? I found myself going up the root system, passing up a chittering squirrel that seemed enormous that raced to keep up with me as I made my way back towards the surface. I found myself near the surface, and I could feel others there. I couldn't see them, but the presence was comfortably noticeable.

"Fleur?" I asked as I focused on a nodule, and my consciousness attached myself to it.

"Hey, you found me." Fleur replied.

"This is... I'm still sitting on the ground, right?" I asked, trying to make sense of the disconnection.

"Yes, and you're here in your mind." Fleur replied, and I could sense her pointing over at another root. "And there's your esteemed teacher for today."

"This is bloody surreal." I blurted out, feeling everything and having it all spread thin over everything.

Pansy's consciousness brushed against mine. "So I heard Delores needed to fine-tune you in her book in order to pair you up with a wizard."

A flare of anger rose in me but was immediately diluted throughout the root system. "Yeah, I... I was going to say I wanted her dead, or to take another long walk into the centaur herd. "My anger, my rage... it's gone? No, it's not gone..."

Pomona Sprout was lounging in what seemed to be a hammock of finely woven roots. "Means very little in the grand scheme, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. This is... amazing. Why wasn't I shown this before?" I asked, curiosity returning.

"Rare to find this tree, and basic Grounding techniques are considered frivolous to some teaching methods." Pomona said sadly. "So this is the Earth way to temper the fire that is in your veins."

Pansy's consciousness enveloped me, and I could feel the still waters in her mind. "And I showed you the Water."

Fleur floated above me, and I was reminded of how I saw her hovering mid-air when I saw her at Hogwarts just after getting off the train. "And she tried to show you air, how to let go and just be in the moment. Sometimes a really good song can help get you out of focusing on the negative."

Professor Sprout swung back and forth in the hammock she had made herself gently. She's really good at visualizing this, isn't she? "Well, ladies, I have things to tend to, you all are welcome to come back another time, but I have to get us out."

Ratatoskr happily scurried to her and followed her up and out of the World Tree, and I could see the light that was her consciousness happily float along up the root system. Fleur went up as well, while Pansy seemed to take me up with her as our minds seemed to share the same cable car in a ski resort.

"So, what did you think of today's lesson?" She asked, and I could hear the happy smirk in her voice.
"Powerfully overwhelming." I replied, "I think I need some time to... um, process all of this."

"Yeah, take the rest of the day off. We'll return to the Quidditch Pitch and to the Black Lake tomorrow. Try to meditate on keeping a calm mind, and whenever you feel a buildup of negative emotion, just realize that you can step aside and let it run past you rather than drag you along on its destructive path."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It's not, particularly when you were raised to embrace all of your emotions. The trick with casting most Dark Magic is that you have to really mean it, which eats away at your emotional control. We're almost at the surface, open your eyes."

"But they are op-" My eyes opened and I felt disoriented for a second as my consciousness left the tree and was back in my own body. *Okay, so that was an actual out-of-body experience.*

"She going to be okay?" Professor Sprout said, getting up and filling a cup with water from her wand. Pansy was taking off a pair of gloves as Fleur helped me to my feet.

"Oh, she'll be fine. Just a bit overwhelmed for her first time." Fleur said as she steadied me. I took the offered water and drank it as I got acclimated to standing all over again.

"Well, I have the third-year students coming in so I have to leave and ward this shut again."

Professor Sprout said politely as we made our way out of the greenhouse and I blinked a few times as I re-adjusted to the bright sunlight.

Pansy cast a diagnostic charm over me just to be certain, smiled, and offered me her arm. "I'll take you back to your room if you want."

I turned to Fleur, who was smiling sadly. "I have to pick up something from my room and then get to class; it's the third-year Gryffindor and Slytherins. Lots of PTSD and animosity there to slog through. Will you be okay with her?" I nodded, taking Pansy's arm as we went back to the castle.

"Thanks for helping me back up." I said, trying to fill the silence as we went up the stairs. A bit of commotion got our attention on the first floor, between the DADA classroom and the Muggle Studies class. Before I could turn us down the corridor, various wands were raised at each other as a dropped textbook had startled a nervous Gryffindor and was ready to hex the Slytherin before him.

"Granger, say here. Do NOT help." Pansy said, gliding her way through the crowd with ease. *Is she going to use the Imperious Curse?* I struggled forward as the Grey Lady floated in and urged the onlooking students to move away and to not get involved. Sir Nicholas poked his head in, and went through another wall saying he was getting a Prefect.

"I couldn't let her use an Unforgivable on a child," I thought to myself as I reached for my wand. *But would casting a spell do any better?* As I got closer, I recognized him as Jimmy Peakes, and he didn't look as angry as he did frightened.

"Where's Nigel? What did you do to him?!"

The Slytherin had his wand up, but not pointed at him. Pansy stood in front of him, hand outstretched to show she meant him no harm. "Pritchard, go get Professor Black."

Graham Pritchard gulped, unwilling to leave his former house-mate alone with him.

"Please do as I ask, Graham." Pansy said calmly.
Peakes backed himself against the wall as the corridor cleared, his eyes darting to me. He didn't look happy to see me, either. "Hermione... you stay there! You're with them, aren't you?" I stopped, looking at his face. He had lost a lot of weight and looked like he hadn't been able to sleep well for weeks.

Pansy re-directed the attention to herself. "Peakes? Hey, it's going to be okay. Let's get you to lower your wand and we'll go see--"

"I don't trust you fucking Slytherin scum! Where is Nigel? I just saw him!" Parkinson darted a glance at me in question, and I shook my head in response.

*Nigel died in the Battle of Hogwarts.* I didn't think telling him that would be beneficial, though.

Pansy took a step back, both hands raised to show she was unarmed. "Well we can go look for him if you want; maybe he's in the Hospital Wing."

I turned to see the crowd of students waiting behind me on the staircase, a lot of them whispering about how Peakes' condition had been deteriorating since the term began. *And Cissy was summoned to come help!* I debated reaching for my wand, maybe sending a Patronus to stop her from coming out and getting hexed, but I remembered Peakes was on the Quidditch team and had excellent reflexes. *And he might assume I'm trying to hex him, instead."

"No more Healers! No more Doctors! No more potions, or treating me like I'm sick in the head! I want to see my friend Nigel!" Peakes said, sparks flying out of his wand from his barely-controlled magic.

Fleur made her way through the crowd and past me, directing the by-standing students to take me back up to my room. I shrugged off their attempts as the Veela approached him. "Jimmy, it's me, Fleur. Let's point your wand down, okay?"

"Why won't anyone tell me where Nigel is?" The Gryffindor said, face crumped in shock and worry.

"Wolpert passed away." Fleur said gently. "We talked about this, I lent you my cope of A Separate Peace?"

He shook his head in rejection. "No, no... he can't be. I just saw him..." His stance went from defiant to defeated as his wand pointed to the ground. Pansy put her hand over his, slipping the wand out of his hand and turned him towards the Hospital Wing.

"Let's go find us someplace to sit, okay?" Pansy asked the silently crying Gryffindor. As the two of them made it down the hall, Fleur went to the DADA class and knocked twice, an apparent 'all clear' signal as the door opened and students started to file out. She went to her own classroom and did the same, and it was almost surreal to see how normal everything seemed just moments later as I made my way back up to my room.

Severus had his office laid out for afternoon tea, though his mind was prepared for battle. The portrait of Albus Dumbledore looked down upon him in consternation.

"Really, Severus, do you believe that this will work? Neither of them are foolish enough to fall for this... dim-witted ploy."

"You can always trust a Gryffindor to think like a Gryffindor. And a Slytherin to think like a Slytherin. So I'm going to do something incredibly Gryffindor in nature. Besides, this is so dim-witted, it will get past them. Portraits, you all are forbidden from communicating in any way with my
guests tonight."

The Gargoyle spoke up, alerting him that Hermione was coming up as summoned. "Let her in."
Severus stated, taking his place at his desk as a resolved Hermione Granger made her way towards
him.

"You called for me, Headmaster?" It had only been a week, but he could see something in her
face. The studious Gryffindor directed her mental discipline like a sharp blade at herself, didn't
she? Her face wasn't as impassive as a Slytherin would be, but she was much closer to being an
Occlumens than Harry would have ever been.

"Yes, please sit. Your reinstatement to Hogwarts depends on three things-" Her eyes flared for a
second in what might be construed as rage, but with a slow blink as she took in a deep breath, she
recomposed herself to being calm.

"-shall I go on?" He asked patiently.

Hermione nodded. "Please, Headmaster."

"First, you must prove that you are better at curbing your emotions and rage. I had hired Miss
Parkinson to help tutor you in that, and I have received word that you have surpassed her wildest
expectations." Hermione smiled at that, so Severus continued. "Secondly, you are required to
apologize to Professor Black for attacking her. I will not have students-"

"-understood, Headmaster." Severus blinked at that. She wasn't going to fight this?

"I lost control and
used magic in a malicious manner towards a faculty member."

Severus cleared his throat as he got up, hiding his surprise. He tossed some floo powder into the
fireplace and called for Narcissa. His life-long friend popped through, a smudge of ink on her hand
transferred onto her face as she brushed hair behind her ear.

She must have been grading
essays.

Severus nodded his silent thanks as he directed her to the other open chair.

Narcissa saw the calm and collected Hermione Granger in her chair and followed suit, nervous eyes
shifting to the Slytherin. "Did you need both of us here at the same time?" Her nervousness did not
bode well.

Severus brought over three teacups and placed them at the edge of his desk. "She has something she
wants to say to you." Severus turned away, conjuring water just below boiling into a teapot and
added the loose leaves for Bergamont Tea. He also added a healthy dose from a vial in his robes as
the two witches began talking. Slytherin help me, I can't believe I'm doing this.

He came back to the table as Hermione started her apology. "Professor Black - Narcissa - it was...
wholly inappropriate of me to lose my temper and to attack you using magic. You're a teacher here
and are entitled to the respect your position grants you. I, um," She took another long breath, and
Severus realized she wasn't fighting back anger, but tears. "know that we have an unusual set of
circumstances between us, and that I will no longer be in your class anymore. But I would like to
have your forgiveness for my outbursts."

Narcissa's gaze softened as she saw her wife, but bit her lip. "You know you could just order me to
forgive you and I have to."

"Cissy, don't exacerbate this." Severus warned.

Narcissa turned on him, anguish in her face. Oh, shite. "I literally cannot speak ill against my wife
without physical harm to myself. Because of our Bonding, I will always be unequal to her. I have to
be the perfect, *pliant* wife to her." Narcissa's response silenced the room momentarily. "It's a recipe for disaster; people should not have that kind of control over another unless they first have control over themselves!"

"I agree, and if I could undo our Bonding, or even just excise that particular clause, I would." Hermione replied, surprising her wife.

Narcissa faced her wife, cowed slightly. "I just want you to know that you have the power in this relationship, and therefore you also have responsibility attached to it."

"I understand, Cissy. Please, forgive me. I'm admitting that I'm not perfect; I just had a week of introspection and saw my own faults glaring back at me. I'm-" Hermione closed her eyes and took another long, calming breath, "admitting my issues and that I'm working on them. I have anger control issues that are compounded by the Dark Magic within me. If you want, I can stay out of your life as much as you deem necessary."

Cissy nodded. "I accept your apology, Hermione. And don't feel like you have to avoid me at all costs. We're still connected as family, despite the Ministry's meddling."

Severus poured the tea into the three different cups, directing each of the witches to take one. He took the last one and sat behind his desk, looking at the two witches expectantly. Each of them took a sip and added some sugar while Severus took his tea black.

Hermione took another sip of her tea, looking at Severus. "What was the third thing, Headmaster?"

"You two are going to have an honest conversation here. Do not attack each other nor accuse each other. I would prefer that each of you share your own feelings and open up to each other by leading your statements with 'I feel...'. My office has been warded shut for the next half hour."

Narcissa's eyes widened mid-swallow, and she put the tea down rather forcefully. "You fucking bastard! Hermione, put down your tea." Her wife looked at the two of them in confusion.

"But I like it." Hermione straightened up at her instant response as she had to will herself to put down the teacup and let go of it. "The cup is charmed."

"Yes, and I bet Severus here put Veritaserum in the tea. Didn't you?"

Severus tried to fight it, but the words slipped out despite his best efforts. "Yes, I did."

Hermione seemed angry for a few seconds until she cackled in laughter. "And you charmed all three teacups to ensure we all drank it, didn't you? How long have you had feelings for Fleur?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, it was a foolhardy and blatantly Gryffindor thing to do, and I knew you two wouldn't expect that. And I have been in love with Fleur ever since I saw her turn into her full Veela form. Now please let's get back to speaking in terms of our own feelings so that you two can get through some much-needed communication that *should have happened already*. Cissy, how do you feel about your relationship with Hermione?"

"I am afraid of her when she gets angry. I know she's wiped her memory before, and I feel that she doesn't understand the amount of sway that the Elder Wand and the Dark inside of her has now."

Hermione nodded in understanding, her hand taking the teacup in hand as she nearly took another sip, then glared at Severus icily. "I feel... well, I know now the sway the wand has had over me. Pansy really helped me by making me lock it away for a few days. I can't recall my arguments with Ronald just before I went to Paris, and that scares me, too. Cissy, I feel that you don't appreciate..."
she thought carefully before she continued, "...how much my life had to change overnight due to inheriting Lucius' Bonding to you. You had it bad, I know, but you were used to it being horrific, and now it's only moderately terrible. And we can work on that."

"I feel like you don't believe me when I say that I love you." Narcissa said, looking at her teacup.

Severus even felt the itch in his hands to raise the cup to his lips and drink. "Bloody hell." Severus downed the rest of the tea in a few gulps, breaking the charm and he was able to put his cup down. "I feel that you two are stubborn women who don't see the beautiful thing before you. You two are perfect for each other if only you quit keeping secrets from each other and stopped worrying about when the proverbial 'other shoe will drop'. I also think Fleur could do better than the man who almost got her killed."

Hermione was rubbing her hands together frantically until she relented and also downed the rest of her tea, slamming the teacup down in frustration. "I worry that my being bisexual might make Cissy feel insecure, even though she's the only person I want to be with right now. And I feel like I can't trust her, even though she did the exact same thing that I did. I really hate the circumstances that brought us together... but I don't want us to be apart, either."

Narcissa exhaled in frustration, glaring daggers at Severus. She picked up her tea and finished it as well. "I worry that our ways to deal with problems are so incompatible that she's going to just write me off as evil. Hermione, if you ever feel the need to have a man as well, please choose someone who isn't... Krum."

Hermione looked at her wife sadly. "No, Cissy, I don't need or want a man just because I'm bi. Just tell me, please, were you ever... inappropriate... with Viktor?"

Narcissa shook her head. "Never. I've only loved two people in my life: you and Odette. And she's..."

"She's bloody gorgeous." Hermione supplied. "Had dinner with her and Pans."

"She's a chapter in my life that is over." Narcissa said with a finality that surprised everyone.

"She told me to treat you right. Almost like a threat."

"What did you say to that?"

Hermione sighed, voice tinged with regret. "I told her I was done with you."

The words hit Narcissa like a slap in the face. "oh."

Hermione looked at her wife studiously. "How can you know you love me, though? Your feelings are just... bits of spellwork."

Severus spoke up here. "Magic can do lots of things, but it cannot truly bring back the dead, nor can it create true love."

"I'm only nineteen. How am I to know what is true love and what isn't? How can you tell the difference between what is real and what is contrived?"

"Lucius was forced upon me. Rita was contrived. Hell, what Severus had with Lily was teenage angst and lust battling his hormones."

Severus glared daggers at his lifelong friend. "Change the subject, Cissy."
"Severus loved Tonks, though. It killed him inside to watch her think the worst of him and marry Lupin instead. But he couldn't come clean and risk defaulting on his life debt to James and Lily Potter. But I look at him now and realize he loves Fleur. And he's been quite the idiot about it, too."

"People change over time, Cissy. In fact, you look like you've gained some weight." As their eyes met, Severus clearly thought or else I could make you answer a few interesting questions. Severus looked back at his tea cup to break the tension. "Recall when Delores came for the Measuring? How did you feel about Hermione's support for you?"

Cissy couldn't bite her tongue. "I dislike how you go from giving unconditional support in public and at Draco's trial to bashing me every time we're alone."

"I dislike how you're such a Slytherin about everything! All this cloak and dagger nonsense only goes so far; sometimes you just have to face your problems head on like you did in Australia!"

"You need to learn to compromise!"

"I could say the same about you!"

"Ladies, please refrain from attacking each other, and share how you feel." Severus cautioned.

"Fine, Sev! I find this situation with you impossible, Cissy! I have a bottomless well of Rage that just wants to lash out and destroy EVERYTHING. I hate the Ministry, I hate Lucius' Bond he had with you, and I hate that I feel like I lost all of my friends. I have Ginny, Fleur, and Cho of all people worried about me! I miss Neville of all people, I can't believe Molly hates me so much now, and I don't know how to fix things with Ron. Or how to get Harry and Ginny back together."

Tears welled up in Hermione's eyes and she furiously blinked them away. Cissy had a handkerchief out for her as if a white flag.

"People change, dear heart. War changes people, and the Weasleys were always homophobic."

Hermione took it with a nod of thanks. "She really doesn't like Harry and Draco together, much less with Ginny as well."

Severus smiled at the exchange, glad to see them having common ground. "I think we've made some progress here; I hope we never again have to resort to this type of questioning-"

"-why did you wipe my memory right after I killed Lucius? Why did you take that away from me?"

"Hermione, The Dark Lord was coming, and I couldn't trust you to not divulge that I gave you the wand that killed my husband. I didn't want him to know I hoped to escape. I was scared, and wanted to survive. I wanted to take my son away from all that. I'm sorry I sacrificed you in order to leave, but if the situation were reversed, wouldn't you have done the same? To save Harry or Ron's life, when you saw me as only a Death Eater's wife?"

Hermione gave a regretful nod. "I get that. I don't know what I would have done. I mean, I used Harry's invisibility cloak yet left money for the stuff I was taking."

Severus scoffed at that. "You paid for what you shoplifted? Stores usually budget for some theft, and you made it all the more apparent that something unusual happened there. I'm surprised you didn't get caught sooner."

Narcissa gathered her courage before speaking again. "Hermione, if I were to tell you-" She paused, visibly changing her tactic. "-well, let me ask this way; what future do you envision for us? Despite
the Ministry's foolish attempt at this marriage law, how do you see us with each other?"

Hermione looked at the ground as she answered, unwilling to show her emotion. "You're family now; every part of my body and my magic tells me that is true. Touching you feels like... home. But I don't know what the future holds. Maybe I'll settle down with you, maybe I'll meet a man and fall in love with him and raise a family, I don't know. But what I need now from you is a foundation built upon friendship and trust. And honestly, right now I don't, and that is going to take some time."

Cissy winced at that, crossing her arms as if to shield herself. "And when Umbridge tells you who your husband will be?"

"Draco is working on a plan to shut down the Wizarding World and stage a protest and call for a snap election, and re-instate Kingsley as the Minister and revoke the Emergency Powers that Ogden has invoked, maybe even sack him and his flunkies. I can't believe they used an anti-pureblood backlash in order to enact this horrific agenda."

Severus vanished the remaining tea in the kettle. "You two are an amazing force when you decide to work together. And, knowing the kind of people you both are, you two would make quite the power couple. You two have a lot more that you two need to discuss, and the potion is going to wear off soon, so I urge you both to keep the conversation going. You both are dismissed." Severus took his leave through the floo and went directly to bed.

Narcissa broke the silence between them, fairly certain the truth serum was still working. *Just keep her from asking questions.* "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too."Hermione replied, making Cissy smile as she understood that she was telling the truth. "I was there last week when Peakes nearly started a duel with Pritchard. I was worried you would come out into the hallway and get hurt."

She nodded. "Glad Pansy was there." She muttered uncomfortably. "I miss you, but I don't trust you." She wanted add an apology at the end to the Gryffindor, but stopped herself because she wasn't truly sorry. *She needs to earn my trust.*

"Me either. Can I - May I... walk you back to your room?" Hermione's offer was genuine, it seems.

"That would be lovely, 'Mione."

Narcissa starts to get up, winces in pain, and sits back down. "Actually, I think I am just going to take the floo." She leaned back in her chair, scooting her hips towards the edge, and made a bit of a show to massage her thigh as if it were the culprit. *It's getting harder to hide the pregnancy. Probably for the best that she be in my class since she'll figure it out.* Narcissa thought about how she could add a lightening charm to herself and maybe avoid getting swollen ankles and walking funny.

"Um, alright. Is there anything I can do?"

"Don't leave me." Narcissa winced as she couldn't keep the words from coming out. "I mean, you can go back to your room. Don't um, don't give up on us."

Hermione frowned uncertainly. "You really do love me, don't you? I'm sorry I can't reply in kind. Yet."

Narcissa slowly stood up, hand on her chair to hide the fact that her center of gravity had shifted. "Yeah, I do love you. Get back to your room, I'll see you... sometime."
Hermione turned to leave, and Narcissa started making her way to the fireplace.

"Cissy," Hermione called out, and Narcissa smiled as she put her hand up by the mantle. "The Ministry is hosting a Yule Ball, probably to make up for the one that didn't happen at Halloween. Might I-" Be your date? Yes. "-see you there?"

Narcissa's smile tightened even as her heart felt like it broke slightly. "Of course." My ankles are swelling, my shoes will need stretching charms in order to fit then, and I don't know how much longer I can glamour away my baby bump for a gown. Might need to use an Empire-waist gown.

Hermione gave a small smile as she turned away, and Cissy knew that her wife's cheeks were turning red as she made her way through the floo and staggered to her bed. Ugh, that girl is so hot-and-cold! I hope she figures out that she loves me before the baby comes! She flicked her wand and canceled a disillusionment charm that had covered an entire wall that was covered in newspaper articles and photographs about the end of the last war and the demise of her cousin Regulus Black.

Crookshanks was looking over the papers again and was flicking his tail as his front paw was extended as if pointing to a specific article. The first reports of Regulus' demise weren't official until after Harry Potter defeated The Dark Lord, and it was filed as a part of a large catalog of the missing and presumed dead.

"What about this, Crooks?" Cissy asked, wondering how the names of the missing were compiled. Rita was already in place at the Daily Prophet, but she was reporting and not some field flunky, right?

"Moow." He said, a hint of frustration there. If Rita really was working with Regulus, why is she only now working to clear his name? What did she do to help the war effort this time? She knew there had to be a piece of evidence missing, one that would disprove her heroine story and show her cowardly nature in this past war.

"Alright, I can owl the news editor from back then, Barnabas Cuffe." Cissy said, sitting herself down to the desk and starting a new letter. Crookshanks went over to her fire, kicked some floo powder in, and raced off to continue his hunt for the elusive beetle who seems to keep bypassing security measures everywhere.

"Good hunting, Crooks." Narcissa said as she took in the wall collage of facts and continued her own hunt through history.

Chapter End Notes

[1] - Prophecy was revealed before, the last 5 words were taken from HP:OotP: Destiny's End comes at the end of the Cataclysm...
Darkness is swallowed as the Earth gives up her graves...
And the Lineage of Blood will be broken in an act of true love...
Once Fate is Twisted, Elder's Bane approaches, and none will come after.
The Yule Ball

Chapter Notes

A/N: There are few times I've really enjoyed a scene that spontaneously came forward on its own and demanded that it get written. Mostly this has happened with Crookshanks, and I hope you enjoy the scene he has in this chapter as it is told from his perspective.

I had a note passed to me at dinner, and I was a bit shocked as Cho and I read it at the table.

"After dinner, the Faculty is meeting up for a drink at the Three Broomsticks and we would like for you to come, too.
Don't worry about the school, Harry volunteered the Aurors to do the patrols tonight as a thank-you for lending the Room of Requirement for training purposes. Bring the transfiguration notes I lent you. -Minerva"

"That's oddly specific." Cho said. "And the timing seems suspect, too. You just got off of a one week suspension."

"Maybe they want to check-in with me about how I've been doing since I was allowed to return to class?" I asked. "I've been fine, right?"

"Actually, yeah. You were more like the old Hermione I knew. Honestly, I think the biggest part of your..." She shrugged, not wanting to say 'your problem', "...is Professor Black. You two being apart looks like a good thing."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting the emotion exist but not fester in me. "Looks like, maybe, but... I slept better with her. And I'm still Bonded to her."

"Maybe you'll meet someone new who can fill that hole in you." I glanced at her, horrified. "Um, emotional hole. Sorry."

It was awkwardly silent between the two of us as I had to wonder when was the last time she had a date. Was it Harry back in our fifth year? I cringed mentally at that thought.

"So I heard a rumor that Viktor Krum proposed to you." Cho asked meekly. I nearly choked on the pumpkin juice before me.

"What? Where did you hear that?" I asked, putting my cup down a little too loudly.

Luna put down a copy of Witch Weekly, finger directly over the new segment called 'Wedding Whispers'. "I knew that if you wanted to confirm it, you'd go to the Quibbler first." Her eyes were narrowed at me in question. "So is it just a rumor?"

"Um, he asked, kind of, but more in a 'I'll save you from having to marry someone worse' kind of way. Also because he said he wouldn't mind if I wanted to still be with Narcissa."

Luna's face was etched with disgust. "What is it with boys wanting to see two girls go at it?"
Cho looked at me quizzically. "Did he really say that?"

I shrugged, trying to remember the conversation I had in the Hospital Wing. "He sounded more noble than pervy, to be honest. And he didn't ask to watch or join in. Honestly I think he was willing to 'share' me mostly to not have to worry about lots of fangirls trying to slip him a love potion in order for him to marry them."

Luna pushed her plate away. "This stupid marriage law is going to blow up in their faces."

Cho seemed to disagree. "Well, I don't want to be in trouble, and there's nothing wrong with being married per se."

"-except that they are rushing us to choose else they choose for us!" Luna replied.

"Or they break up people who are already married." I added.

Cho squirmed as the two of us looked at her. "Well, I just... good intent, bad execution?" Luna and I didn't seem as optimistic.

"It smells funny, and I don't mean just because Umbridge is running it." I saw some of the professors leaving the head table, and I decided to take my own leave as well to grab my notes and meet them in Hogsmeade.

Narcissa was in the Three Broomsticks, sipping on the white wine that she had bribed the bartender to look the other way about. The last owner of the Three Broomsticks goes to jail for trafficking illegal potion ingredients, and now the new owner is leery about you bringing in your own wine. *Smooth, Cissy. At least they don't know it's alcohol-free, so you can keep up your charade.*

Promptly at eight, the door to the bar opened and her favorite stylist entered. The sound of his undead albino peacocks outside faded as he came in, David Mallett warning them to not get into too much trouble. Cissy could have sworn she heard them laugh at that. As soon as he saw Narcissa, his face lit up as he came to sit by her.

"Cissy, dear... I'm *in THE UK* for you. You *owe* me." The Slytherin looked him over, impressed with the spiky salt-and-pepper hair that made him looked distinguished yet young enough at the same time.

"I know I do, and I have made the arrangements you asked for." The bartender came by, and David ordered a scotch on the rocks.

"Really? I didn't think Merlin himself could do it."

Narcissa raised her drink in salutation. "Merlin isn't me."

Severus approached the table and sat down, stein of Guinness already in his hand. "Mister Mallett, welcome. What on earth are you two blathering on about?"

David looked away, biting his lip to keep silent. Narcissa looked like the was the cat that ate the Canary.

"You said you'd resort to anything for Fleur, correct?"

Severus looked to hairdresser and back to his friend. "I fail to see how a haircut will help her."
"Oh, she's not getting the haircut..." Mallett received his scotch and sipped it, his eyebrows almost comically raised.

Severus figured it out, understanding he had just been played. "Damn you, you vile woman."

Slughorn, Minerva, Pomona, and Fleur all entered together, chatting excitedly at the pair of albino peacocks outside.

Pomona excitedly fussed with her hair, now realizing who they were meeting tonight. Fleur looked stricken with tears of gratitude.

Minerva spoke up first in the bunch. "Goodness, Severus, I cannot believe you were able to get-" She cut herself off at the visibly grumpy Severus and a nearly gloating Narcissa. She made a *hmm* sound of surprise as she realized it wasn't the Headmaster's pull that did this.

Horace spoke up, making introductions for everyone. "David Mallett, world-renowned stylist and curse-twister."

David shrugged the praise off genteelly. "Curse-breaking just seems so destructive. Sometimes you can make something better." He took in Fleur, eyes reflecting study and awe. "Darling, I am going to do whatever you want so that you love your reflection once again. I was thinking some sort of light-weight scaffolding could be used to recreate your missing wing, but I'm at a loss for the tissue and skin. But first," His eyes took in Severus like a juicy morsel, "Severus here will be having a full makeover."

Severus nearly frowned at that. "Leave the nose, Mallett."

David gasped in shock. "I'd never touch that! It's striking on you." Hermione came in alongside Sybill, nodding politely while seeming to dismiss everything the supposed Seer had to say.

"So your payment to Mister Mallett was that I would have to undergo a makeover?" Severus asked.

David shrugged. "I'm not in need for gold or Galleons. I wanted a challenge, and I also got my white whale!"

Hermione harrumphed at that, receiving her Gin and Tonic from the bartender. "Be careful, Captain Ahab. You know how that story ends."

Minerva received her own drink as well. "Would you be willing to donate one basic haircut/style to a lucky winner of a raffle? The proceeds would go to the war orphans fund." Realizing he was cornered, David nodded his consent.

Horace slapped the table jovially. "You're sly for a Gryffindor, Minerva!"

Minerva sent off a Patronus to the Head Girl to make the announcement to the prefects in their common rooms. Turning to Hermione, she pointed to her Transfiguration notes. "So you know what David Mallett did here to twist the curse on Narcissa and her hair, right?"

"Yeah, he couldn't undo the curse but he could modify it." Hermione answered, "Which was something I had looked into as a solution to Fleur's condition, but she's not really cursed. She just... is. Then after she lost her wing, I devoted my free time into how to replace it, but skele-grow won't work because it's not human bones."

Fleur finally spoke up, silencing the table as her sole wing shook in frustration. "Okay, I'm right here, can we not speak about me in the third person? Also, I don't think I want my wing back."
"But your wings are amazing!" Narcissa replied, "Don't... don't be ashamed of yourself. You're a Veela, and amazing."

Fleur took the compliment, but shrugged anyways. "I've been having back problems from the weight difference. And to be honest, if I were a full Veela, I could change back and forth at will. And even with the new wing, it could take months before I fly again, if ever. I mean, I can use a broom if I want."

Severus felt stricken as he looked at her. "Fleur, would you permit me to show you how to fly? It's..." *Something that was given as a 'gift' to him from The Dark Lord.* "...the least I could do."

Fleur smiled at that, prompting Severus to give a small smile back. David beamed at the exchange as he started to make a list of potions he would need.

"David, I just want to be human again, like my old self before the war."

"Okay, well, Fleur, you do realize I cannot actually change what you are? My changes would only be cosmetic; you would still be a Veela. The fire in your hands would still be there. I don't want to mess with your avian eyes, either. And if you wanted to have children, they would still be part Veela. Your womb and everything down there..."

"Nothing is going on in that department." Fleur said sadly, looking down at her drink.

David bit his lip as he glanced between Fleur and Severus, then again at the uncomfortable tension between Hermione and Narcissa. "Everyone is blind." he muttered to himself as he leaned over to see the transfiguration notes.

It felt surreal, to have all of the faculty together and I was the de-facto study group leader as we discussed how to help Fleur in her quest to look like her old self. None of us realized the wings being permanent were hurting her.

David had a list of potions he would want to use, both on Severus and Fleur. They were mostly normal ones, skin-clearing potion, hair-thickening potion, revitalizing hair tonic, but there were a few that he had abbreviated as flxsd oil, tthls crp trtmt (get giant tub), sgr scrb. His handwriting was tight yet loopy, the opposite of Severus' in his potions book.

"So Fleur's facial structure went from a bone/cartilage fusion to bone/beak. The flesh and musculature is still there, so all we have to do is manipulate the sub-structure." David said, sketching out the skulls of a human versus a veela.

Narcissa piped in with the obvious, uncertain what we could do. "You can't use episky because it's not broken."

I shrugged. "Draco ruined my teeth once with a hex and I had the mediwitch over-correct and straighten my teeth better than before... maybe we can do that?" Severus' eyebrow cocked up slightly. "My parents were not happy with magic negating their plans to give me orthodontic braces. Personally I was ecstatic to avoid it."

David looked at what he had, looked back at his list, and groaned in frustration. "I have a solution, but it's a horrible one. Severus, I'm going to need your best pain re-leaving potions. And possibly blood replacement. And bruise cream. And access to a hospital."

The professors had been nodding at all of that until the last part. "Merlin, David, a hospital?"
Pomona spoke up as well. "Do you want to cut into her like the muggle doctors do?"

Fleur looked at the stylist carefully. "Um, cut into me? Like with a blade?"

David brushed aside their worries. "It will be the best way to get under the skin and modify the bones, particularly to smooth out your shoulder blades where the wings were connected. Don't worry, I'm planning on having Severus here sing his skin-knitting charm to avoid scarring." He looked to Severus. "I saw what you did for Draco, you are phenomenal. Shame that won't work on the bite wound on your neck."

Severus clenched his jaw at that. "If there were any blemishes I would want removed from my body, I would point to my forearm first."

David's brows knitted together in question there. "That's linked magic, I wouldn't want to trip any magical fail-safe or alert your... lovely former colleagues... that I'm doing." He pointed at the arm with all of the fingers on both hands, wiggling them as he twisted them away from each other while deep in thought. "It's tied to your magic, right? So I can't do that..." He flicked his right hand as he brushed an idea away from himself, wiggling his fingers again in thought before snapping them in a eureka moment.

"I got it! We remove your..." His voice died down as he shook his head and scratched at his temple, "skin... no, you need your skin."

"Yes, David Mallett, I require my epidermis." Severus said patiently. "Cissy, did you forget he's a bit of a madman?"

Narcissa grimaced slightly as she sipped her wine. "He's also brilliant. In his own keeping-albino-peacocks-as-undead-familiars kind of way."

I shrugged as I volunteered some more suggestions. "Sounds like you will want to use Granger Hospital. My parents are muggle Dentists and were trained in oral surgery, so they should be able to help with some of the basics."

David beamed. "Wonderful! And Severus, didn't your Dark Mark fade before when You-Know-Who was defeated by Harry Potter?"

Severus took a longer than necessary drink of his beer. "It did."

"But Cissy, Hermione, and Draco killed him." David said flippantly, "There are no more Horcruxes; the soul was completely un-stapled from this side of reality, so it should have crossed over."

Cissy, Severus, and I all had ominous looks on our faces. "You heard about the lack of magic here for a day?" Narcissa asked cautiously.

"Oh, you know I don't bother with the news overseas." David said, shrugging her question away. "The UK is like... wait, magic failed? Just quit working for everyone?"

Severus raked back his left sleeve. "Not everyone got squibbed. Some of us still had access to magic."

"Here I thought Tony Blair was the worst that the UK could do to the world." David cursed.

Minerva frowned at him. "I never would have pegged you as a Torie."

"Point is," David pressed on, "that dead bastard's power is still working here."
Fleur rolled her eyes. "You're behind; Bellatrix Lestrange is wearing his skull like a mask and is an undead Lich. She even thinks she is him.'"

I cleared my throat. "I have class in the morning, and so do a few of you, so can we get back to this?"

The Aurors' training ended early, making Ron assume that Robards was giving them all a well-deserved night off. Instead, Cormac began pairing people up and assigning them patrol duty.

"Don't complain, this was part of the deal for us using Hogwarts' resources, the Staff get a night off each month and we do some patrol work. Just consider this part of your extended training. Weasley, you're with me."

_Could I instead dodge curses from Bones and Boot?_ Ron thought as he packed up his gear into his backpack. "Okay, McLaggen." _And why can't we call him Cormac anymore? Bloke's got himself a giant head._

The pair of them went down the stairwell, making Ron uncertain where they were patrolling as Cormac kept asking him questions about Hermione Granger. _Why does he want to know about her?_

"What does she want in a man?"

"Blimey if I know. She seems to prefer women." _He can't possibly think he has a shot with her._

"That's okay with me, you know? Wouldn't mind another witch on occasion." Cormac said as he shrugged, and Ronald realized then that this prat didn't deserve a girl as good as his Hermione. "Well, not one as old as Narcissa."

"You do realize Hermione considers herself more of a modern, liberated woman, right?" Ron asked, hoping to confirm his opinion on the prat.

"Oh, they all are like that until they settle down with the right man. Trust me, at the Yule Ball, I'll show Hermione all the liberation that she needs..." McLagged said, a stupid smirk on his face, "...in my pants."

Ron was saved by a reply as Kingsley's Patronus approached. "McLaggen, Harry and I would like to speak with you in my office. Come at once."

Cormac elbowed Ron in the ribs. "Finish up the eighth year corridor, the Faculty is supposed to be back in an hour, okay?" He took the stairwell to leave the castle as Ron went down to his assigned corridor to patrol. _He was probably hoping to catch a glimpse of-_"Hello, Ronald." Hermione said politely, eyes looking nervously around. _Bloody hell, she's gotten more beautiful over time. How did I not notice her? "Just got back from the Three Broomsticks." She looked around and cast the muffliato charm. "Can we talk for a moment?"

"Yeah, 'Mione." Ron cleared his throat, keeping his wits about himself as he remembered Robard's discussion on discerning potential danger and environmental awareness. He knew how long it would take to get his wand out, and found himself sizing her up like a hostile target. _Ease down. She's not going to attack you._

"I wanted to say I'm sorry about..." She seemed to realize he was sizing her up, making her look all the more apologetic, "you know what I've been dealing with. A lot has happened since the war ended, but it doesn't even feel like it's over yet, you know?"
"Yeah, you could say that. People are still dying." Ron shot back, a bit harsher than he meant to.

"I'm really sorry about Lavender. There wasn't anything."

"I know. I fucking know." Ron had been told countless times when an Auror only had a split second to defend themselves against an Imperiused wizard, and how many had been injured and killed for flinching.

"I don't recall our fight, the one that happened before the Awards... before the Goblins attacked." Hermione took a breath. "I was so upset I wiped my memory of it." His eyes met hers as his jaw was clenched defiantly.

"You sounded right mad. Almost like something evil was taking you over. Mum told me it was because Narcissa had..." Ronald relented there, however. "Draco hasn't made Harry evil, though."

Hermione's face flashed a trace of a smile for a moment, but fell flat again. "Yeah, they are good together, it seems. I kind of had a blow-up and was suspended for a week; had to be tutored in how to handle the Dark Magic inside me. It's helping, and I wanted to let you know that."

"Yeah, I heard the Aurors are going to have someone come in and teach us how to close our eyes and stare at trees or something. But I'm glad it's helping you."

Hermione nodded to her door. "Thanks. Well, I'm going to my room, so, maybe we can hang out and catch up sometime?"

Ron nodded, and then a thought hit him. "Yeah, actually, would you mind going to the Yule Ball with me?"

Hermione seemed reticent at that. "Just as friends. I'm not ready to--"

Ron decided to back-track there, realizing how forward it sounded. "-yeah, of course. I just had McLaggen asking me all sorts of things about you; I just thought maybe it would help if--"

She cut in immediately, almost blurting, "-oh, then definitely, I'll be on your arm. All night." She huffed out a nervous chuckle. "That boy won't take no for an answer."

Ronald smiled then, turning to continue his patrol. "Okay then." It's a date.

Narcissa was glad that Hermione was the first to leave, entrusting Mallett with her tranfiguration notes as Severus sent word by his Patronus that there would be a surgery in Granger Hospital this weekend. The process seemed simple enough, once everyone got over the idea of what muggle surgery entailed. Once all of the questions were answered and Fleur agreed to let David keep her wing (who has hopes to replicate it, I daresay) the teaching staff began to follow in her wife's footsteps and made their way back to the castle.

Cissy kept sitting, hinting that she wanted to catch up with her dear friend David. Severus gave her a curious glance and decided to remain seated.

David seemed to be aloof of this as he turned to the Headmaster. "So, the hair length, may I play with it at all?"

"No."

"May I do something to change how you part and style it?"
"No."

"Severus, you're not being any fun." David chastised him. "Cissy, I thought he would be more amenable to this."

"She tricked me into agreeing to nearly anything to help Fleur be more comfortable with her body. I had no idea that she intended to help me on the same account."

"Sev, my dear, you need a makeover. You no longer have to look like the sour, grumpy-poo McFrowny faced, anti-social bastard that you've been for decades." Narcissa said, sipping her wine.

"Nor do I have to begin wearing Hawaiian print tee shirts to work, either."

David Mallett took the glass out of her hand. "Darling, this is the third glass you've had this evening. You're no longer the spring chicken you once were; you'll thank me when you don't have a hangover in the morning when you have to teach class." He sniffed the wine carefully, then sipped it.

"I think I should head back as well. Severus?" Narcissa smiled in frustration as she began to get up from her chair. Severus was already there, lending his hand to help her up. She took it gratefully, grunting softly as she balanced herself to stand upright and cast a weight-lightening charm on herself.

"Oh, Merde." David said, swallowing the rest of her wine like a shot of liquor. His tongue circled his mouth as he didn't detect any alcohol. "How long have you been hiding it?"

Narcissa shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Too long, I daresay." Severus betrayed, leaving the blonde alone as she stood at the table.

David shook his head. "Cissy, I know you're good at arithmancy and all, but how on earth is lying to your wife the best decision you could have made?"

"I really didn't have a better option; besides, she is getting marriage proposals from Krum and at least another dozen wizards, I daresay. She's also too young to deal with being a mother already." Cissy replied. I haven't even looked at my arithmantic formula for a while now because it was all going to shite anyways.

"I've always rooted for you two, so forgive me for saying that you've been a complete idiot about this. She's a responsible adult and will do the right thing if she knew everything. Keep secrets and treat her like a child, and she'll keep acting out." David said, leaving a few Galleons on the table for his drinks before walking out.

Severus offered his arm to his life-long friend, knowing enough to not rub it in right now as they made their way back to the castle.

My eyes took in an eager-seeming house elf that appeared to be wearing a pillowcase with a monogrammed G-H in front of a modified Caduceus that had a wand in place of the staff. When she spoke up, I realized it was an excited Winky who expected me to be at the hospital today. I bolt upright, realizing it was Fleur's surgery. I slept in!

"Thank you, Winky! I'll apparate over in a bit!"

It was already Saturday, and the only thing people could talk about was the amazing makeover that some Sixth year hufflepuff girl won from the raffle on Friday night. She even got a complimentary set of cosmetics and hair care products, and a reporter from Witch Weekly was allowed to come in
and get a few photographs to mark the occasion. He got a nice bit of free publicity, too.

By the time I got to the hospital, Fleur was already knocked out by some sort of potion and my father William was having the mediwitch do the appropriate diagnostic charms while he monitored her vital signs. My mother was cleaning up David and herself while Severus was nowhere to be seen. I followed the same protocol as my mother was doing and joined them in the disinfected room, surprised to see the mixture of muggle scrubs being used when magic would be so much more effective. Doesn't hurt to be extra careful.

"Hermione! Good you could make it. I can't believe we're doing this kind of body modification here, but I also understand wanting to amputate a solitary wing." My mother said, "But then again, I've seen people do all sorts of things to their body to make themselves happy."

I shrugged, not wanting to get into a philosophical debate about this. "David, what will you need from me?"

David pointed to a note left on the table. "Severus said you've seen his Vulnra Sanentur spell performed before. He wrote it out for you phonetically to use here on Fleur."

"Well where is he?" I asked, shocked.

"Oh, he was giving me some lip, so I threw him into a tub full of flesh-eating fish." David dead-panned. I looked at my mother who rolled her eyes while my father repressed laughing.

"Honestly." I asked uncertainly.

"Toothless carp treatment. He's got so many scars on his body full of dead tissue that I just put some tape over his eyes, plugged his nose and ears shut, and gave him a giant tube to breathe through for the next few hours." He said dismissively. "Man's going to exfoliate 10 years off of his face. Not to mention his feet, it's like he's never had a pedicure in his life."

Honestly, he probably hasn't.

"And he gets to be extra-surprised when he sees the new Fleur along with everyone else at the Yule Ball." William said happily. "I've seen the theory and the x-rays, and I think we can do this, Jean. I know this one surgeon who would literally file down the bones on someone's face to make them look more feminine. It's nothing more extreme than that."

"Not aside from the amputation." I said, sighing at the incision lines that David was putting on her.

"We're going to do both wings, even though most of the left one is gone, I want to leave it looking clean and flat in case I get to come back in and re-attach the wings to her." David said to the team.

"Re-attach?" My mother said, "Did she say she wanted it re-attached later on?"

David shrugged. "Not yet, but if I can make a copy and make a left and right wing, I could offer grafting wings onto people. Eat your heart out, Joseph M. Rosen!"

"Do you have any idea what he's on about, Hermione?" William asked me. I shrugged as we set ourselves to helping Fleur try to look normal once again.

Vulnera Sanentur. Carnem Corrigendum. Sanguis Restitutus. I can do this. Vulnra Sanentur. Carnem Corrigendum. Sanguis Restitutus...
Narcissa looked at the notes and the clock on the wall, wondering what it would feel like if she put her feet into the pool with Severus. She shrugged, spelled her shoes off and cast a cleaning charm on her feet as she waded into the large two-person tub and sat on the edge. It was an almost ticklish feeling as the carp swam to her feet and began to nip at the flesh. She really didn't feel any pain from it, which was expected if they only went after the dead layers of epidermis. She thought about being submerged like Severus was, to see if it could revitalize her face any, but decided against getting her hair that wet and would rather risk using *Scourgify*.

The carp kept swimming around and nibbling at her toes and heels until it was time for Severus to get out, so Narcissa knocked on the edge of the tub three times to alert Severus that he was done soaking in the water.

Severus instantly pulled the tube out of his mouth and stood up in the tub, shrugging disgustedly as he made his way out of the water. Narcissa averted her eyes from his Kelly Green speedo so as to not offend him, as Severus pulled the plugs out of his ears as well as the nose-plug before untaping his eyes open. "Thank you Cissy... you're voluntarily soaking your feet in it?"

The blonde shrugged, swinging her feet gently in the water. "It isn't that bad."

Severus scoffed at that. "At least you didn't have fish swimming about your nethers in the piranha pool."

Narcissa rolled her eyes at that. "It's not that bad, Sev. Besides, I want to look my best for the Yule Ball for Hermione."

Severus gave her a slow, disbelieving blink. "While you use charms to hide your pregnancy and lighten yourself in order to wear nice heels, I imagine."

"Nobody finds a pregnant woman desirable, Severus! It may seem shallow of me, but I'm not ready to be... seen as chopped liver while my wife has suitors lining up for her to choose from due to this stupid marriage law."

Severus spelled himself dry as he went to dress himself. "I saw the article; there is no way Hermione is going to fall for Cormac's awkward courting attempts."

"Yes, well, I want to impress Hermione on our date." Cissy replied, pulling her feet out of the tub as well.

"Date? She asked you to accompany her?"

"Well, not exactly, just that she'd see me there."

"If she didn't explicitly ask you to the ball with her, I wouldn't assume anything."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed at him. "Don't give me advice on women, Severus. And you had better add some color to your ensemble for the Yule Ball."

"Very well. Tell me, what do you make of Umbridge and her marriage law?" Severus asked.

"If it gets enforced with public support, I may have to leave the country. With a single stroke, she can enact an anti-gay law and destroy the Sacred Twenty-eight. That's too much power in one set of hands."

"Honestly, the Gaunts have destroyed themselves through inbreeding, while the Selwyns and the Shafiqs married themselves into other bloodlines and had no male heirs."
Narcissa pressed her lips together as she decided on how to bring something up. "Severus, do you recall the conversation we had just before I married Lucius?"

The Potions Master had his shirt half-buttoned when he went preternaturally still. Cissy didn't want to directly bring it up so she held her breath as she waited for his reply.

"I offered to marry you to save you from that fate."

"If... if this law doesn't get repealed, would you consider-"

"-no." Severus interjected, "This law must not stand, and I refuse to engage in this line of thinking."

"But there is every chance that it will be enforced!"

"And you have a spouse who would, and should, support you in this. Besides, you told me to follow my heart concerning Fleur."

"Oh, you're finally going to do that now?" Narcissa said, nodding sarcastically. "The marriage law doesn't even apply to her; you're just hoping to do this to avoid getting married off to someone else."

"Cissy, do not attack me when I am not your enemy." Severus chastised. Narcissa rolled her eyes before apologizing. "Now, can we go see how well Hermione is doing with healing her cuts?"

"Actually, no." Narcissa said awkwardly. "She wanted this to be a surprise for you."

"A surprise? Very well. Will you be helping me pick out an appropriate cravat for the evening?"

Severus said bitterly.

Narcissa gave him a sideways smile. "Might as well, you can help me pick out a dress as well. Then you're getting a haircut, possibly some sort of ridiculous facial peel, skin tonic, and a shaving charm by Mallet."

"I will try to contain my joy." Severus dead-panned as the two of them left to shop for outfits for the Yule Ball.

Crookshanks climbed up the drain pipe behind the old man's wand shop, made it to the roof, and jumped to the rooftop adjacent to it before finding a path to climb up in order to perch atop the roof of the next building over, continuing his daily sentinel duty of the building that makes all of the newspapers. Every afternoon, Rita Skeeter would go out for lunch and not return as soon as everyone else would. Crooks knew the witch could turn herself into a beetle (which amused him greatly back when she was stuck in the jar) and knew that must have been how she made it past enchantments and wards. That was how the rat Peter did it, and I never got the chance to kill him.

Today, however, she was going to different locations. She went to some nearly empty office and spoke into a stick attached to a wireless with a grumpy-looking couple, who handed her a few Galleons for her time before she went and spent some of it gambling on a horse race. It was difficult for Crookshanks to get into Knockturn Alley, since some shops there put spikes up on their building to repel birds from perching there. It was evening, and shops were starting to close up for the night so he knew that Rita wasn't about to do more shopping.

He watched as Rita Skeeter turned right and headed north-east towards the Apothecary; he had to take a running sprint in order to leap over the Alley and land on the roof of the Daily Prophet, before turning a sharp left and climbing his way to the top of the tea shop before making a similar leap over the entrance to Knockturn Alley, landing on the posh clothing store that he knew his human
Hermione refused to shop in. Crookshanks knew that she could afford it now that she had mated with Narcissa, who had been a wonderful human to him, more than respectable and willing to scratch his shoulders and tail-end whenever he asked. He thought maybe he should bring Hermione's mate a bird or something, prove that at least he will provide for the litter if his human won't.

Why does my human seem so hesitant from taking care of the woman who is making a new litter for them? Crooks couldn't figure it out as he made his way up and over the ice cream shop, keeping the blonde witch in his sight. He made his way over the bakery and ran even faster to get past the loud shop that seemed to specialize in offending everyone's ears.

Crookshanks stopped on top of the Owl shop, and he panted as the smell of that many birds cooped up in one building tested his nerve. Why would they put so many in one small area if they didn't want cats to run in and chase them around? Crookshanks' ears flattened in annoyance as he saw Rita look around suspiciously before transforming into her beetle form and flew into the shop through the Owl window that sold paper and quills. Hermione once called it 'stationary', but Crooks knew that word to mean 'stay still'. The feline kept his eyes open as he watched the beetle turn back into her human shape and carefully searched through the scrolls in the desk. Going to need Narcissa to teach me the letter-writing, or at least how to recognize stuff about Regulus, Crookshanks thought as he saw the witch turn back into her beetle form and exit the shop. The orange half-kneazle hunched down and watched as the beetle flew away into the night.

Crookshanks was pacing her room, wondering where Hermione was. She said she wanted me there, right? Where is she then? The Slytherin paced her room once more and decided to meet her at her room instead. Maybe she's expecting me. As she made her way down to the Eighth Year Corridor, she heard Hermione and Ron laughing as they left together, and it was like a dagger to her chest. Narcissa realized that Severus had been right. I'm alone, and going stag to the Yule Ball. She didn't want to be the laughingstock if the party; she would rather stay at home alone instead.

"Misses Granger-Black!" A familiar voice shouted, grabbing her attention. Cissy turned to see Reginald Bertrand coming to a quick halt as he stood before her. "Oh, good. Severus said I might find you here if you weren't at your room." She looked to see Bertrand dressed sharply in formal wizard robes, and smiled politely. He handed her a small box. "Happy Yule."

Narcissa was stunned at this; she had not expected to get a present. As she opened it, she saw it was a silver bracelet that had a sleek black hair as well as a rough, ethereal dark grey string braided together through it. It was beautiful yet it felt like there was a source of magic humming through it. It feels incomplete, though. "What is this?"

"Well, remember the Dementors we fought off? This was part of the shroud from the nearest one that we burned to death. And the Thistle seemed adamant that you have it, along with one of his hairs from his tail. So I wove them into this goblin-wrought silver bracelet and added a protection charm on it for you. That which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."

Cissy felt the piece, and cast a revealing spell on it to confirm what he had said. It was, indeed, a powerful protection charm designed to keep Dark Magic at bay. She decided to put it on and made the clasp fasten with a tap of her wand. "Thank you, Bertrand... but why? And, call me Narcissa."

"Then call me Reginald. I saw your glamour fail after you passed out and I went ahead and re-cast it before Severus arrived. You're hiding your pregnancy and taking risks that aren't Slytherin in nature." He extended his arm to her. "May I escort you to the ball?"
Narcissa frowned momentarily in thought, and placed her hand into his arm. "Very well, but I can tell you're up to something."

Reginald gave her a knowing smile as they made their way out of the castle and apparated to the ball. **How am I going to face Hermione now?**

Severus had withstood a myriad of feminine tortures upon his face and was certain that there was nothing left to be peeled, plucked, buffed, nor smoothed out with tonics that even his Mastery in Potions left him clueless about. He even had some sort of quidditch mouthpiece in, coated with a type of tingling chemical (he had indeed said chemical and not potion, and warned me to not swallow it) as he cast a few intense straightening charms. The result was a row of pearly-white teeth that made him think he should have been in the muggle cinema.

He saw himself in front of the mirror; wearing black dress robes and putting on a Cerulean blue ascot that tucked smartly into his white shirt. Looking at his reflection, the noticed the dark brown of his eyes stood out more than they ever had before. Severus always believed that he had black eyes, to match the stains on his soul from his days of being a loyal Death Eater.

Now, as the color of Fleur's eyes were wrapped around his neck, he realized how much he could shine. Severus didn't believe that he was seeing his own reflection at first; he didn't think he could look so young and handsome. Even with his hooked nose, he seemed quite... dashing. It then hit him that if he looked this good, David Mallett would have turned Fury into Aphrodite herself.

Taking a moment to add a drop of cologne of his own making, Severus smiled at the image he saw in the mirror and thought that maybe he was worthy of the witch he had fallen for. **Slytherin help me find the words to tell her my heart's desire.**

As Narcissa was announced with **Agent Reginald Bertrand, International Confederation of Wizards**, she noticed the furtive glances and news cameras taking photos of various attendees. Though her son was always within arm's reach of his boyfriend Harry, the photographers kept trying to coax him to pose next to Ginny Weasley. Cissy made eye contact and took a cursory glance into the a reporter's mind. **Someone has been dropping a hint that Harry and Ginny are to be engaged?**

"What's wrong, Narcissa?" Bertrand said, noticing the flash of concern on her face.

The Slytherin's eyes darted around the ballroom until she saw Molly and Rita chatting amiably in a corner, and it appeared by Molly's sluggish gestures that she was already quite intoxicated. Draco was beside Ginny now, replacing her highball glass with a glass of water. "Same old shenanigans, it seems."

"Oh, your... um, Hermione looks quite ravishing tonight." He helpfully pointed out, and Cissy's polite smile fell as she saw Hermione wearing a white backless gown, her calf showing through a slit that went mid-thigh. **And Ronald's grubby hand was on the bare, small part of her back a little too possessively.**

"Looks like he wants to ravish her..." Cissy muttered vindictively. Hermione's head turned and darted around the room, as if she could feel her wife's gaze upon her. She turned her face away, hoping that her wife wouldn't recognize her in the silver empire-waist gown she had on. Cissy did not, however, realize how close she had placed herself in regard to Reginald. As her eyes went up to meet his, there was a noticeable sense of yearning coming from her impromptu date.

"Jealousy is unbecoming on you, Narcissa." He said crisply.
"Reginald, thank you for accompanying me here. I'll let you go mingle-" He cut her off with a gentle finger lifting her chin up slightly to look at him.

"-would you like a dance, Narcissa?"

Severus was glad that he had been clenching his jaw in anticipation as David Mallett entered the ballroom with Fleur by his side, because his jaw would have dropped otherwise. She looked entirely human, and was missing whatever spark that her Veela blood caused mens' pulses to race. But she was still the most beautiful thing in the world to me. Fleur wore a daring white-and-black strapless gown, and there were no scars whatsoever where her wings once were. It looks better than my own neck, Severus mused, but I am not about to have my neck cut open just to heal it properly to remove all of the scar tissue.

The pair of them approached the Headmaster and David's victorious smirk was all the payment that the stylist needed. Severus and Fleur were planets that fell into each other's gravity well as they approached each other and... don't kiss her, it will seem contrived. "You look... well." Severus said, hand extended to receive hers.

Fleur had both arms up as her face fell, expecting an embrace instead. She recovered quickly enough, lowering her left hand and presenting her right to him. "Thank you, Severus." Her lips pressed tightly shut as she fake-smiled and held back a torrent of emotions since she had replayed this moment many times in her head and never expected him to be so reserved.

At the entryway, Luna Lovegood was announced alongside Rolf Scamander. Severus' eyebrows furrowed at that. "Those two are an item?"

"I've seen worse people try to make a go of it." Fleur said quickly.

David Mallett cut in to change the subject. "Luna is the spitting image of her grandmother Lucretia."

"Shame about her mother, though." Severus' ears perked up at that. Pandora dropped out of her Potions Mastery and was in France when The Dark Lord rose to power? He saw a visibly uncomfortable Narcissa watching Ronald paw at her wife, and Severus excused himself to attend his dearest friend.

Draco had had it. Reporter after reporter had pulled his boyfriend away from him and was asking Harry about wether wedding bells could be heard in the future with Ginny Weasley. I love Gin, but she's mugging the bloody camera and our personal lives are just that - Personal. He leaned over and asked Harry to join him on the dance floor for a moment.

Harry gave an exasperated sign as Draco took the lead, (something unusual for me to do) thanking his boyfriend for giving him an excuse. "Sorry about that, Ginny just pulled me in beside her and I just forgot how to talk, and smiled and nodded to the cameras."

"Last I heard, you and her took a break. Something about her attitude, drinking, and becoming a social pariah while the media document her downward fall from grace."

Harry looked down, ashamed. "Yeah. Pretty much that. Your mom did her best to silence the Daily Prophet and Rita's need to flay someone on the front page, but her influence only goes so far."
A news camera took a photo of the couple dancing and Harry's eyes lit up with mischief. *This will be good.* "Draco, my love?" Green eyes met blue, and the Slytherin knew he was the fly in Harry's spider web.

Draco gasped as Harry's lips flew to his, the two young men blatantly kissing on the dance floor as reporters gasped and were torn between the rumor that Harry was going to propose to Ginny tonight versus the blatant way the two men came out as gay. Draco's heart was thudding in his chest as he started to realize what had just happened as he felt a tap on his shoulder by his Aunt Andromeda, asking to cut in as a livid Ginny was coming right for Harry.

"No, I do not want a dance, Reginald. Why are you doing this?" Narcissa asked, finding a table and sitting down.

"I realized life is a short, fragile thing. And I've always wanted to have a child." Bertrand replied, remorse in his voice. "And it's not like a single man can go adopt a child."

"What, and you think you can just have mine?" Narcissa said flippantly.

Reginald bit his lip in impatience. "I'm going about this all wrong. I wanted to ask for your hand in marriage, so you could comply with the new PoWFA law."

Cissy snorted in amusement at that. "You know Delores won't approve of us as a valid couple."

"Well, I have some schadenfreude in exploding that narrow little mind of hers. Worst case scenario, she'll say I have to marry a man. Best case scenario, I'll be your spouse and I would help you raise your child."

"If you want a child, go apply as a single witch, as Regina. I don't even know why you changed in the first place."

Bertrand's expression went from apologetic to harsh. "There's the Ice Queen that everyone learned to fear and despise. You may not share the same bigotry as Lucius and Molly do, but you definitely are neighbors." He got up as Severus approached. Bertrand affixed a polite smile and nod as he left the ballroom.

Narcissa reached for a goblet of water on the table and sipped it as she fumed. Severus sat silently by her, patiently waiting for her to begin the dialogue.

"He knew. He know all this time, and wanted to marry me in order to help raise my child." Cissy slammed the drink to the table. "Does everybody know at this point?"

Severus pondered for a moment before replying. "You're upset at his selfless act of wanting to help raise a child."

Narcissa ran her tongue across her mouth, wondering if there was a tongue-tying hex on Reginald's identity. "He's not who he presents himself to be."

"Ah, you're the moral judge on veracity now. I see." Severus dead-panned.

"He wasn't born Reginald." Narcissa said, taking a breath to continue, but instead relented. "It doesn't really matter, I guess."

Severus looks to the table next to them, recognizes both the backs of Hermione and Cho along with the telltale thin flesh-colored tube of a Weasley's Extendable Ear. He looked directly at Narcissa and
thought to her, "We're being eavesdropped on."

Really? How do you want to play it?

"Austen." Severus smirked as he remembered and paraphrased _Pride and Prejudice._

"I daresay, Cissy, your wife Hermione is very agreeable."

Narcissa's eyes widened as she figured it out and played along. " Barely tolerable, I dare say. But not handsome enough to... tempt me. You'd better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles. You're wasting your time with me." Severus gave Cissy a knowing nod as they both got up and left the eavesdropped table.

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I was hunched next to Cho Chang, listening to an extendable ear that she had brought in with her. _I can't believe we're eavesdropping on my wife, but it was the only way to find out what all she was keeping from me. What was Reginald's secret?_

Severus and Narcissa got up from the table, and Cho retracted the extendable ear. "Well, you're lucky, Hermione. If she liked you, you'd have to talk to her. And she doesn't seem to be the agreeable sort.

I shrugged, unable to determine why that conversation felt familiar. "Even better, I won't have to dance with her either. The last thing I need is more headlines while the entire European media is here."

"Here comes Cormac."

"Lovely." I said sarcastically.

McLaggen hiked his leg over and straddled his seat. "Hey Hermione."

"Noooosee." I drawled it out for him to understand I didn't want to hear what he had to say.

"Very well, seeing as I was unable to take you to the Halloween Ball, I had hoped to bring you tonight. But I see you came with Ronald."

I nodded, speaking slowly enough for him to understand. "I did arrive with Ronald."

Cormac's face scrunched up. "So I shouldn't bother."

I flashed him a vicious smile, eyes conveying he should bugger off. "Happy Yule, McLaggen."

Cormac had his winning smile on as he faced Cho. "I'm actually going to talk to Cho, okay?"

"Very well, Happy Yule, Cho." I said as I went to the punch bowl to watch the Ball.

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Severus found himself slipping back into his spy mindset as he scanned the room for potential hazards and targets. Andi was dancing with Draco, while both of them kept an eye on the poorly hidden row going on outside between Harry and Ginny. Narcissa was halfway out there, playing interference to ensure their privacy and to avoid tabloid-style photos from being taken.

Pansy was by his side, presumably doing the same thing. "Headmaster, do you know how Millicent went completely off the grid?"
Severus blinked a few times as he pulled his mind back together. "She's missing?"

"I've been keeping tabs on all of the Slytherins from my year. I got a tip from my muggle contact; she has apparently given up magic in hopes to avoid the marriage law. Will you go talk her out of this, brie she does something stupid like break her wand in half and renounce her magic?... are you even listening to me?"

Severus' eyes flicked between seeing Fleur dance with Viktor and his protégé. Pansy let out a resigned sigh.

"Ask her to dance, sir." Pansy said.

"I'm not a pillock who just cuts in-"

Pansy walked off before he could finish, cutting in between them and begun to dance with Krum. Fleur looked relieved yet dissapointed as she made a beeline for Snape.

"You look amazing, Fleur." Severus said honestly.

"I don't care about looking good, I just want to live like anyone else without being looked at in fear or pity!" Fleur snapped, and Severus wondered if she had repeated this multiple times this evening.

"You're doing alright with Krum fawning over you." He regretted saying it as soon as the words flew out of his mouth.

"You could have been fawning over me, Sev. Next time don't be a coward and hang back while I deal with constant unwanted attention from men!" Fleur stormed off, causing Severus to grimace before chasing after her.

I took to the punch bowl in hopes to stymie conversations, yet Ronald failed to understand my subtle hints.

"Glad you gave McLaggen the boot; apparently he's a difficult bloke to say no to." Ron said, getting awfully close to me as if he's marking territory. I simply nodded as I feigned another sip of my punch.

"Look, I need to tell you that I understand and don't hold it against you. You know, what happened with Lavender."

I really don't need this right now. "Okay, thanks." I turned away from Ron, trying to find any reasonable excuse in order to walk away. Narcissa finally got between Harry and Ginny and diffused the escalating situation, only to see the redhead stomp away petulantly.

"Ginny really didn't like seeing Harry and Draco flaunting themselves like that."

Flaunting? "You disapprove of Harry kissing his boyfriend?"

"He's my best friend, but that sort of stuff shouldn't be done in public."

"Snogging in general, or displaying homosexual affection?"

Ron winced at that. "When you say it like that, it sounds even more disgusting."

"Ronald!" I admonished.
"It's still icky, and I don't want that kind of behavior shoved down my throat."

"It was a simple kiss; I doubt they would ever be so crass to actually shove stuff down each other's throats on a dance floor." I gave him my best 'dissapointed Molly' look. "Straight couples are kissing with better decorum than you and... sorry." I stopped myself before saying her name.

I looked back out into the crowd and saw Fleur rushing away, obviously perturbed as a black cloak billowed familiarly after her. Bad idea, Sev. I went after him, hoping to stop my friend from messing this up like he did with Lily- wait, that's Narcissa's memory. I thought she blocked me out.

"Severus Tobias Snape, you know how this will end."

That made him stop dead in his tracks as I rounded upon him. "Give her some space; your nickname for her is appropriate in this case."

"Miss Granger, there are only two people in this world who are permitted to call me by my full name-"

"-yes, Eileen and Cissy. But your mother had passed on during the first Wizarding War." I ran out of steam as we stood there, seemingly rooted to the ground.

"It is unnerving to hear you speak to me like she does."

"Sorry, Sev. Her memories and emotions are like an extension of me now, and you seem to invoke them more-"

"Likewise she has befriended Harry and is currently trying to impart some wisdom concerning proper comportment when faced with the whole of the European media."

I turned to look where she was, but couldn't seem to lift my feet from the ground. Severus noticed my struggle as he looked up and cursed quietly. That's not good...

"I believe we're charmed to this spot unless you brought your other wand and know how to break Solstice charms." Severus said, steeling his nerves.

I didn't want to look up. I didn't want to see the mistletoe. I didn't know of any way to break the charm other than fulfilling the time-honored tradition. "Let's just get it over with."

Severus looked into my eyes, and I wasn't certain what emotion was there as he pressed his lips gently to mine. I stood there, frozen in shock as his scent flooded over me and my chin went up in response to his kiss, my fingers weaving together behind his neck and I gave into the moment as his hands trailed around my waist, over the small part of my back, and stopping just short of a possessive grope of my arse.

Bloody hell, how is he so amazing at this?

I couldn't help myself as my mouth opened, tongue probing for entrance as Severus began to respond, only to pull back and pant slightly. "Cis- Hermione." His voice held restrained passion and desire, and it surprised me to realize that he held this much emotion behind his stoicism. I realized that Severus wasn't in love with me, that the kiss held his life-long almost-familial affection for my wife, and that if Narcissa were heterosexual at all, she would have returned his feelings wholly.

That's the magic behind mistletoe in the Solstice. It will help you discover love if you allow it.

"I know, Sev. I love you, too." My hand cupped his cheek in a familiar gesture that was completely
foreign to me.

"Was that you or Narcissa?" He asked, trying not to frown.

I shook my head slightly. "Doesn't matter. You and Fleur are in love with each other. Quit denying it, and you two can actually be happy."

The charm released us, as Severus licked his lips. "Thank you. Happy Yule." He nodded politely as he slowly left the Ball, confident in how he was going to approach Fleur. I also moved out from under the mistletoe to see a shocked Narcissa staring at me.

Narcissa always knew she loved Severus, but she also knew it lacked that additional spark that she'd only feel with women. Seeing Hermione there, talking to him like she would distracted her enough to lower her Occlumency shields, resulting in a confession she had always lacked the courage to make. But he and Fleur are perfect for each other, just like Hermione and I are.

"Hello Cissy, you look absolutely... perfect." Being seven months pregnant and in a low-cut empire waist dress would grab her attention, Cissy thought about her cleavage. She blanked on what to respond with, and was reminded of her earlier conversation with Sev. You are Darcy, just go with it.

"Hermione, I have struggled in vain and I can bear it no longer. These past months... have been a torment. I came to the Ball with the single object of seeing you. I had thought I would be your date, but then I saw that you were with Ronald. Still, I had to see you. I have fought against my better judgment, society's expectations, and the impropriety of both your age and being a student. All these things I am willing to put aside and ask you to end my agony."

Hermione looked at me in confusion. "I don't understand."

Narcissa took her wife's hands into her own. "I love you. I know that we are to be finding ourselves husbands to comply with the new law, but I simply cannot. I cannot permit myself to be wedded to a man I am incapable of loving. I dare say the only person I can be married to is the one woman I am married to."

Hermione's face was mixed between being touched and horrified. "I'm sorry, Cissy. Any pain you're feeling now I do not intend to inflict upon you purposefully. I cannot say I love you any more than you love Severus, and I cannot marry it is not true love."

"Are you rejecting me?"

"I must; in order to save your feelings, I must be honest. Perhaps in time you'll understand."

"But we're amazing together! Why would you refuse, when we both know how perfect we are together?"

Hermione fumed as she responded. "I could ask why you think telling me you love me against your better judgement would be a good idea. Honestly, how I could ever accept the hand of the woman who has ruined the happiness of someone I consider a sister?"

Narcissa tried to reply, or object, but was unable to think of the right words to say.

Hermione piled on. "Can you deny that you separated a young couple who loved each other, shattering her heart and rending Harry in two?"

"I won't deny that." Narcissa could see Hermione was exercising great control over her emotions,
rather than letting the Dark infuse her words with venom.

"How could you?"

"Because I observed that his attachment was far deeper than hers, and she would only bring his career to ruin! I did it for his own good."

"Ginny hardly shows her true feelings to anyone. And Harry doesn't care what the rest of the world thinks of him; Ginny's not seeking fame."

"It was clear that an... advantageous marriage... would be the best option possible."

"Did she give that impression?"

"No! But the rest of her family..."

"What about the Weasleys?"

"You've seen how Molly, Ronald, and even occasionally Arthur have acted. The drunkenness and bigotry are on display for all to see. Ginny isn't homophobic, I'll grant you that."

Hermione glared as she pressed on. "And what about Viktor?"

"What about him?"

"What excuse do you have for your behavior toward him? You know of his misfortune, and yet you treat him with, at best, neutrality."

"So this is your opinion of me?" Narcissa held back tears while she kept her voice steady. "Thank you, then. Perhaps these offences might have never happened had we not been thrown into a relationship together. Should I be happy to see you getting proposals left and right by inferior buffoons?"

"Do you think this changes my opinion of you? Ever since I first met you at the Quidditch World Cup, your arrogance and your complete lack of empathy for others made me realize you are someone I could never be in love with, and yet you... understandably... surprised yet flattered. I said how I was willing to risk my life alongside you no matter the odds, because we believed in the same thing and wanted a brighter tomorrow. This all was, however, said only to myself after I thought that Dominika had killed you.

"So when you turned out to be very much alive, I was relieved yet heartbroken to see you lost a wing. You went from an invulnerable ally to something fragile and made out of glass. You had always been seen as a beauty before and I despised the undeserved attention you got from it. But seeing you now, and seeing how others shrink back from you and want to flock to me because the

Severus caught up to a visibly distraught Fleur, offering her his monogrammed handkerchief. She blinked up at him, mascara running down her cheeks. "Nobody is fawning over me now. I look normal, not Veela-beautiful. And people are scared of what I can do."

Snape took a long pause before speaking, hoping his words came out right. "I must admit that I didn't realize you had an emotional attachment to me. When I did finally understand that, I was... understandable... surprised yet flattered. I said how I was willing to risk my life alongside you no matter the odds, because we believed in the same thing and wanted a brighter tomorrow. This all was, however, said only to myself after I thought that Dominika had killed you.

"So when you turned out to be very much alive, I was relieved yet heartbroken to see you lost a wing. You went from an invulnerable ally to something fragile and made out of glass. You had always been seen as a beauty before and I despised the undeserved attention you got from it. But seeing you now, and seeing how others shrink back from you and want to flock to me because the
scars on my neck are more appropriate simply because I'm the male hero.

"And before you wonder, no, I don't pity you. You don't want that anymore than I do. My emotions regarding you are much more complex and yet simpler than I can ever describe. I have always held cold, unyielding logic above all other things. Emotions, particularly love, have only served to break me when I think I am at my weakest. Indeed, having any kind of companion in my quests had always seemed a hindrance rather than beneficial due to becoming compromised and having to save whatever hapless idiot that the Fates have festooned onto me.

"Tonight we honor the death of the Dark, the Heathen holiday that marks the longest night of the year. We rejoice because the days will, once again, grow longer. It is a silly tradition based on lore and superstition that can be easily explained by the axial tilt of the world as we ellipse around the sun. I find this pedantic and reductionist, for we live in a world that is ailing and cannot stop the rising tide of Darkness that does not show any sign of peaking and receding any time soon.

"I do not believe I deserve the title of Hero, not when my reputation stems from keeping a promise to a woman I wronged over eighteen years ago, only to then mark her for death because I did not know that she was with child. My brave survival story is nothing more than being too stubborn to die as a snake's venom pumped through the veins of a too-clever Potions Master.

"And yet we fought side-by-side, against incredible odds for a society that didn't want us. If anyone deserve the title of Hero, it is you, Fleur. You contrast me so sharply I cannot fathom why you stand there and admit love for me. Your selflessness against my avarice, your beauty against my repulsiveness, and your compassion against my... indifference.

"Fleur, I am the worst choice of companion you could ever make, and yet I'm unwilling to do the right thing and send you away. You have endured massive loss, you've seen war, and had great injury. And yet you stand here, still wishing to love and be with me. And all I can do at this point is once again be selfish, to take you in my arms, and swear that I will never rebuff you again for the rest of my days."

Severus never even saw Fleur coming as she kissed him under the night sky.
Severus, for the first time in years, *smiled* as he woke with the nude form of Fleur tucked into his arm in his bed. Christmas had come and gone, and not having to leave this bedroom for over 24 hours was the best present he had ever gotten. He leaned over and kissed her temple, then her cheek, and woke her as he pecked her lips. *I won't have to hide this now; I am in love and she is my...* Severus didn't think the term 'girlfriend' was appropriate for someone at his age, and lover seemed unnecessarily risque.

"Morning, sweetie." Fleur said, rocking her buttocks against him. "It's been years since I've been unable to walk due to a good shag."

"I have a potion that will help with the pain, as well as a salve for any internal bruising you may have obtained."

"You do realize you sound like you're bragging, right?" Fleur chuckled, wincing slightly as she tried to sit up. The Veela flopped back on the bed and rolled onto her back, hissing silently in pain.

"Guilty as charged, my dear."

"I think I'll need your expertise after all." Fleur chuckled darkly as she felt him pressing into her with enthusiasm. "Maybe after that we can have another round."

Severus pulled two vials out from his nightstand.

"When did you first notice me?"

"It was when I heard about what you did just after... well, I heard about it later because of the war. May I say something about you and Bill?"

Fleur stilled, not expecting this turn in the conversation. "You know I loved him and he was a good man."

"I won't disagree with that assessment. After he got mauled, and you told off Molly for thinking you would not wish to marry him because of his scars. I really respected you for that. Though I hated the 'beauty married beast' headlines that came out afterwards."

"Until recently, I was the beast."

"And I was never a beauty."

"You're beautiful to me, Snape." Fleur said as he began to administer the potion.

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I was back home for the holiday - well, my parents' new home, at least - and I was glad to have some
relative peace and quiet while both of them were working at the Hospital. It was, however, short-lived as a House-elf popped into the guest bedroom where I was trying to peacefully meditate and was trying to hand me a note.

"You the witch that likes to gift clothing to us elves? I was told your hair was brown and curly, not wild and ugly!" My gut reaction was disgust at the young house-elf.

"What's your name, elf?" The diminutive elf huffed, shaking the scroll in front of my eyes as if I were blind. *He refers to himself using the word 'I'. Interesting.*

"It's in the note. I was told you were intelligent, don't tell me I have to read and chew your food for you, too." I took a deep breath and opened the scroll.

Hermione-

I found this elf trying to shop-lift in my store today. Apparently, his owner passed away earlier this week from old age and he didn't have any relatives to take him in. He goes by the name Surly (quite appropriate in my opinion) and Draco had informed me that Granger Enterprises will be buying up the estate which will include this elf. Until the deed is finalized and transferred over into your name, this elf will have to stay with you. I suggest the strongest silencing charm you can muster.

-Arabella Figg

"So you belong to me now?" I asked the elf, trying to be polite.

"I don't bathe you, I won't massage you, and I refuse to answer stupid, rhetorical questions." Surly replied, rummaging through the pile of dirty laundry that I was going to run in the washing machine after lunch. "Yeah, you would be the kind of tart to wear pink lacy knickers." He fished out a rubber ball-gag that had accidentally gotten packed with my clothing. "Whoa, mama! How do you wear this?" He placed his nose near it and sniffed loudly. "Am I supposed to wash it with your clothing?"

"Surly, you will unhand my clothing, put down the ball-gag, and you will remain still while I figure out what to do with you. Do you understand me?!" I said forcefully as the house elf scrambled to sit on the ground before me.

"Fine."

Curiosity got the better part of me. "Why aren't you referring to yourself in the third person?"

Surly cleared his throat as he looked directly at me, affecting a sarcastically grovelling tone. "Would Mistress prefer Surly to speak like this?" He made a retching sound. "I sound like a fool that way."

"Who was your last owner?"

"Hector Fawley, his son Sullivan died during the war and Hector went senile as he drank himself to death. Blamed himself for Grindelwald taking power back when he was Minister of Magic."

My heart broke for the poor elf. "I'm so sorry, Surly."

"I'm not," Surly replied bitterly, "he's in a better place now, he can see his son and first wife. I doubt his second wife went to the same place, if you know what I mean."

The front door opened, and I heard the sound of my parents coming home from a day at work. My mother popped her head into my room first.
"We're home, 'Mione. Did you put dinner in the oven already?" I nodded, looking at my watch.

"Should be done in half an hour."

"Good, come to the study, your father and I would like to talk to you."

I gulped, not expecting this. As I made my way there, I saw my father sitting down with a scotch in his hand, looking at the Daily Prophet on the table before him. **LESBIAN LUNACY: HERMIONE SNOGS SNAPE, NIXES NARCISSA.**

"I could sure use a drink." I muttered under my breath, only to have Surly present me with a gin and tonic. "Thanks, Surly. Go... clean my room and Narcissa's, and you can stay at my place in Hogwarts until we officially have the house. And go ahead and do my laundry, please."

"Whatever you say, Mistress Granger." His voice was dripping with sarcasm.

Jean looked at me, puzzled. "You own a House-Elf now? I thought you were against it."

I sipped the drink, savoring the crisp flavor. "He's... its a long story."

My father's eyes bore into my own. "Care to explain what has been going on this semester? I knew you and Narcissa had been having issues, but kissing your Headmaster right after being suspended for a week? You know how to make interesting headlines."

"Dad, I had no idea-" I started.

"'Mione, we know about the mistletoe." My mother reassured me, and I was glad to hear that I had some support.

"But the outbursts? Getting suspended? When were you going to tell us this?" My father was understandably disappointed.

"It's been quite the trying year, okay? I used magic that, um, I had to mean to inflict harm in order for it to work. And it's kind of affected me." I felt ashamed for having to admit it, but it was true.

My mother's lips pressed thin in understanding. "Dark Magic. Have you spoken to someone about this?" I nodded, explaining from the beginning about how my relationship with Narcissa has been rocky, including our dealings with Viktor and Harry's relationship with Ginny and how it all came to a head resulting in me having to be tutored by Pansy Parkinson during the week I had been suspended in order to deal with my emotions and the Darkness within me.

My father frowned after I finished explaining what all had happened. "Before when we spoke, you said you loved her. Yet now you seem to reject her. I've hardly ever known you to be of two minds about something."

I shrugged uncertainly. "I should know when I'm in love, right? And not having any control over my feelings has made me question it entirely."

What happened next utterly surprised me. My father laughed. "You think I had control over my own feelings when I met your Jean?"

I knew they had met in school, but my father never really explained what it was like trying to date my mother. "But you two are perfect for each other. You totally compliment one other. It's obvious you two belong together; I don't think I've ever had that."
William and Jean both laughed then. My father replied first. "She and I couldn't keep our hands off of each other, to the point where we set timers and scheduled snog breaks to offset the tension between us. And even then, we fought quite a bit."

My mother continued. "We compromise. We communicate, and we argue. But we argue constructively to share difference of opinion, rather than destructively in order to "win the debate" or shut down the conversation. We weren't this in-tune when we first met, 'Mione."

"Really?" I asked, trying to imagine my parents younger and, for the lack of a better word, flawed.

"I have noticed that you seem to go from defending her to others when she's not around to arguing against her when she is. It's really easy for you to defend somebody when they're being provoked, but it's hard to defend somebody when you disagree with them isn't it?"

I frowned at that, taking another sip of my drink. "Well, she has done done serious damage to Ginny and Harry's relationship though." It felt like a weak excuse as I muttered it to a disappointed parent.

My mother replied this time. "You mean to say she used magic to force them apart? She doesn't seem to be that kind of witch."

I redoubled my nerve as I replied, pointing down at the article. "No, she just let Ginny fall apart all over the papers and told Harry that this might seriously affect his career."

My father made a slow hm noise that irked me. "So your friends make their own mistakes and you're blaming... Narcissa?"

"Well she didn't have to do that." I rebuffed petulantly.

My mother was still being the most tactful person in the room. "And she didn't put a wand to their head either. If Narcissa's merely talking to them made them break up, they chose to break up instead of dealing with whatever problem they saw. I love you, 'Mione, but I think that your need to always be perfect has blinded you from one simple truth. People aren't perfect and you should accept them the way they are. If they want to change, it is up to them." She lifts up the newspaper, eyes scanning the article.

"She does love herself some Austen." Apparently Rita's quick-quotes quill had picked up part of the conversation and I could read it on the paper below.

"...I have struggled in vain and I can bear it no longer. These past months... have been a torment... Still, I had to see you. I have fought against my better judgment... I am willing to put aside and ask you to end my agony..."

This is ridiculous. I shouldn't even be entertaining this line of thought. She's not Darcy, the misunderstood Byronic Hero. And Viktor Krum isn't George Wickham. Right? Even though Ginny and Harry together do remind me of Jane and Bingley somewhat. At the bottom of the front page had a listing for wedding announcements, better than the usual grim obituaries page. I turned, hoping for some happy news.

Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot Tiberius Ogden is proud to announce the marriage of his nephew Cormac McLaggen to Cho Chang on January Ninth in a private ceremony.

I set my drink down and gaped at the announcement. He moves pretty fast, it seems. "Um, I need to make a phone call."
Within moments, I had her number dialed and I waited to hear her pick up.

"Hi?"

"This is Hermione. I'm calling from my parent's place."

"Oh."

"You're getting married?!" I wondered why she seemed so blase about it.

"Yes, to Cormac. He asked at the Yule Ball, and I accepted." I tried to quit making the associations, but this one glared me in the face. Cormac could easily be Mister Collins, but that would make Cho... Charlotte Lucas.

"How could you with... McLaggen? You know he asked me minutes before you, right?"

Her voice almost seemed to convey an emotion: annoyance. "No he didn't."

"Well he was about to. I could tell. He said he was going to ask again."

"I know; he told me. And I was there when you shut him down. But the law is about to be enforced and I honestly don't have any other prospects."

"You don't sound happy about this, though." A silence began to grow between us, and I didn't know how to remedy it.

"I was called the human hosepipe, you know. Over how much I cried about Cedric dying. I'm tired of being seen as 'the girl who dated that boy who died'. I need a fresh start, I need a husband, and he's asked."

"But you're settling." I just couldn't understand how anyone could do this.

"Maybe I am; maybe I'll learn to love him. He swears his Aunt Dee-Dee will love me as long as I don't talk out of turn. Or about politics. ... probably best if I not speak up at all. He really wants to please her, and maybe that means he'll do the same for me."

"You don't have to do this."

"I kind of do. And I want you and Luna there. She wants us there?!"

"I don't know, that's in nine days..."

"It's not going to be too fancy; I've seen your closet, you've got dresses for this. Could I trust you and Draco to dress Luna?"

I sighed, knowing I would regret this. "Yeah, we can do this."

Narcissa was throwing herself into her work to ignore the pain of her last conversation with Hermione. Her wife had not lost her temper and remained quite calm throughout it all, which for some reason made it hurt all the more. I can't just blame it on the Dark in her, she had it under control and yet she rejected me.

She put back up her arithmancy equation, filling in more details of the recent past and more values to define her wife. It showed that there was a good chance Hermione would keep the dark at bay from now on, but that it also showed it would be best for Narcissa if they remained married.
It was then that Severus was at her door, and Narcissa could tell from his relaxed composure that he had indeed enjoyed the past day in his bed chamber. He finally opened up, good for him. Narcissa smirked as she added, and apparently so did she.

"Sorry for not wishing you a Happy Christmas yesterday."

"You were indisposed in a manner quite becoming of you."

Severus ignored her playful jibe and looked at her equation. "I cannot even get my arithmancy equations to go out past a week. Yours is... abruptly ending in a few months?"

Cissy nodded at that. "I'm trying to add more precision to the values attached to the variables in order to keep the equation stable, but the eigenfunction destabilizes every time."

"You have a lot in this equation; are you sure you even need the data from before you met Lucius?"

"It all comes into effect on some small level, that's why my equations work so well. Something that happened then you were not even seven could cause you to make a subconscious decision that changes your path in life. Had Harry not met Ron at Kings Cross, Draco may have befriended him and both of them would have been sorted into Slytherin. Imagine what the world would be like instead, a half blood wizard forced to live under the staircase of his muggle Aunt and Uncle."

Severus paled at that. "That's a completely horrifying supposition. But that's not why I came to you today. I saw Rita's latest headline from the Yule Ball; are you going to be alright?"

Cissy nodded. "She was exceedingly polite yet firm, proving a Mastery of her emotions and the Dark within herself. Hermione, I mean. Rita can just fuck right off."

Severus nodded solemnly at that. "Meaning her rejection wasn't based on some knee-jerk need to inflict pain unto you."

"Well, it still happened. Bertrand proposed because he can't get pregnant anymore but wants a child, and I'm tempted to accept just so my child has a stable father figure."

"He can't get pregnant anymore?" One eyebrow was raised curiously. "I had no idea you and Lucius had such detailed dossiers on INTERCON Agents. But I don't think you should enter into a lifetime commitment just for the child's sake. And perhaps it is time for you to cut your losses with Hermione."

Severus nodded solemnly at that. "Meaning her rejection wasn't based on some knee-jerk need to inflict pain unto you."

"But she's my wife. She helped create the baby girl inside me."

"You didn't have to keep-"

"I've always wanted another child, particularly a little girl. Severus, I've felt her kick."

That made him pause as it sank in. "Don't use her as a ploy to save your marriage. Your relationship with her with survive or fail according to the actions between the two of you. Adding another person, particularly a dependent child, will only magnify the problems that already exist. As a child who was supposed to be the glue that fixed my parents, I'm telling you it isn't fair to her."

"Are you saying I should accept Bertrand's offer?"

"Not at all. I am simply telling you what not to do."

"But this is Hermione's first real relationship. Mistakes will happen and I'm trying to be
understanding. She's even conquering her inner Darkness so she can figure out her own feelings about us."

"Cissy, I love you, but if you start to say it's not the real him and that you only get hit when you deserved it... I can't stand around and watch this happen again to you."

All of the stores were closing early, which suited Crookshanks just fine. He knew tonight would be the night of the explosions and bright lights in the air, and he was able to convince the stray cats that Arabella fed behind her grocery store to help him with his hunt. It had taken some considerable effort to get Narcissa to teach him how to recognize the letters, but there was nothing there about Regulus. That's why all the cats were needed tonight.

Mr Tibbles was atop the Owl shop, chirping that he was in position. Crookshanks was standing out of sight at the Apothecary as he smelled the reinforcements making their way up from Knockturn Alley. I am going to have to clean myself after this, I swear those street tomcats enjoy rolling around in garbage like the dogs do. Crookshanks had ditched his collar with the translation runes and rolled around in coal and soot in order to disguise his orange coat, but he knew he didn't smell as bad at the other cats did.

They were all ready, and even Crooks' tail was twitching in anticipation. That thing has a mind of its own, unless I'm running full-out and only then it's balancing me in the tight turns. He lifted his head up just enough to see Rita Skeeter get to the storefront again, then look strangely at the two stray cats staring back at her. What are they doing? Don't scare her off!

"Shoo!" Rita said, ducking into an alleyway and transforming herself into her beetle form so she could break into the shop at the end. She dug through the scrolls of paper once she was back in her human form inside the shop, looking over her shoulder towards the street. She seemed nervous, even though the street cats sauntered away with their tails high up in the air. That was close. She worked faster at the papers, stuffing them into her purse and transforming herself back into her beetle form, flying out through the owl-window for the business.

Crookshanks yowled loudly, giving the signal that all the cats should pounce her while in the bug form. The cats gave chase, swatting her out of the air and knocking the beetle onto the paved street.

Mr Tibbles made a hiss and swiped at the beetle, knocking it sideways as it seemed stunned. Crooks was there at the same time as the street cats, all of them with claws out and making swipes for the beetle, flying and darting frantically in various directions. We don't want her dead, just stunned! Crooks thought as he took an exaggerated clap towards the beetle and instead knocked over the mange-riddled street cat that seemed to want to eat her. The beetle that was Rita Skeeter seemed to have a broken wing, and was left to crawling on the street as the cats circled her, hissing ominously.

The cats knew she might put up a fight, and that her wand would need to be taken from her as soon as possible. Within seconds, Rita assumed her human form again and was reaching for her wand. Mr Tibbles got there first, clamping his mouth around the stick and pulling it out of her reach, running off into the direction towards the Twin Red shop. The street cats pounced on her and slashed at her face and shoulder, making the witch move her hands into a defensive position as she tried to get up and chase after her wand.

It was time, he knew, as he used his claws to climb up Rita's back and pull the purse strap off of her shoulder while the other two cats kept hissing and spitting at her. Crooks got the purse strap in his jaw and started to run... at least tried to. The street cats hissed one last time, giving Rita quite the bitch-slap across her nose. He was burdened down with the purse dragging between his legs until he
rolled over and got the purse to lay on his side as he almost-ran back to Figg's Grocer and used the open Floo connection to rush into the Hospital.

Narcissa was there with a plate of tuna and a much-appreciated scourgify charm for his work. She even put his collar back onto him after a decent bit of scratching between his shoulders. "Now let's see what she has been snooping into..." As she looked over the documents, a picture started to become clear and she fired off a Patronus to her Solicitor as well as Draco. Someone in the Ministry is using the stationary store as an anonymous dead-drop to leak information.

Harry was left working New Year's since he took off for Yule and Christmas. At least Draco would be by later in order to ring in the new year with me at midnight. After the Yule Ball, he and Draco were both no longer speaking to Ginny. He wasn't certain who had 'leaked' that to the press, but Harry was not about to get pressured into proposing to her. The three of them had wanted to spend their lives together in an unusual relationship, but none of them knew how to get back to where they first were without arguments over attention and jealousy. He loved them both, but Ginny wasn't meeting his emotional needs while Draco didn't pressure him at all. Harry could tell that his boyfriend missed her, though.

*It's going to be a long night.* Harry thought as the front door to the Auror office slammed open and a livid, bleeding Rita Skeeter looked around and disgustedly approached Harry Potter.

"Rita, how good of you to show up... in person." She had laid off of disparaging him, but that didn't make things right between them since the reporter had started to go after Hermione and his boyfriend's mother Narcissa.

"Harry, I'm here to report a crime! I was... mugged."

"That's 'Auror Potter' to you, Rita." Harry drawled, having learned the fine art of the personal dig.

"Auror Potter, I have had my wand and purse snatched from me this evening, and I demand my items back!"

"Alright. What did the assailant look like?" Harry asked, quill filling out the criminal inquiry report.

"There were four of them."

"You seem relatively unharmed, just a few scrapes. Were they armed? Did they brandish their wands at you?"

"They were cats." Rita mumbled, grabbing a tissue from the box at the desk and wincing as she put it on a wound on her face.

"I'm sorry?" Harry asked, uncertain to what she had said.

"Cats! I was assaulted and robbed by at least four cats on Diagon Alley. They even took my wand."

Harry bit his lip from laughing. "I think this is a case for the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"I don't know if they were magical creatures. I stopped by their office on the way here, anyways, and they... well, sent me to you."

"Alright, well, Rita, would you tell me exactly where you were in Diagon Alley when you were... assaulted by," *don't say pussy, "the cats?"*
"The..." She trailed off, eyes flinching to the left. Harry could already tell she was lying. "Apothecary."

"Oh, how is Silverthorn? He whipped me up a nice burn salve a month ago."

Rita smiled and replied automatically, "he's good, um, I was just... asking about doing an article in his shop."

Harry sighed, putting the quill back in its inkwell. "James Silverthorn died in 1950."

Rita shrugged, "I must have been talking to his son."

"He's an American muggle chemist. Draco was researching muggle chemistry and stumbled across a fraternity that seemed to study Alchemy. Now, where were you? Really."

A folded piece of parchment sailed into the office, and Harry recognized it was from the Magical Creatures department.

_Don't let her 'pussy-foot' around the truth, Auror Potter. Anyways, Happy New Year!_

"I see." Harry said as he read the note, incinerating it with a tap of his wand. _Even they weren't taking her seriously._ Rita hadn't responded, so Harry took a page out of Severus' playbook and let the extra long pause build up tension. Harry clasped his hands, letting his face betray nothing as he appeared cool and collected before the woman who used to rapid-fire questions at him in order to get material be completely silent and under heavy scrutiny.

"You should be aware that it's a crime to make a false report, Rita. And I'm going to need to know more about what happened then, to make sure you aren't... bugging anyone."

Rita's face pinched uncomfortably as Harry waited for a response. The Auror shook his head and took the quill in hand again.

"As you were saying, you were assaulted and robbed by four cats." Harry conveyed how ridiculous it sounded as he dead-panned her testimony. Rita caught on, seemingly affronted yet embarrassed.

"Well, they may have been wizards in disguise! Unregistered animagi!"

"Really? Unregistered animagi?" Harry stroked his chin as if he were in deep thought. "Been awhile since that crossed my desk; and the odds that all four of them were cats? If that's the story you want to give me, fine. What color were they?"

Rita's lips pursed shut; she was uncertain if Harry was taking her seriously or just having her on. "Um, they were all dark. Some black, some grey. They all stank."

Harry slowly enunciated as he wrote the description down. "Four... black or grey... smelly cats. Did any of them speak out loud, perhaps use each other's names at all?"

Rita fumed at that. "You're insulting my intelligence!"

"If they were animagi, they could potentially talk. Besides, this is a standard question for these forms."

"They didn't."

"Did any of them have any identifying features, scars, or tattoos?"
"THEY WERE FUCKING CATS!"

"And how did you get away from them, if you were unarmed and outnumbered?"

"Well, I ... transformed into my human shape and ran away."

"You're reporting that four non-magical cats attacked a beetle, which you had to voluntarily take the form of, and then mugged you."

"This is ridiculous! You're not taking this seriously."

"I've had reports of shops being broken into on Diagon Alley." Harry bluffedd as he gave her a meaningful look. "Perhaps you should avoid the area after closing time. Or I'd be happy to assign you an escort." Harry smiled, and he could tell it wasn't reaching his eyes. "For your protection."

Rita balked at that. "No, I don't... this won't be necess-"

"-At all times."

"I need to get home, thank you, Auror Potter." Rita nodded, stomping away as a mirthful Draco stood at the doorway.

Severus found himself at The Devonshire Arms, feeling rather awkward as he couldn't shake Fleur off as he said he needed to check in on a wayward serpent. He knew of the place and its history, and patiently explained to her that there was a particular type of dress code for the location. When he had explained it to her, she balked before bursting out in laughter.

"You mean to say there's a bar where you dressing like the bat sweeping out of the dungeons is not only approved of, but encouraged?"

"And that is why you cannot even hope to get in wearing anything in your normal wardrobe. Think of it as Victorian Mourning dress. The less normal, the better." He wasn't certain he could explain the gothic subculture to her, but that was where the Drag-nun Maria said he could find Millicent.

"So you'll have to dress me." Fleur said, flirting with him. "You've undressed me enough times it seems."

After a trip to the Black Rose and Darkside in Camden town, Severus found his eyes lingering on Fleur's corseted waistline as she looked at herself in a compact mirror, remarking upon the makeup charms he had put on her.

"I'm not used to having dark eyeliner or black lips, but goodness, it does indeed bring out my eyes. And I thought you would have just put me in that first green and silver dress you saw in the window." Severus smiled at seeing her in the red and black Victorian off-the-shoulder dress with black lace bolero, which was the main reason she didn't object to the plunging neckline. She was definitely pale enough to make this outfit work.

"Speaking of eyes, if any muggles ask, tell them you are wearing contacts. As you can see, the feline eye look I gave you is a bit of a trend here. I am glad, however, that Millicent is finding her way in muggle society."

The girl at the bar didn't look anything like the chubby raven-haired girl that he remembered seeing as she was sorted in her first year. She had lost all of the weight he could tell in her torn black leggings, black fishnet top over a blood-red bra, and thick black leather choker that looked a lot like a
collar in his own opinion. It was the lip-piercing and the mohawk that had truly surprised him. *She went full punk, it seems.*

"Happy New Year's Eve. What can I get for... Headmaster Snape." Millicent said, her face going from the disaffected goth (an easy look, considering her Pureblood-playing ways in the past) to surprised schoolgirl all over again.

Severus gave a polite nod. "I'll have a Strongbow."

Millicent nodded, and looked to the blond. "And you, miss... Fleur Delacour?"

Fleur nodded in response, asking for the same beverage.

"I'm here to see how you're doing, Miss Bul- apologies, what would you like me to call you?" *She's probably using an alias.*

"I go by Millie here. And I'm fine. I've got a job, a flat, and a decent flatmate who doesn't ask a lot of questions. How did you two find me?"

"Pansy was worried; and apparently you spent quite a few Galleons in order to establish a muggle identity." Severus replied.

"That effing nun." Millie cursed under her breath, pouring the first cider from the tap. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted him."

"Nun?" Fleur asked, "Maria?"

Severus cocked an eyebrow. "Good guess."

Fleur shrugged. "I was his beard in school."

"Beard?" Millie asked, uncertain of the term, switching glasses as the second one began to fill.

"Pretend girlfriend to hide that he's gay." Fleur replied, earning a curious look the Potions Master. *She met Nymphadora, so I guess that's fair.*

"See, it's stuff like that's making me glad I'm living in the muggle world now. It might not be perfect, but it's a lot better than being forced to marry some muggleborn just to ensure there are no more Purebloods in our society!"

"I have it on good authority that the law will be protested against, and, hopefully... overturned." Severus replied.

"I've seen what happens when people protest and fight the government. They get crushed." Millicent replied as she took the twenty pound note and gave them their change. "Don't turn me in. If I have to, I'll break my wand, renounce magic, maybe even flee the country if I have to."

"We won't; we just wanted to make sure you were okay. And that you wouldn't do anything foolish like snapping your wand in two." Severus hoped he was getting through to her.

Fleur, however, seemed to notice something else. "What's his name? You're staying and living as a muggle for a reason."

"Theo. We can't be married in the wizarding world, and I knew I could fit into the muggle world easier than he could." Milli said, eyes downcast at the meaning of it.
"He would have to marry a muggle-born witch." Fleur said in soft horror.

"But his heart would be with me, and he'll come see me when he can. This way we can be together." She sounds like she is convincing herself that this mad plan will work. Millicent gathered her resolve. "I've got other customers here. Thank you for checking in on me, but it would be best if you forgot all about this."

_Slytherin's Snake, they are running to ground and already planning on infidelity. So much for doing this to promote family values._

Narcissa thanked Surly for retrieving the Black spellbook from Hermione's room, still uncertain about the new House-Elf Draco got for them as a Yule present. The estate that it came with was more than adequate and a lot less flashy than Malfoy Manor ever was, and the change of scenery might do her some good as she had begun planning out a nursery for her soon-to-be newborn. Surly looked over the edge of the table to see how she was doing the layout of the house.

"Why are you putting a bed in the nursery?"

Cissy sighed in frustration before she responded. "Because sometimes it's easier just to sleep in the same room to care for a child."

"Oh, I thought it was because you and Hermione wouldn't be sleeping in the same bedroom."

"Well aren't you just an observant little house elf." She snipped back, unused to such precociousness in a House-Elf.

"At least not when you two do it and then she gets all mean at you the morning after." Cissy arched a warning eyebrow at him. "What? I did my research. You wouldn't believe the kind of gossip the Hogwarts House-Elves have. Like Filch having outfits for Mrs. Norris to wear."

"Have you ever been hit with a silencing charm?" Narcissa threatened.

"Lots of times. That's why I say what I say, in case I can't later on. I think the more you bottle up the shite life gives you, the more likely it's going to crash and crap all over you when you least expect it. Honestly, I don't even think Hermione is going to live in the same damn house with you after she finds out you've been hiding your pregnancy all this time."

Cissy fumed at that, hand twitching for her wand. "I forbid you from telling her about it, do you understand me?"

I'm honest, not cruel. You can tell her about the baby when it begins to attend Hogwarts for all I care. Is that how you want the house arranged? I've got work to do." Surly asked with a sneer in his voice. Narcissa nodded, dismissing the elf. Once I tell her, it's over. She'll hate me for lying and want nothing to do with us.

As she was waiting for an answer from Helena and Draco, Cissy decided to see what the spellbook had said about the Harbinger.

_Black rebuffs the stains of sin, light from darkness of the withered tree, contorted through violence and faith, the branches amputated and spliced with unnatural means. All shall be unbound and unwound as the wingless bird flies, Septimus' blood betrays blood, and poppies bleed their death upon the wedded grass as silence grows deafening. The dead will be borne again as the lion and serpent clash in loving misery as the black swan lie gutted in a pool of her own blood..."_
Narcissa slammed the spellbook shut in frustration, rolling her eyes rather than continue reading the gibberish. *Elladora was a mad witch, nothing more.*

I was in the Weasley house, and it felt really odd to see Arthur's Garage emptied of all of his muggle contraptions. *Now that he's living in the Muggle world, I guess he doesn't really need to hoard stuff.* Ginny shuddered as we saw the gutted living room. It didn't even feel like anyone was actually living here, but rather like people were moving out. It was missing whatever indescribable lived-in feeling that made this house feel like a home. The only reason we were here was because Molly found more of her stuff and wanted it out of the house since Ginny was no longer living here.

"Can I just leave whatever stuff is left in my room at your place while we get ready and go to Cho's wedding?"

"Of course, Gin."

"Thanks again for coming with me to the Burrow. It feels strange now that dad is gone."

"I can tell. Have you seen him lately?" I asked her as we made our way up the staircase to her room.

"No. It's really weird to see him carrying on with a girl my age. He's happy though."

"Are you worried about um..."

"dad making a new quidditch team of children?" Ginny offered. "Nah, apparently it was mom who wanted to give birth to the litter until she had a girl that could be just like her." We walked into what used to be Ginny's room, and the bare walls and missing furniture just left the room looking desolate as Ginny went and picked up the plain box left in the middle of the room. *Molly could have shipped this parcel by owl with a shrinking charm.*

"Ginny?" Molly called out, "I asked you to come over days ago!" Ginny frowned at that, hoping that they would evade her mom.

"I had practice with the team, and we partied the New Year away with our sponsors." I arched an eyebrow in question to my friend, only to see her shrug and hope the lie would pass muster.

"Well, after that horrible display at the Yule Ball, I have been doing damage control only to find out that-" Molly turned into the room, snapping her mouth shut as she saw me there.

"Misses Weasley." I said politely, hoping this would placate her. *Though you're just Ms. Prewett now.*

"Hermione Granger, you ruin everything!" Guess not.

"What have I done now Molly?" I retorted, dropping any pretense of being polite.

"Delores and I have been negotiating the marriage of her godson and my daughter. It had nothing to do with you, and I demand you leave that sweet boy alone!" Wait, what? *Umbridge is Sweet Aunt Deedee?*

"What are you talking about?" Ginny would never agree to an arranged marriage!

"I heard he's getting married, and saw in Witch Weekly that he proposed to you. Don't play coy!"

I couldn't help it; I laughed in her face. I didn't know her face could go that red.
"Molly, what makes you think that I have any designs upon him?! Sure, he proposed to marry me just before the Yule Ball, but I turned him down. And you think he's over that already and would just go after your daughter as some sort of consolation prize? No offense Ginny."

Ginny cringed at the thought. "Merlin, please! None taken."

Molly huffed as she realized that Ginny would never have accepted an arranged marriage to Cormac. "Well, some of us know the importance of being married, Miss Granger!"

I wasn't taking any of her self-righteous indignation today. "I'll go ask Arthur what that importance is."

"Well I'm not about to leave my only daughter to the mercy of the Ministry." Molly said impatiently. "She needs a good man to take care of her!"

Ginny fumed at that, and I could see the pressure building. "I can take care of myself. And if I were to marry anyone, it would be Harry Potter! I love him!"

Molly tsk'ed as she rolled her eyes. "He's off doing you-know-what with Draco."

Cold tension went through me as I glared her down. "Leave my son out of this, Molly." I took a slow breath, keeping my emotions in check even while I wanted to hex her into oblivion.

Molly winced in disgust as she looked up and down at me. "He's not your son."

I set my jaw as I felt my magic crackle in anticipation. "I love him like he is."

Ginny realized what was happening as she took my hand, sapping the tension away from me. "And I love him too. The three of us love each other, and I plan on having a wonderful life with both of them."

Molly shook her head at us, face full of disgust. "You two are just throwing your lives away."

I stared her down, my eyes peering into her mind and sensed every insecurity she had. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but she pushed too far and I was going to go for the most hurt I could dish out on her. Maybe this is why Sev resorts to a cutting remark; it keeps his wand stowed while releasing the stress and some of the anger without giving into the Dark.

"What do you do all day in this ugly, gutted house? It's just you, Ron, and Percy, here, right? This place is as barren as you are now; empty - like a useless husk that nobody wants to come into. All you have are two immature boys playing at being men who like not having to pay rent or cook for themselves. Probably have a good wank after dinner because who need marriage and a wife to supposedly do all that for you when they have a mommy." I took a breath, to let it sink in as she turned even more red. "I get why Arthur left as quick as he did; he needed to go elsewhere to feel like a real man and not yet another one of your babies. Now tell me how important your marriage makes you."

Kingsley was sitting next to Hermione at Cormac and Cho's wedding, who smiled at the sight of Draco sitting next to Luna at the reception dinner.

"Luna cleans up well, Hermione. Was that your handiwork?" Hermione shook her head no.

"That's Draco's work. She looks radiant and perfectly normal as per Cho's request." Ginny eyed the food and rolled her eyes again at being dragged to this.
"I cannot believe those two decided to get married all because his uncle passed a law." Ginny frowned as she reached for the champagne, thought better of it, and sipped her goblet of water.

Even though Kingsley was the Minister of Magic, he knew he was merely a figurehead leader as long as the Wizengamot keeps their emergency powers enacted. He smiled, though, as he realized how ineffective this new marriage law was. "Did you know that this makes the total number of marriages performed so far up to three?"

Hermione scoffed at that. "Who were the other two?"

Kingsley shrugged. "Some muggle-borns who had already planned on getting married on New Year's. You can see the disappointment in Delores' face."

Cho came by the table, beaming in her wedding gown while Cormac was getting pulled around and introduced by Tiberius to various power-players in the Ministry. "Minister Shacklebolt, Hermione, Ginny! I'm so glad you all could be here!"

Hermione smiled politely. "I love the decorations you did here." The reception hall had a very strong Gryffindor theme.

"Thank you! I absolutely loved your common room and wanted to incorporate the colors here." Cho said, tilting her head in the direction of her new husband, "And I think he looks smashing with a bit of red."

"You were in the Gryffindor Common room?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

"Remember, Headmaster Snape made it so every house would throw a party in their common room in order to have more inter-house cooperation? You..." she trailed off, "...you weren't there. It must have been when Saint Mungo's..." She smiled sadly. "Well, it was a nice party."

"So Cormac's 'Aunt Dee-Dee' is Delores Umbridge?" Hermione asked curtly.

"Yeah, that's his Godmother. She really does care about his well-being." Cho said, her smile looking fake as she avoiding looking in his direction. Kingsley could feel the vehemence in her glare towards them.

"She doesn't seem to approve of us here." Kingsley said with nonchalance.

Cho took Ginny's champagne and downed it in three large gulps. "Yeah, she mentioned that I wasn't her pick. Like Cormac was just going to go off and marry whomever she told him to. I probably did that girl a favor."

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a guilty look between the two of them. Kingsley wasn't exactly sure what just happened as Cho sighed before placing a blank smile back on her face and turned to greet other guests at the reception.

"Hermione, I have heard rumor that there might be some political upheaval in the upcoming months. You should know that there is precedent for removing one regime in favor of another. If, of course, that is the will of the people." Kingsley gave her a knowing look, and Hermione nodded in understanding.

Ginny looked over and politely applauded as Cormac and Cho took to the dance floor for the First Dance. "Hey 'Mione, can we go? I think I've had it with romance today." Hermione nodded as the pair of them made a discreet exit.
Severus and Fleur flew above Hogwarts together without aid of any brooms or enchanted rugs, and only using their own inherent magic to float above the ground. He held her in his arms as they twirled like a slow dance over the greenhouses. Fleur was scared at first, she loved flying on a broom as a child and enjoyed using her wings once she sprouted them at the end of the war... but she enjoyed being in the air and was glad to once again take flight.

"Thank you for showing me this, Severus."

The Headmaster smiled. "Only you would thank me for teaching you this curse that The Dark Lord used to prove his mastery over all magic."

Fleur shrugged. "I don't care that it's technically a curse; I feel at home again." Smiling, she playfully pushed away from him and sped away towards the stone circle by Hagrid's Hut. Severus began to give chase after her as she sped past the hut and turned over the edge of the black lake, arms spread wide as she laughed in delight. *She could really put on some speed,* Severus thought to himself.

As the Potions' Master fought to keep up with her, his attention was diverted by a warbling at the outer gates. Judging from the way the wards buckled, Severus turned on a dime, pulled out his wand, and flew with urgency to see who was attempting to enter the grounds. It was an unannounced visitor, and something Dark enough that the castle automatically refused it entry.

"HEADMASTER SNAPE!" a child's voice called out, "We seek sanctuary!" Severus made out a chilling shape by the girl which urged him to fly even faster, wand pointed at the coffin by her feet. Though she appeared to be no more then twelve in size and dress, the look in her eyes were those of someone who had seen lifetimes.

"Who are you? And who is in there?" Severus called out, walking his way towards her with his wand steadily trained at her. He could hear Fleur coming in behind him, doubtless that she had her hands aflame and poised to strike if needed.

"I'm Laura, and this is Sanguini. He said you would offer shelter when the worst came to pass."

Severus frowned as he lowered his wand. "That was to mean the Wizarding War."

"My Master found his maker destroyed in such a state that he commanded we come here as soon as possible."

Fleur was now abreast of Severus, unsure of what was going on. "How did this little girl carry a coffin here?"

Laura's voice sounded petulant, though the words betrayed her true age. "The Veela whelp ought to understand that some things are not as they appear to be. You are nothing but a mewling infant in my eyes, Miss Delacour."

Severus turned his head slightly to address her. "This is Sanguini's Renfield. She is at least twice my age, if not more. She also has twice my strength and vitality, so I will ask that you not push her into anger."

"So she's like his servant?" Fleur asked.

"I am eighty-seven and a half, and Sanguini is my Master in all things. He spared me a fate worse than death during the Silesian Uprising, and gave me the strength to fight the German Reich. She turned her head and spat onto the ground. It was unnerving to see such and old action coming from one who would look more contemporary with pigtails and chatting about schoolwork than cursing the pre-Nazi regime.
"Will I be required to offer refreshment as a duty of hospitality?" Severus asked, making certain he would not get maneuvered into repaying a debt he did not owe.

Laura looked almost affronted at the mere suggestion of it. "He has me for that!"

Severus made a short bow of thanks. "Very well. I only ask in regards to the students here under my protection. Come, I will make space for you in the Dungeons." Severus flicked his wand, levitating the coffin as the three of them walked into the school together.

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I found myself at Grimmauld Place because Ginny had 'one tiny request' for me. Apparently, she had some of Harry's stuff in there and she didn't want to have to face the boys. *Can't really blame her, I suppose.* I knocked on the door and breathed a sigh of relief as Andi opened it.

"Oh, hey Hermione. Were you looking for Harry or Draco? Both boys are still at work right now."

I shook my head placatingly. "That's okay, I'm just dropping off some stuff. Anyways, how are you? How's Teddy?"

"I've got a great routine here, now that Kreacher and I have an understanding on the division of labor in the home. I also bribed a Healer to sign off that I was barren in order to exempt myself from this new marriage law. I can't see myself with anyone but Ted, you know? What are you and-" Behind her, we heard Teddy cry and she immediately went to check on her grandson. "Come in for a bit if you want to talk."

I came in, closing the door behind me as I held the small box of stuff for Harry my arm. The home was now spotless and many of the darker recesses had been redecorated and brightened up. The lighting charms hadn't changed much, but the color scheme of the walls had changed the mood entirely. Andi came back into the main room with Teddy propped up on her left shoulder as her right hand patted his back gently.

"Sorry about that, I think he's still got some gas from his last feeding. Where were we? Right, what are you and my sister going to do about this marriage law?"

"You didn't see latest *Witch Weekly?*" I asked with a grimace.

"No, I don't read that rag." Andromeda looked me over. "And I'm guessing you two argued again."

"Yeah, at the Yule Ball."

"I didn't even see that. I was too busy playing interference between Draco, Harry, and the press corps."

"I kind of told her that I could never willingly marry a woman like her." A pang of guilt hit me again. "I'm fairly certain she won't have anything to do with me anymore." I looked away from her. "Probably for the best."

Andi gave me an exasperated look. "Hermione, I don't get how you two keep messing this up, but my sister really loves you. And I'm fairly certain you love her."

"If she really does, she sure has a horrible way of expressing it."

"Well she cares about you, even if you don't see it." Teddy burped a little bit and Andi sighed happily. "I think some patience and communication would solve this latest issue."
I rolled my eyes and huffed. *We tried that already.* "Narcissa only cares about what she can manipulate for herself!"

Andi frowned in discouragement. "You've got that wrong, Hermione. Cissy cares about others, even when she has nothing to gain. I mean, she told me about how she was watching out for a friend when his girlfriend started to exhibit some really questionable behavior at public events. He asked her what she thought he should do and she told him to do the right thing, even if it hurt in the short term."

I took a breath to calm down. *She might have a point.* "What kind of behavior?"

"She was becoming tabloid-bait by going out and drinking a lot; apparently, it was starting to look like a scandal and it would reflect poorly on him."

"Really? Who?"

"Oh, she didn't mention his name. I'm pretty certain it was Arnie Peasegood, though. Poor bloke."

That's when I knew for certain that it was Narcissa who had been the one to sway Harry to leave Ginny. *Just before Draco's trial.*

"Narcissa, you conniving, manipulative bitch." I muttered.

Andromeda looked at me in shock. "What? That's not what I expected." She went to the kitchen and started to make some tea. "What are you on about?"

"It was Harry. She talked Harry into dumping Ginny right around the time they started, um, 'dating' Draco."

Andi balked at that, looking around in thought. "That can't be... wow... Hermione, answer me this. Honestly. You know she had to live and breathe and tow the Malfoy Pureblood line for almost two decades; understand the game of cat's paw that had her and Lucius running the Wizarding World, correct?"

"Yeah, so?"

"And you know Rita has been looking for a way to tear you two down in print?"

"Yeah, Skeeter's got quite the ax to grind."

"And you see Draco like your own son sometimes, right?"

"What does any of this have to do with-"

"-so a Pureblood family that seems to be imploding on itself has a daughter whose drunken antics get her on Quidditch Quarterly and Witch Weekly...is romantically involved with your son and his boyfriend."

*Oh.* Andromeda seemed to realize I finally got it as she poured the boiling water into two teacups. We both put a small bag of Darjeeling in our cups and let them steep.

"So warning him that it could cause problems at work? That's not really manipulation. Your friends are adults now and have every right to muck up their personal relationships and they don't have to take anyone's advice. You were always the oldest and smartest of your group, weren't you?"

I sighed. "Yeah."
"Well, as the oldest of three sisters, you eventually learn to accept the decisions they make, even if you don't agree with them. You give your advice and make your peace with that."

"I just... it's so much easier to-"

"-to point and blame someone else's actions as why you can't love them rather than accepting them as they are?"

"She's locked me out of her mind and memories. Ever since she strengthened the Bonding between us, admittedly to save my life, I've been getting echoes of her memories and feelings."

"And you're upset she revoked your all-access pass into her innermost thoughts and cherished memories?"

"Well, I feel like she's hiding something!" I snapped, sipping the tea. "Oh, that's good tea. I never even liked Darjeeling before."

"Next thing you'll want is a cucumber sandwich to go with it." I arched an eyebrow up at her. *That sounds perfect.*

Kreacher was there with the plate of them. "Just like Mistress liked them."

"Thank you, Kreacher." Andi said, taking a fourth of a sandwich and biting into it, savoring the crisp, cool flavor. "Welcome to the Black family, Hermione. We all hide secrets from each other, some of them more important than others. I hated Regulus and Sirius for far too long only to find out they were against You-Know-Who after all this time. Don't cut people out of your life unless you absolutely have to because you will miss them once they are gone."
Once Sanguini and Laura were set up in the Dungeons, Severus sent his Patronus out to Agent Bertrand. The vampire warned him that he didn't want INTERCON officially involved with this, and Severus had to promise that Bertrand wouldn't report this to his superiors.

He agreed as the Renfield set up their living area and light-proofed the room. Severus was willing to use magic to help them, but Laura refused. "I've been doing this for decades just fine." Sanguini smiled at that.

"She's always been precocious."

"Fleur, I don't want you involved with this." The Headmaster said, "We're about to have the students come back and classes resume."

"You cannot think I will just stay home and... do knitting while you go off and risk your life again. You will need backup!"

"That's why I summoned Bertrand."

"You will need more than just him."

"And you have classes to teach."

Fleur rolled her eyes. "I make kids attend a book club, and Hermione subbed for me just fine!"

Severus' face went stoic. "I made my decision."

"This is about us dating, and I refuse to let you try to be my white knight and get killed in the process." Severus looked to make a retort, but fell silent. "There's a good chance that this is Trixymort, and I'm not letting you go without me."

Severus relented as Bertrand arrived and he filled them in on what was going on.

I was summoned back to Hogwarts and found myself in the Headmaster's office surrounded by all of the professors save Severus and Fleur. Minerva gave a sharp nod as I took a seat and tried to ignore the fact that I was next to Narcissa. This is what I get for coming late.

Minerva was running the emergency staff meeting and asked everyone to pitch in as Severus and Fleur have left to deal with an issue that had arisen. Also she informed us that the Headmaster had granted sanctuary to Sanguini and his companion. Plans were drawn up for collecting the students from the Hogwarts Express and the meeting was quickly over. As I tried to get up, I realized that a sticking charm was on the seat.

The Deputy Headmistress dismissed the rest of faculty as she faced off myself and my wife.

"You two are going to get along after what I saw happen at the Yule Ball, correct?" She arched an eyebrow at us.

"Yes, Minerva." Narcissa said as I nodded shamefacedly.

She gave a smile way too bright for Severus' office as she dismissed us both, removing the charm from our backsides. I got up and started to storm my way down the spiral staircase as I heard
Narcissa call after me. *I really didn't want to... didn't know what to say anymore.*

I sighed, realizing it looked like I was running away from her. *You're better than this, Granger.*

"What do you want, Cissy?" I asked, trying to keep the exhaustion and tears out of my voice.

"I was trying to say that not only are we bonded to each other, but we're both being stubborn about the obvious emotions between us." Her eyes were watery and there was something else there, almost like desperation. Whatever damn that was put up between us felt like it was breaking down, but I decided to feign ignorance.

"What emotions?" I said, my mouth quivering. *I was starting to feel her own forlorn exhaustion, wasn't I?* Had we both been hurting each other and ourselves by avoiding each other? *Of course you have!*

"You *do* have feelings, strong ones, and though you might cloak them with anger, I can tell your heart still beats for me. *Just like mine does for you.***

I winced at her words, and the twinge was like a splinter in my heart. "Ginny is like a *sister* to me, and I know what you did so don't deny it; why did you talk Harry into breaking up with her?"

Narcissa sighed. "Yes, I told Harry he should leave Ginny. I saw it was a bad match, and I could tell he didn't love her as much as he loved the *idea* of loving the stand-in for his mother! His affection for her was like that of a child; he played the hero and expected to win the damsel in distress. I was trying to save him from the heartache of realizing that it wouldn't be enough to build a lifetime relationship on."

Her words punched me in the gut, as I had those same worries at the end of our sixth year. "And what about Krum? You denied him money your family owed him, and let Draco perpetuate that discrimination against him!"

"Ugh, not this again. You won't accept that *perhaps you're wrong.*"

"I'm wrong? Narcissa, you're selfish, destructive to others, and in the months we've been together I've come to realize that you'd be the *last woman* I would ever want to be with."

"-even though we have a child coming?!"

My eyes widened in shock. *WE?* She didn't even look... no...

My mind reeled at that as my hand dove inside my robes.

"PROTEGO!" Narcissa shrieked out in a panic, and the sheer fear in her eyes horrified me. *I was just reaching for the charmed spectacles.*

I looked at her again, and I could see through the shield and past the glamour charm. I saw her pregnant belly and swollen ankles. I saw the spell-work done around the fetus to make it easier for her to carry to term.

"You're pregnant..." My mind couldn't put this together. *We're pregnant.* "The child is mine? How can you be certain..."

*I can't have done this, there's no way to... but we..."

"You've been the *only one*, 'Mione."
I got her pregnant.

I got Narcissa pregnant.

The Dark Lord had us mate at wand-point, and she's been carrying the burden, alone, all this time.

My mind was refusing to accept that, even though the Compulsion had been getting stronger and was telling me that it was indeed our child inside her.

No, this can't be right... It's not supposed to be this way... She hasn't seen any other men? I've even kind of had a date in the midst of everything with a stunning blonde.

"But... we only did that once."

She nodded, eyes red and tears streaming down.

"Eight months ago." She said as she was nodding.

"Eight. I knew that word was important but counting was difficult for me right then. "You're a month away from...?"

"-Used glamours and featherweight charms to hide it."

A wash of coldness ran over me as I felt like something was ripped, stolen from me. This is why you locked me out of your mind. She was hiding it on purpose.

"You weren't going to tell me, were you?"

She shook her head no, but kept the protection spell up between us for her own safety, and it was like a slap in the face.

"Severus said that you might not take it well, and that we should be on better terms before I spring this on you. Your outbursts and anger have also made me hesitant to say anything. I'm sorry I brought it up like this." She doesn't trust you.

Understanding hit me as the pieces fell into place.

"That's why there have been no suitors at your door, and you didn't get the Ministry Owl for the Measuring..." my face lit up on surprise, "and you used the hangover potion for your morning sickness! I thought you were just drinking yourself to sleep all that time." I looked at Cissy as I realized that my own emotions were going haywire due to being linked to someone who was being absolutely hormonal. "Merlin, I want to hug you and say congrats and I want to slap you for lying and hiding this from me all this time!" My words dissolved into sad laughter. Tears ran down my face as I laughed.

Why in Salazar's name am I laughing?

A small smile came from my wife. "Those cancel each other out, right? I don't feel in the mood of being hugged, spanked, or slapped right now."

My heart ached at that. "Ugh, I'm not going to hurt you. Not like that, not ever. Fuck! You locked me out." My mind reeled at how she must have been dealing with this all by herself all this time. Because she couldn't trust to confide in me.

"I'm so sorry." She sobbed slightly. "I'll have you know your familiar has been purring up a storm in bed with me, his head on my belly."
My face split into a grin as more tears fell. Even he bloody well knew!? 

"Even Crookshanks knew!? Right, he was trying to induce lactation on me with his sharp little paws... I have to - want to - know. I won't use Legilimancy to force the memories out of you, but I want... I need to feel what you felt, how you learned about this... I need to be a part of this, Cissy."

Narcissa nods and lowers her occlumency shields, pushing them forward into her mind as I viewed her memories. I saw her panic when the pregnancy charm proved it in the hospital wing, the worry when Severus found out, and even Reginald offering to marry her and help raise my child. My child... I even saw Narcissa talking to the House Elf Surly about the baby room as she was thinking about baby names. I pulled away gently, reeling at all of this and still trying to process it.

I found myself sitting on the ground, and my backside hurt. Did I fall down?

"Hermione, I wanted to tell you before this, but we've been so" I nodded, cutting her off. I didn't need to hear her explain it any further. My head felt like a jumble of thoughts and feelings and I couldn't keep up.

"No, it's okay. I understand. I just needed to know this that... just baby. Us." Good job, Granger, you're starting to babble. "...you didn't even divulge this under the veritaserum."

"Sev nearly got me to, if he had asked."

I cradled my head in my hands, mind reeling on what has to happen now. I'm the daddy?

"We've really bollocked this up, haven't we?"

Narcissa chuckled softly.

"Yeah. I'm glad you finally know; we can agree on a name together." My heart swelled in joy at that.

"You still want me involved?"

"Yeah, you're the... other parent."

I felt touched at that. "Thank you." I wanted to hug her but the look of fear on her face from a few seconds ago made me freeze in place.

Narcissa conjured a chair for herself to sit in, and thinking about it, dropped the protection charm. "I want to follow Black tradition, and name her after a constellation."

I shrugged at that, uncertain how many would be suitable names.

"I want Greek mythology... I was thinking Perseus if it were a boy."

My wife thought about it and nodded. "Oh, that's... more than acceptable. Well, genetically we can only have a girl. Severus explained to me that women don't have the Y chromosome to make boys."

Oh. "That's... we'd need a bloke to make a boy?"

She shrugged uncertainly. "Just that one chromosome. There's been this theory that magical ability is on the X Chromosome, and that most people have it but it never 'turns on' to express itself unless you're around a lot of magic. It might account for muggle-borns, but it doesn't really explain squibs."

I waved it away. "Nevermind. We're having a girl, then." We're having a baby girl.
Narcissa shrugged. "Aquila?" She didn't seem set on it.

I shook my head. "No, what about..." My eyes lit up at the same moment hers did.

We spoke the same name at the same time, and knew it was the name. "Carina."

I nodded at that. "Carina Granger-Black. I like it. Thank you for letting me help name our child." In a month's time, my daughter Carina will be born. Oh, Merlin...

"Of course, you're her fath... well, you're going to be a part of her life. If you want, we can make custody arrangements after you graduate here, that is, if you want anything to do with her." She was being very non-assuming.

I tried to wrap my head around this. "I always thought I'd be smart enough to not get pregnant if I weren't ready to have a child, I never actually thought about getting someone else pregnant. I um, I don't know. This is all very sudden for me to make such a decision; I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do for a career." I took a deep breath. "No. Wait. I don't want to not be involved. I won't forgive myself if I miss out on this. I want to help raise our daughter. But it doesn't really change my opinion on us."

"I am not asking you to marry me all over again, Hermione." I could feel her emotions, though. She was letting down her Occlumency walls she held against me all this time, and it was comforting to feel that connection again, even if I wasn't comfortable with her thoughts. She wished that I would choose her. That we could recommit ourselves, to willfully embrace the marriage we were in.

I smiled at the thought. "Well it would anger Delores Umbridge to no end."

"And her second-cousin, Molly Weasley."

"Whoa, they are related?!"

"Well, by marriage, yes. Delores was only a quarter blood, and has two squib siblings. I think she always worried that the magic was diluted in her blood."

"That explains so much, including her wearing that Horcrux locket and claiming relations to the Selwyn family."

Narcissa's eyes widened in shock. "She actually had a sliver of The Dark Lord's soul infecting her with Dark Magic and all it did was... make her more efficient in rounding up muggle-borns? Oh, that really shouldn't surprise me."

"Why isn't that bitch in jail." I fumed at the injustice of it all.

"Because she's a slippery little brown-noser who shunts blame like none other. She'll get her comeuppance in due time. Best that you let it go before it poisons your outlook on stuff." The Darkness flared up in me at that, and I wanted to lash out. I needed to.

"But she's an evil, horrid bitch who DESERVES ALL THE SUFFERING I CAN UNLEASH ON HER!" Narcissa gulped, but didn't put her shield back up.

"Calm down, Hermione."

"DON'T TELL ME TO CALM DOWN!" I snapped, "She ought to rot in prison. The Dementor's Kiss is too good for her!" I surprised myself with how quickly I was this angry.
"Yes, she's horrid! But there's a difference between yelling at the bullshit in your life and *using me as a punching bag.* I didn't like being told to shutup...

"I'M NOT USING YOU... ughh! So I should just *bottle it up*? Is **that** what you're telling me?!!"

"No, I didn't say that. Besides, that will only ensure you blow up even worse later on."

"I only have **two** options, Cissy! Bury it or let it out!" The air crackled with my magic as I realized I was losing control.

"No, you learn to pick your battles and to let it go so it quits poisoning you."

"**FINE.** I'll shutup in order to *make you happy.*" My wife patiently rolled her eyes at that, and the gesture irked me.

"I'm not asking you to silence your emotions, that's the *same* as bottling it up. I'm telling you to quit holding onto your hatred this strongly!" Her eyes sought mine and I could sense her pleading with me.

I grimaced in anger as my eyes teared up. "I don't know how." I found myself on my knees, breaking apart at the seams from everything that I'd been enduring all this time. *Nobody else could have handled this much stress like I have.* My voice was hoarse as I whispered, "It's too much for me to handle."

Narcissa did something very Gryffindor in nature as she reached out and took my hand in her own. "Have you ever seen the peacefulness of the Black Lake?"

I nodded, remembering my training with Pansy. As our fingers interlocked, my anger felt diluted as her inner peace spread and filled me.

"Remember that calm spot, and release your hatred and anger. You don't need that right now." She took my other hand as I felt calmer, and put it on her pregnant belly. "There are pure, *good things* in this world. Things worth all the misery and pain we face, and we conquer it all by not succumbing to fear, panic, and hatred. Yes, we both have some Dark within ourselves, but it's the choices we make that define us." I stood back up, my hands still touching her and realizing the truth in her words.

My eyes dropped to her baby bump and I felt a small kick. *Carina.* I couldn't explain the emotion that flooded through me right then, except to say it was more intense than a Patronus. Tears fell down my face as soft lips pressed against my cheek.

"I love you, Hermione. For better or worse, Darkness and Light, until death do us part." The look on her gave clearly said that I shouldn't muck this up yet again.

My heart told me what to say in reply, despite my mind wanting to stop it. "And damn it, I love you too." **Damn, I do love her and I don't need to blow up at her.**

Cissy visibly relaxed at that. "I'm not perfect, and I am not asking you to be perfect, either. Just say that you will try your best, and so will I for the sake of our daughter."

I shrugged off the odd sensation filling me as I stepped away from my wife. "I've got lesson plans to work on. Call on me if you need anything." I begun to turn away before I stop myself and face her again. "Thank you for that, really."

Narcissa smiled back, ending the glamour charm that hid her pregnancy. "You're welcome; I'm willing to help you the best I can to get through this."
"Even when I'm being a vengeful, raging bitch?"

There was a glint of something in her eyes as she replied, "Always."

I saw Fleur's notes for her classes and had the writing assignments up on her chalkboard and still had the rest of the evening to myself and I finally ran out of things to do to distract myself from the fact I'd be a parent with a month.

_Nappies. 3 am feedings. Baby clothing. Taking Carina off of Cissy's hands on the weekends so she can have some free time._

I thought about what all my parents had when I was growing up, thinking about what what I would need to get for her. Crib, rocker, cradle, bottles, formula since I'm not nursing her - or do I ask Cissy to use a pump and hand over her milk so I can feed our daughter?

I wasn't certain what all I would need to get, and I knew I should inform my parents before this hits the newspapers and becomes yet another scandal. There was a soft knocking at door to our shared loo as I turned and saw Cho there with her trunk open.

"You're not supposed to be back yet." I mentioned, noting the irony since I was here.

"Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I enjoyed being your suite-mate this year. I'm um, dropping out and will be taking my N.E.W.T. exams at the ministry this spring." _She's dropping out now? Why?_

"Cho, what's going on?" I asked. _Was she unable to continue sharing space with me?_

"I'm moving in with my husband Cormac, he has a flat near the Ministry."

I gaped at that. "I'm glad you're still going to take your exams, but... what will you be doing there?"

"Well, I'm married now. I guess I'll be a good little housewife and work on getting pregnant." _Work on? Like that's really hard to do?_ I cringed internally as I wondered if that was the entirety of her life goals, to simply be an incubator for her husband's seed?

"You don't want a career outside of the home?" I asked.

"Cormac doesn't think it's appropriate for a witch-"

"-I asked what you want, not Cormac." I said, interrupting her.

"That's irrelevant, though." She shrugged. "You and Ginny are welcome to come visit; his 'Aunt Deedee' wants to discuss how the flat ought to be decorated. I'll send you an owl when I have it all set up."

I nodded politely, cringing mentally that anyone could see Umbridge as 'sweet aunt deedee'. "I'd like that."

Snape found themselves just outside of a mountain in Northern Andorra, surprised at how remote this area was. He had been able to contact the Andorran Magical Department after finding out that Andorra's government was under the supervision of Spain and France. Neither country wanted to cause an alarm with INTERCON, so they quietly allowed Severus, Fleur, and Agent Bertrand in to inspect the area.
"This is supposed to be a tourist town?" Fleur asked the empty air.

"Yeah, where are the tourists?" Bertrand replied, pulling his wand out.

"Let's spread out; use the knut communicators if you find anything." The three of them went in different directions through the town to find clues about what happened.

His knut popped to life as Bertrand's voice became audible. "Female victim, not the target. I need confirmation she's not pretending nor rise as an Inferi."

"Set her on fire." Fleur responded.

"That's a bit extreme." He replied.

"We're not here to save the day; just to get answers." Severus replied on his knut.

"Well there are bite marks..." He hissed in horror. "Not vampire; this isn't neat at all."

"Does it look like an attack or are there signs that she was being eaten?" Severus asked.

"I don't know; I plan on eating sometime this decade so I'm not going to look at the body that way!"

Severus rolled his eyes as he made his way over there. The diminutive blonde lay spread-eagle on the street, eyes wide in horror. *Her last moments were watching herself get torn apart by monsters.* Her neck was torn open in a fashion that reminded him of a werewolf, but the teeth were nowhere near sharp enough judging by the torn flesh.

"This was done by human teeth." Severus reported. *Could be Inferi.* "Fleur, hold your position until I have more information." He and Bertrand followed the blood trail away from the corpse and Severus immolated the body once they were far enough away from it and they made their way to a ransacked home. The door and windows were blown apart from spell damage and it was obvious that some of the dead here had holed up as if taking their last stand against something.

The men and women here were similarly torn up, too messy for a vampire kill but not showing signs of being consumed as if they were overrun by ghouls.

"Merlin..." Bertrand said, causing Fleur to reply immediately.

"What's going on there? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine. Just... this was a bad way to die. Fresh vampires make sloppy kills, that could be what we're seeing here."

Severus wanted to agree with him, except for the fact that he knew that Sanguini's maker flatly refused to make any more vampires. *If she did, she did it against her will.*

"Severus, I found something here by the mountain. It's some sort of... something. And there are some heavy wards here, too." The three of them congregated over the ashen remains of the vampire that they were looking for, and it disturbed them all to see this so out in the open.

*What had made her come out and die in the sunlight?*

---

I apparated into my parent's home and found my father's minobar and decided that this called for something a bit stronger than gin. *Glenfiddich it is.* I put some ice into a tumbler and poured a healthy two fingers of scotch in. My father, naturally, heard me in the home and was surprised to see me with
the amber liquid in a glass.

"Must be something really big to see you pull out my drink of choice."

I took a sip for courage as he made his own and sat down.

"I'm having a baby." His eyes bugged out as he put his glass down and pointed at my drink.

"What? First, you shouldn't be drinking then..." I waved his worry away with the glass, gesturing as I did so.

"I'm not the one that's pregnant." He looked at me, confusion on his face.

"Then how... oh." He figured that out pretty quickly. "So you two are back together then?"

I grimaced at the question. "Not exactly. And she's having our daughter next month."

"Oh, no wonder you needed a drink, then. Wait, next month? Is this a magic thing, fast-" I shook my head, embarrassed.

"-no, old-fashioned, three trimester, nine months. She only told me now." Guilt plagued those last five words as I said them.

My mother poked her head into the study. "William, did I hear Her... darling!"

He gave her a cooked smile. "You're going to be a grandmother, dear."

She looks between the two of them, confused. "Narcissa?"

"Do you think throwing a baby shower would be prudent?" I asked.

"No; that's just a recent American import here, so I doubt the tradition is in the magical world." Mum replied, "Besides, she's already had a child before, so I doubt she'll want or need presents. But a social call might be in order."

"What do I do? I need a crib and cradle and pram and all that, right?" My mind raced with all sorts of situations. "I'll have to worry about spontaneous magic, making her burp after meals, feeding her healthy meals, getting pictures of her first steps, deciding on her first school..."

My father looked me in the eyes and my panicked eyes met his. "Calm down, 'Mione. Breathe."

I stop my rambling and take a deep breath. "Okay."

"When will know know the sex?" She asked.

"Carina will be born next month. I might get to take care of her on weekends for now, then we'll make custody arrangements once I'm out of Hogwarts." I thought for a second. "There has to be books on this, right?"

My parents exchanged a knowing look, which oddly comforted me.

"Still our Hermione." My father said.

"Carina? That's a constellation, just like Andromeda and Regulus..." My mother replied.

I nodded. "Yes, I wanted something pleasant, and Carina used to be a part of the Argo Navis
constellation, which is my link to Greek Mythology. Best of both traditions. I wish there were a way I could be more attached to my daughter."

My mom looked down as she pondered something and went off to her computer. "I think there is, I read about a strange side effect..." I looked at dad, who shrugged at this. "Found it!"

She came back in with something written on a piece of paper. "Ha! Magic Potions have a lot to learn from Muggle Chemistry! Surrogate mothers have been using a motion sickness medicine to induce lactation so they can nurse the baby that someone else delivered for them. Would you like to do that, which will impart your immunity and help you bond to her?"

I nodded instantly as my father took the drink out of my hand. "I'd love that!"

"So no more drinking for the next few months..." Something flashed through my mind and I realized that Narcissa went out of her way to pretend to be drinking alcohol all this time to not show her hand. *Slytherin to the end.*

I looked at the piece of paper and was surprised to see it was an over-the-counter motion sickness medicine. "And this won't leech into the milk?" I asked absently.

"Science says it won't. Even men could technically do this, since they are born with nipples."

*I could breast-feed my child.* My arms wrapped around my mother as happy tears fell and she hugged me back.

"Thank you for accepting this."

"You're my daughter, of course I'll always accept you!" Even my dad came and joined in on the hug, and it was like I was five again, getting hugged between my mum and daddy.

"Want to go to the bookstore and research?" He offered with a small chuckle. I dried my eyes, nodding to him. *This was going to be okay.*

Severus helped Fleur figure out the wards and the mountainside opened up. Inside of it looked to be some sort of underground castle. Fleur had her wand out, casting *Lumos Maxima* in order to illuminate the expansive area. "Makes sense that a vampire would live inside the mountain."

Bertrand frowned as he kept casting detection spells in every direction. "But it's playing havoc with finding anything."

*That would be the point,* Severus thought to himself. "So we have a well-known vampire in an underground castle, warded shut to the outside world, and there is no evidence except for her remains outside that has turned to ash? She must have had some sort of panic bunker, some last-resort position to keep herself locked away from the sunlight."

"We have ourselves a good old-fashioned locked door mystery." Bertrand said, unable to find any footprints.

"So what made her run screaming out of her castle, warding it behind her?" Fleur asked as she scowled as he found no trace of anything physical or magical. "No fingerprints, no magical residue, and I bet we won't find any foreign bodily fluids or hairs on the the desiccated corpse out there." *What makes a powerful vampire run out like that?*
He lights up a clove cigarette as he thinks, exhaling it in the cave and watches how the smoke moves.

"Since when did you start smoking?" Fleur asked, crinkling her nose at it.

Severus took another puff, blowing it on the cave wall. It bounced like it should have, making him move away and try again. "Helps me think." he tried again, and made his way around the wall, watching the smoke roll against the wall until he got to an area where it passed through the rock unnaturally.

"There's something back here." He said, trying various detection spells at the rock face.

Fleur's avian eyes widened at the hint of movement. "People!

Bertrand quit his spell-work at the other end of the cave and rushed over. "Bloody vampire abandoned her... food bank..."

Severus backed away from the rock wall even as his companions raced to save them. How did they last this long down here in a sealed mountain?

"Severus! Help me rescue them!" Fleur said, a thread of panic and fear in her voice. Bertrand began to panic as he found a seam and began pounding on it to see if there were any survivors who could respond.

"Hello? Is someone there?" Bertrand shouted as Fleur put away her wand and started to hurl fireballs at the rock, noting where the flames seeped through.

"There's a passage!" She exclaimed as Severus turned his back to them and took in the large cave-like area. This isn't the safest area to fall back into.

"Hello? Is someone there?" A voice repeated on the other side.

Severus thought quickly. "We're here to rescue you, is there a lock on your side of the stone?"

Fleur quickly added, "Are there any injuries that need immediate attention?"

Bertrand got a hold of something and started to physically pull it open. Severus still had an uneasy feeling as the voice called out from the other side of the stone.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

Severus pulled his pistol out and checked the magazine. Conflagration rounds, thank Salazar. He looked up and saw that the lumos charm was about to dissipate and he cast another one. Something was wrong here.

His eyes searched the cave but only saw darkness in every nook and cranny. He couldn't make out any movement out there as Bertand kept tugging at the stone and excitedly said that he got it open a crack.

"Severus! I got-" his voice froze as a deep scratchy voice spoke up from all around them.

"huuunn...gggrryy..." Darkness spread over Bertrand, like a sheen of oil that reflected absolutely zero light as it encompassed him utterly and seized for a second, making crunching sounds come from the human shaped shadow all at once.

Fleur gasped and Severus had shoved her out of the way, wand and pistol trained on the Agent.
There was no sound of pain or agony as the shadow sank flat against the ground again and crawled its way towards the Veela.

"LUMOS!" Severus enchanted, firing his pistol at the inky shadow on the ground. The shadow shrieked as it burned, pulling away from the flame on the ground slower than shadows recede from light.

"Dominika's shadow tendrils... she controlled Lethifolds!"

Fleur gasped in fear. "We killed her. Took a dragon to burn her to ash, but she's dead!"

A rattling sound sound came from the other side of the stonework, and it made the Potion Master's skin crawl at the sound of it.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

Nobody is there. Fleur instinctively stood at Severus' back, hands aflame with fire and began to launch fireballs to light a path out of the cave. Severus tried his strongest *Reducto* on the stone only to see it unlatch like a heavy vault door.

"Sanguini's maker wasn't killed; it committed suicide." Severus said, casting another *Lumos Maxima* into the ceiling, and this time the shadows pulled away as the light made it burn.

"What would drive an old vampire to solarcide?" Fleur asked, now seeing some movement on the far wall and throwing fire at it.

"Lethifolds feed on fear and flesh, much like how a Dementor feeds on happiness and souls." The shadows receded even further as the stone began to open up.

"Um, Severus?" Fleur asked, and he could hear her fear rising. *Damn it.*

"I see it. Start making your way to the exit; I'll be at your back. Try to stop fearing them."

"Easier said then done when the shadows can eat you!" Fleur said, panic in her voice.

The rattling from before became louder as the humans that were left behind shambled out, rotting skin apparent under the multiple light sources that he had made. One of the Inferi walked right through the fire and didn't seem to care as it caught and began to burn.

"This is St. Mungo's all over again." Fleur said in a hurry.

Severus' voice held calm as he began twisting curses to dismember the undead coming at them. "No, we don't have the Stone in play. That's been secured in the Ministry."

"Then what is making them... *gods no.*"

"What?" Severus asked, eyes shining as he beheaded one of the Inferi that came through the open stonework. *These were simple inferi, nothing like what we had faced in Dominika's Crypts..."

"Who do we know has an affinity for the dead?" Fleur threw more fireballs as they moved a few feet, "This must have been where Bellatrix first experimented with the undead." She barked out a dark chuckle, something he recognized from their marathon sex.

Severus was slightly unnerved at hearing that as they were surrounded by the Hungry Darkness and undead corpses.
"You're... excited. After everything we saw in St. Mungo's and the catacombs you're... excited about this," Severus said.

"Yeah, I am." She lifted the palm of her left hand holding it outward like a torch. "This no longer scares me; I owe that lich-bitch a lot of pain." He could hear a bit on snarl in her voice and he could tell the Lethifolds shrank back even more as the fear evaporated.

Severus scanned the cave again, realizing all of the dark recesses and how they weren't only dealing with Inferi and Lethifolds. Some of the dead bodies shambling towards them appeared out of thin air. That wasn't right, or real. Someone threw Boggarts and Lethifolds together!

"And you're happy instead of angry? You do realize you are touched in the head, right?" Severus said, laughing. As his laughter rang out, some of the fake Inferi melted onto the floor as they kept inching their way back out of the mountain. He turned towards the exit only to see more darkness from that side as well. I'm not lost, the exit has to be that way.

"Sev? You're laughing... Riddikulus!" Fleur's wand shot out a jet of light, shattering a darkness in front of them that was hiding the exit.

The pair of them made it to the entrance finally as he put away his pistol and took her free hand in his, remembering the past few days they have spent together.

"Expecto Patronem!" Severus' doe ran out of his wand and galloped deep into the cave, hooves smashing and destroying the inky puddles of darkness that threatened to swarm the pair of them.
TRIGGER WARNING: Umbridge gives one hell of a speech.

I was at the Head Table for the Welcoming Feast for the new semester and I forced myself to not roll my eyes as I read the latest *Prophet*.

*Ministry Marriage Mandate Meets Miniscule Margin*

The Wizengamot's latest attempts to ensure that Pureblood extremism never runs rampant has faced a bit of a speed-bump so far since it has gone into effect. Currently, the magical community has only seen three marriages occur since the start of the year. This remains barely above the normal marriage rate for this time of the year, and senior officials are worried that the creeping acceptance of radical and immoral relationships as well as the rampant sexual iniquity of today's youth are to blame for the reduction in the projected marriage rate in this post-war period.

Delores Umbridge, Director of PoWFA, explains that at the end of the last war with You-Know-Who, there was a boom in marriages and births that haven't been repeated as of yet. She hopes that Wizards and Witches alike will settle down and begin raising families together in order to put the most recent era of darkness behind us.

Critics, however, have mentioned that the marriages dissolved by PoWFA have done more to harm the institution of marriage rather than protect it from activist homosexuals. War Hero Arthur Weasley seems to be living happily in the muggle world with his new girlfriend, however, and most people are glad for it. "They had no right to meddling in things that were none of their business," a harried-looking Molly Prewett (formerly Weasley) said as she was trying to put her house up for sale, "They should have only punished the wicked Purebloods, like the [expletive deleted] Malfoys!"

The Ministry has reported that those who are not married in compliance with the law yet will be receiving an owl stating whom has been selected as their best mate, and will be required to solemnize and consummate their marriages by the Summer Solstice. Students at Hogwarts, however, will receive their letters in person by Delores Umbridge. This deadline is to ensure a maximum birthrate before the following May, in time for the second anniversary of the final defeat of You-Know-Who.

*Potter's a Poof, Granger Snogs Snake at Yule Ball*

Looks like Head Auror Harry Potter fancies blokes, as evidenced at the Yule Ball when everyone was expecting an announcement of marriage between himself and Harpies Beater Ginny Weasley. The redhead, visibly distraught over her beau's unnatural proclivities, was seen getting pissed before receiving an escort home by Ministry security. Hermione Granger was seen arguing with her 'wife' Narcissa just after snogging Headmaster Severus Snape, making her date (and official third-wheel) Ronald Weasley look totally daft. Looks like someone spiked the punch bowl this year!

At least my new house-elf, Surly, could make a mean cup of coffee. *I'm going to have to give up caffeine, too, aren't I?* Looking over at Narcissa, I realized that not only had she hidden this all year, she had been drinking decaffeinated tea instead of her usual coffee. I frowned in apology as she saw me with a steaming cup of coffee as she had the students' pumpkin juice and water this morning.
The rest of the teaching staff was giving the both of us covert glances and I could feel the silent judgment from all of them. It was obvious that she was pregnant, but it was never made clear as to who the father was. I think she was wanting to protect both of us from the potential fallout. I wasn't certain if it would be a bigger scandal if I claimed to be the father or not. Headmaster Snape and Professor McGonagall both assured me that there was no rule against married professors having children at Hogwarts, and it was to our benefit that we were Bonded and consummated it while neither of us were attending the school. Just because we aren't breaking the letter of the law doesn't mean we're not skirting the spirit of it, though.

I wasn't really paying attention to the announcements until I heard Professor McGonagall stop abruptly as Delores' voice filled the Great Hall with saccharine sweetness. I looked around to see a red envelope in my wife's hands and was shocked to realize that she had been sent an actual howler.

"Narcissa Black, it has come to our attention that you are currently in violation of PoWFA by having a child out of wedlock. You are hereby summoned to answer to the charge of fornication in front of the full Wizengamot next month, along with whatever wizard impregnated you!"

Minevera scowled at the interruption. "Which brings me to my last point: the Ministry will be sending more correspondence as they seem intent to disrupt classroom time with getting everyone over the age of 17 married off and to ensure that the young ladies here all graduate pregnant. I implore all of you to be responsible with your time and the choices you make as they can follow you for the rest of your life."

Sounds like she's against the law too.

I pondered what we could do legally as I finished my breakfast and went to begin another day of substitute teaching for Fleur's class.

Fleur stood outside of the mountain and in the direct sunlight, want raised and sending her Patronus charm back into the dark chasm alongside Severus' doe. She knew it symbolized his first love, Lily Potter, and didn't let that twinge of jealousy fester because her own Patronus was that of a wolf-like shape due to her late husband Bill.

"What about Bertrand?" She asked Severus, unable to see far enough into the underground area to recover the body.

Severus shook his head sadly as he sealed and warded the mountain shut again. "He's gone; the best we can do is seal this up and warn the authorities of what lies within. Trixymort is long gone from here, I can only assume that she used this as a staging area, and gathered up enough information and bodies to experiment on to learn her new power."

"New power?"

Severus nodded. "She's controlling lethifolds now like carnivorous pets. Something much harder to kill than Nagini." He tapped his knut communicator again. "Harry? I have some horrible news for you."

Cormac was in the Atrium, waiting for his uncle Tiberius to show up for his lunch break. He had done everything to the best of his ability and still he was getting shafted while Harry seemed to get all of the media attention. So he's playing hide the wand with Draco, does it have to be on the front page?!
"Nephew!" The Chief Warlock said. Cormac greeted him warmly, uncertain why he was summoned right then.

"Uncle, thank you again for that lovely wedding ceremony. Cho was very exquisite there."

He nodded absently. "You two getting situated in your new home?"

Cormac smiled at that, honestly happy to get such an amazing flat as a gift. "Yes, but that was too generous; we'll have to have you and Dee-Dee over for dinner sometime."

"Good, good... I need someone I can trust doing security around here. There's been whispers of a rebellion, certain... Purebloods... who are unhappy with us outlawing their special type of perversion."

Cormac grimaced at that. "I recall hearing how the Carrows rutted about the castle when they taught there. Glad those siblings didn't reproduce."

Tiberius looked at his nephew and regarded his words. "Yes, exactly! We don't want their kind getting a foothold again and making policy, because once they allow one kind of marriage what's to say they won't demand the legalization of incest? That's exactly why we're breeding them out slowly with PoWFA. Delores understands the vital importance here; but I worry that there are enough homosexual activists who are going to upset this for everyone. Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

Cormac frowned. "Yeah. The marriage law is supposed to help us heal and move on, and we've got a lot of naysayers who are refusing to marry. I don't get it."

"They will comply with the law and be happy once they start having children, just like you and Che-"

"-Cho--"

"-Cho, Ching-Chong, whatever, she's Mrs. Cormac McLaggen now, okay?" Cormac nodded, biting his tongue. "Now, nephew, I want you to head up the new department for Ministry Security. Only people you know to be loyal to the Ministry and none of those homosexual sympathizers. I will not let their disorders run roughshod over my signature legislation!"

Cormac nodded. "Yeah, of course. This is for the greater good, of course I'll do it."

Severus and Fleur made it back to the castle late in the day, torn and bloody from their battle with the purged mountain. He was looking forward to a long shower while Fleur wondered if Hermione kept the classes on task and assigned their research papers.

He was nearing the outer gate when a flash of pink in his periphery made him curse under his breath. Tapping his knut, he messaged to everyone "code pink at Hogwarts."

He could hear Hermione's frustrated hiss in reply and smiled at it. Delores, of course, assumed he was smiling at her.

"Headmaster, where have you and your... associate... been?"

Fleur smiled wickedly. "Classified."

Delores frowned at that. "I've got the highest intelligence clearance in the Ministry, behind the Chief
Warlock of the Wizengamot himself!"

Severus' eyes matched his smile now. "Don't you mean the Minister?"

She tutted at that, affronted. "Let me in, I have Ministry business to attend to."

"I won't have you interrupting the classes." Severus said politely.

"I'll stay and make my announcement at dinner." She said with acidic sweetness.

Severus bowed in typical Pureblood fashion. "As it pleases you." As he said it, his mind was screaming *Fuck off, you sodding bint.* He opened the gate and the three of them made their way onto the castle grounds and Severus sent off a Patronus charm as he excused himself and Fleur.

"Madame Umbridge, I require to see myself and my... companion here... to the infirmary for a checkup and to clean ourselves up before dinner." He turned back towards the front doors. "My Divination Professor will happily be your escort while you're in my castle."

Delores gave a tight, uncomfortable smile. "That fraud I tried to fire? Really?" She seemed giddy at the confrontation.

Firenze's deep voice cut through her giggles. "I am no fraud, witch."

Severus offered his arm to Fleur as the pair of them made their way to his quarters for a quick shower before dinner. "You'll be in good hands, Delores!"

I was making my way down to the Great Hall when Professor Vector flagged me down. "Miss Granger! Have you been having any trouble keeping your eigenvalues stable?"

I shook my head. "Honestly Professor, I haven't even spent much time working equations, I've just been studying the theory."

Professor Vector frowned. "Well, in all my years, I haven't had so many equations fail to resolve for me at all. Have you ran any practice equations?"

I frowned at that. "I've done them all."

"Recently?"

I whipped or my wand and drew out a basic equation to calculate the odds that plants would grow tomorrow. One hundred percent chance.

Professor Vector nodded at that. "Extend it to six months."

I modified the equation and ran it again. It didn't solve; not 100%, not 50%, no result at all. I graphed it out and ran the equation manually rather than just cast *Solvo.* The line faded from the graph rather than climb or fall, which... shouldn't happen.

"What in Slitherin's name...?"

Professor Vector frowned as she put up her own equations and they all similarly failed. "No variables to worry about. Even the proofs fail after 5 months."

"Have you asked my wife?"
"Narcissa? She and I never really got along..." Was there bad blood between Septima and Cissy?

"No time like the present to bury the hatchet." I offered, idly wondering what could cause this kind of failure. She winced, but nodded as she agreed with my suggestion. We made our way into the Great Hall, glad to see that Severus and Fleur were back. I was glad that I'd be returning to my regular student role in the morning. Umbridge was staring daggers at my wife while Narcissa irked her even further by ignoring her blatantly and inspected her nails.

We all ate dinner in a muted silence as the anticipation loomed over the Ministry's latest announcement. The pink woman made her way to the podium and cleared her throat for attention, only to realize that she was a bit too short to stand behind it. Did Severus have it raised earlier just to mess with her? I smiled at the thought as I exchanged a glance with Narcissa who was repressing laughter as Delores had to conjure herself a stepping block to stand on to be seen.

"Good evening children." She calls us children and she's here to mandate marriages. How I hate this woman.

There was no response. She cleared her throat expectantly.

"I said, Good Evening, children." Her lips were pressed tightly in frustration at the lack of a response.

One Slytherin spoke up defiantly. "It's not a good evening when you're here!"

Severus stood and gave him a dry stare. "Ten points from Slytherin. You will respect our... guest... here."

Beside me, I could hear Professor Flitwick mumble "Five points to Slytherin" from behind his napkin. I turned to see Minerva doing the same, and Severus gave her a barely-noticeable nod as he sat.

"As you know, the Ministry is concerned with protecting the values that have made our society strong, while abolishing certain behaviors that erode our values, such as the Pureblood extremism that has plagued us for the past few decades with their prurient immorality. I know many of you may think that this Act seems excessive, but I have to respectfully disagree. The disrespect towards family and for the unique contribution of fathers and mothers is abhorrent and it has to be curtailed. And as much as some people might try to redefine marriage to include their own perverse twist on it, 'Homosexual marriage' is as wrong as giving a man a license to marry his mother, his own daughter, or his sister, or a group of women. Homosexual 'marriage' will harm children by denying them the proper love of a mother and father. This attempt to eliminate the natural distinctions between men and women must be refuted, because it goes against the self-evident, natural truth that male and female bodies are designed for and complement each other. And I know many of you might be flirting with the idea of being with someone of the same sex, but I must caution you. Opposite-sex marriage is the natural means by which the human race reproduces. Granting same-sex couples legal recognition is not the same as true marriage, for two men nor two women can become one flesh. Legitimizing such unnatural perversions does not make it any more natural, and it would be nothing more than a fraudulent marriage.

"Further, homosexual sex is a dangerous and destructive act to the human body and it is useless for reproduction. Engaging in such actions has a direct correlation to domestic violence, child abuse, and potion abuse; which is best remedied by renouncing any homosexual inclinations you may have and embracing true marriage. The only 'procreation' homosexuals can engage in is through recruiting young people such as yourselves into their destructive lifestyle. So I urge you all to be wary around homosexual provocateurs because they can be as seductive as the Dark Arts themselves. Do not be..."
fooled by thinking this is simply seeking equality; homosexuals are seeking a special right unto their own. They already have the right to marry just like the rest of us have - the right to marry a person of the opposite sex, the way it was meant to be.

"Recognizing any kind of 'marriage' between homosexuals simply because they engage in sodomy is as illogical as granting a solicitor-of-law license to a salesman just because he carries a briefcase. The public would suffer as a result of granting them the rights, benefits, and responsibilities as if they were qualified. Homosexual 'marriage' will devalue your marriage. A license to marry is a legal document by which the Ministry would have to treat same-sex 'marriage' as if it were equal to the real thing. A lawfully recognized marriage speaks that the Ministry is telling society that such 'marriages' are equal. Let me assure you that it. Is. Not. What we must all acknowledge is this: engaging in sex doesn't equal marriage. Death Eaters like the Carrows had incestuous sex, should the Ministry call that 'marriage' and recognize them? Certainly not!

"The biggest problem we have today is getting people, especially younger ones, to understand why marriage is becoming devalued and how it is a national problem. Adultery is no big deal. Divorce is tolerated. Absentee fathers and single mothers devalue what marriage is. Unmarried pregnancies are common. Fornication is 'normal'. In order to combat the rising rates of sexual deviance, potion abuse, fornication, and premarital cohabitation, and to ensure we don't have any more witches having children out of wedlock, we have instituted the Protection of Wizarding Families Act. We hope that, within a generation, the more dangerous Pureblood elements will be eradicated so that we can return to the morals that made us great."

Delores ended her speech with a large smile, expecting some sort of applause from the students. Amazingly, nobody clapped. Her smile turned sour as she opened her book from the Measuring and began to pull letters out of it. I can't help but wonder if she's one hell of a repressed closet-case after that verbal vomit.

"I shall now hand out the notices for the Ministry-designated marriages for those seated at the Head Table. Fleur Delacour, Rubeus Hagrid, Filius Flitwick, and Rolanda Hooch are all exempt for not being pure human, as well as Narcissa Black for being unable to become pregnant at this time." Her eyes were narrowed viciously and I didn't like that. Not one bit.

"Hermione Granger..." At least I won't have to worry about the anticipation getting to me now, I thought as I began to open the piece of parchment.

'Dear Miss Granger, according to the Measuring, you require someone who will support yet challenge you, someone intelligent...' that actually sounds like Narcissa, if she weren't a witch.

'...someone who can be your best friend and confidant...' so this is attempting to find me the ideal mate? I'm oddly curious now.

'...a man you've known for the past thirty years...' I'm not even thirty years old yet... why is...? oh, no...

'...therefore, it is resolved that you will marry Headmaster Severus Snape by the Summer Solstice. Sincerely, Delores Umbridge, Director, PoWFA.' I blinked, expecting to see the words change before me. This has to be a joke.

I stand up, dazed, as I turn away from the table and begin to leave the Hall. The world around me was faded and muted as my mind echoed a single thought as I wandered the castle.

The Ministry expects me to marry Severus Snape.
Narcissa had never seen her wife look like a Dementor had kissed her, and she found herself chasing after Hermione silently through the castle as Delores kept handing out notices to the students who were of age. The Gryffindor had a head start and Narcissa hadn't remembered to enact the weight lightening charm before so her body was paying for her exertions now as she tried to catch up with Hermione.

It wasn't a big leap of logic as she found herself entering the library and there was a tear-stricken Hermione looking up the various archaic laws in the thick tomes of Wizarding law.

"...there got to be something along the lines of..." Hermione was saying to herself as she had a quill out and was jotting down notes.

Narcissa looked over the book and thought about her upcoming trial. *I can't believe they are charging me with fornication.*

"Hermoine? Are you okay?"

She shook her head as she kept flipping through the book, huffing in frustration. "This is insanity. I can't go through with this; I'll flee to the bloody States if I have to!"

Narcissa understood where she was coming from. When she was younger, the thought about fleeing to avoid Lucius. She even had Severus asking for her hand. *Why didn't I just marry him instead?* "You can still make an end-run around this. I mean, if I had to marry anyone, and it had to be a Wizard, I'd choose Severus."

"That's... who they paired me up with." Hermione said, wiping a tear away from her face. "And on top of it, I'm being all emotion-" She looked at her pregnant wife and remembered the Bonding between them. "-right. Sorry."

"Oh. " Cissy turned away before Hermione could see the conflicting emotions on her face. "He would have preferred Fleur, anyways."

"They can't honestly think we'd all just go along with this!" Hermione fumed. "And those things Umbridge said?! I swear, annulling our marriage on top of everything just proves they have an ax to grind."

"Draco and Harry are affected by this as well."

"Well Draco can marry Ginny, they are still seeing each other, right? I don't even know what's going on there anymore-"

"-both purebloods, so no, they can't. I swear he's up to something."

Hermione's head dropped onto the books with a loud thump, and Narcissa could hear a quiet "ow..." come from her. "Tell me we're going to defeat this like we did the Inferi."

"If we could throw cursed fire at someone and stop all this, just tell me who." Narcissa said soothingly, rubbing her wife's back in a small circle. Hermione actually chuckled at the dark humor.

"Umbridge would be a good start, but I wouldn't be surprised if she put her heart in a jar somewhere far away for safekeeping."

"Will you be okay here? I've got to go meet with our solicitor over this, and my upcoming trial. Surly might come to you with questions for the house and the baby's room, okay?" Hermione's head nodded at that, and Narcissa knew why Hermione was so thrown by this. *She would have preferred
Severus, too. But it would tear us apart, and break Fleur's heart.

"I'll admit to the court under Veritaserum that you're carrying my child if I have to. You're technically my wife, so they literally cannot call it fornication."

Cissy smiled at that, glad to know she had Hermione's support. "Thank you. But I believe the Wizengamot is purposefully refusing to see the truth before them. I'll be back tonight."

Cissy took the stairs back up to her room and made the floo-call to Helena Harker, praying for a miracle.

I found myself not really paying attention in classes lately as I found myself back in the courtrooms again, this time glad to have Harry's hand in mine as Helena Harker stood tall in the courtroom. The Wizengamot was unable to find a solicitor to represent the Ministry's side for prosecution, so the Chief Warlock had to run this like a hearing instead. It also removed any chance of invoking a trial by combat, unfortunately. I would have really enjoyed seeing Ogden or Umbridge up against her. Kingsley Shacklebolt was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Draco. That worried me.

"Where's your boyfriend?" I whispered to Harry.

"Wouldn't tell me. Also, right after Severus gave me information about Trixymort, I was pulled off of that assignment and informed that my security clearance has been revoked. Apparently the Aurors are only to investigate crimes and I'm in trouble for not complying with the new PoWFA laws."

"You're in trouble because you're not married?" I asked, affronted.

"I'm not living a proper example for the Wizengamot. And for not knowing and arresting Cissy for being pregnant out of wedlock. I didn't even know that this law was still being enforced! Did you?"

I bit my cheek, but nodded. "No, and I only found out about the pregnancy a few days ago."

"Any chance you know the bloke that..." I nodded, wincing. "It was Lucius, right?" I shook my head, trying to recompose myself. "Alright, well, I can turn him in, save some face with Ogden."

"Harry-" I started, unwilling to admit it.

"-what? Some other bloke shagged your woman, I'd think you would want him strung-up... was it Bertrand? He did seem to take a shine to her at the Yule Ball-"

"-she'll give birth next month, before he was even in our country."

"Well that would mean she got pregnant just around the Final Battle. Surely you know-" my hand squeezed his tightly, and his face lit up in surprise as he figured it out. ",-I don't, wow. Okay. Congratulations."

"Thanks, I guess. You're the first person I told outside of my parents. Umbridge made one hell of a speech at the start of term, do you think she'll try to take away my baby from us?"

Harry gulped, eyes narrowed in fury as he stood there silent. He thought they would. And they could even take away Teddy from him.

Chief Mugwump Ogden looked down his nose at Narcissa in disgust. "You stand accused of the crime of fornication and being pregnant outside of wedlock. How do you plead?"
"My client wishes to plead 'Not Guilty', Chief Mugwump." Helena said succinctly.

"Come now, I think it's quite obvious that Miss Black here is pregnant. And unlike in certain muggle religions, we know there is no way that this witch is having a 'virgin birth'."

"Misses Granger-Black is not guilty of the charges as you have described them."

Delores Unbridge spoke up then. "The Wizengamot does not recognize that name for the accused, nor any 'marriage' that would have her espouse Hermione Granger, who is betrothed to Severus Snape."

"Misses Narcissa Granger-Black pleads not guilty of the charges as you have described them."

"So noted."

"I would also request a copy of all evidence that exists that Misses Hermione Granger-Black is betrothed to Severus Snape."

"The Measuring was done in compliance with the new PoWFA law."

"Then I request to see the book and all of the pairings it did on behalf of the PoWFA law." Solicitor Harker asked politely.

"That is preposterous! Out of the question!"

"What is preposterous is to believe that the current Ministry was able to create a magic book that could pair individuals up so succinctly considering that there are wizards and witches who just turned of age and are to be married and perhaps their true soul mate will not come of age for another few months. I would like to know what kind of rubric was used and if any arithmantic equations were used to calculate the percent chance of creating a successful pairing." Helena smiled as she waited for their response.

"The Measuring to ensure appropriate pairings for PoWFA is not at trial here! What is at trial, is Narcissa Black's extramarital promiscuity."

"Wizards and Witches of the Wizengamot, we are here to determine the guilt of my client being pregnant outside of marriage, am I correct?"

Most of them nodded nervously.

"The law was enacted... how long ago?"

"It was devised 6 months ago and is being put in place now." Ogden said, mouth curling down after he said it.

"Narcissa Granger-Black was already two months pregnant at the time, and therefore, you cannot arrest her retroactively for something she did before it was declared a crime."

"Good try, solicitor, but the law against fornication is as old as the Ministry itself, and not a part of PoWFA."

"Will you be putting the father of said pregnancy on trial as well, or shall we shrug that away with a smile and wink about how Wizards like to get their wands wet from time to time?" The Solicitor's smile looked predatory, "Because I know a few witches in Knockturn Alley that would absolutely love to come testify about a few wizard's penchant for promiscuity, sodomy, and
"This trial has nothing to do what other individuals are doing with other men!"

"-I was under the impression this was a morality court, and may I inform the Wizengamot that
sodomy is practiced by more heterosexuals than homosexuals?"

"The Wizengamot is not concerned with the sexual acts between married persons, only homosexual
sodomy and extramarital fornication."

I stood up defiantly, tired of hearing this tripe.

"Then you have NO case, for I am her wife, AND she carries MY CHILD!" I shouted, surprising
myself and the embedded media covering the trial.

There was a moment of stunned silence before members in the Wizengamot began to laugh. They
were laughing at me.

"Witches cannot make children in other witches!" Delores Umbridge said, a giggle in her voice.

"I will attest to that under Veritaserum." I replied defiantly.

Ogden scoffed at that. "We do not need to hear the insane ramblings of one little confused girl-"

"-Chief Mugwump, it is a right reserved to my client that she call witnesses to her defense. We are
still beholden to our laws, if I am not mistaken." Helena interjected, and Chief Ogden nodded
reluctantly.

"Hermione Granger-Black, would you be willing to testify?" Ogden asked.

Delores cleared her throat for attention. "Let it be known that any testimony you give can incriminate
yourself. Perhaps it is best if you stay seated and let the adults handle this." The flare of anger I felt
sank into the ground as I realized Narcissa was helping me keep my calm.

"She's saying that to rile you up." Harry warned into my ear.

"Well she's not." I faced the Chief Mugwump. "I'm willing to testify."

Helena Harker nodded to me as the court clerk swore me in. Percy? You're still a Ministry flunkie?
The solicitor smiled at me, and I knew for now that I was in safe hands. "Misses Granger-Black,
please state your full name for the record, now that you're under a wand oath to tell the truth."

"Hermoine Jean Granger-Black."

"The Wizengamot does not recognize-" Delores began to object.

"-with all due respect, Madame Umbridge, she is under a wand-oath and that is how she
stated her name."

"Very well." Ogden said, "Let's not bicker about all day over this one thing."

Helena Harker made a simple bow in thanks. "Misses Granger-Black, when did your surname
change?"

"Just before the Battle of Hogwarts."
"I see, and, pray tell, what instigated this change?"

"I slew Lucius Malfoy in a duel on his property. Seeing as he kept with the Old Ways and Traditions, his property, including the Bonding to his wife Narcissa, transferred onto me."

"But you're a witch?"

"The magic involved doesn't seem to mind. I suppose Wizards back in the day never expected a Witch to ever raise a wand against a Wizard." I looked at the Chief Mugwump, making a slight nod to him. "Times change."

"So you've inherited Narcissa like property, just like his estate?"

"I did. It seems women are little more than chattel in the eyes of some."

"So, in theory, her unborn child is yours, too." She must know the baby is mine, though. "She must know the baby is mine, though."

"Well, in theory, yes."

"Natural Magical Laws trump Ministry Legislation, as stated in the INTERCON statute-"

"We don't need the law dictated to us, Solicitor!" Delores snapped. "Well we don't go around engaging in lawsuits to demand wands recant their new allegiances due to dueling. Therefore I request that the Wizengamot recognize parentage of Narcissa's child to Hermione Granger-Black."

Ogden looked like he was going to be sick. "The Wizengamot recognizes it. Now allow me to cross-examine your witness."

"Hermione, may I call you that?" The Chief Warlock's smile was oily and disgusting. "Wanker."

"May I call you a homophobic bigot?" His fake smile disappeared.

"You will keep a civil tongue in the courtroom, mud-muggle-born!"

"Chief Warlock, I believe Misses Granger-Black was answering your question with a question." She gave me a stern look and I adopted a polite yet plaintive face.

Of course this is how I talk, I'm always polite and answer questions with questions, you insufferable prick.

"Was Narcissa pregnant at the time you inherited her as a wife?" I thought about it, and realized I would have to answer the truth.

"I cannot be certain, I didn't check her with a medical diagnostic charm."

"And where were you when you realized she was your 'wife'?"

"I was detained in the dungeon, expecting You-Know-Who to arrive and execute me."

"Why were you detained if that was your home?"

"Perhaps you missed the part where Lord Voldemort was on his way, and I was facing a scared
Bellatrix and Fenrir. I was marginally safer in the dungeon instead of having to duel them as well. I had, however, to share the dungeon with Peter Pettigrew's corpse, which was raised as an Inferi that tried to kill me."

"So you didn't choose to be there?"

"No, I have been busy trying to fight Lord Voldemort all this time, even back when you were making Harry *carve himself up* with that Dark Quill in hopes to suppress the news that he returned!"

The Wizengamot gasped audibly while my Solicitor filed an affidavit against Umbridge, had Percy sign it as a witness, and turned it into the Chief Warlock. The paper duplicated itself and she retained a copy for her own records. *Now they are going to have to investigate it.*

"Back to the case at hand. You were a prisoner and therefore couldn't consent to what was going on, am I correct Hermione? So you didn't *choose* to be in that sham marriage with a known homosexual? Why did you turn down the Minister's offer for an annulment? Why are you here defending her?"

"An annulment wouldn't change the Bonding or the Compulsion that is attached. As for Narcissa, I didn't know she was 'known homosexual', though you seem to insinuate that it's a *bad thing.* I was pushing his buttons, but I was fairly certain this was the right call.

"It is!" Delores injected venomously.

My solicitor took the moment to speak up. "I would like to remind the Wizengamot that if they are unable to keep their own personal emotions out of a hearing, that they should recuse themselves entirely? Particularly when they might be under investigation for using Dark Artifacts?"

"Delores will control her emotions." Ogden said as he glared at the woman.

"I think we've answered enough of your questions-"

"-Misses Granger, can you tell me whose seed is in your 'wife'?"

Helena spoke over me immediately. "I must object; wizards do not have seeds as if they are plants. Please phrase your question accordingly."


The wand-oath pushed me to admit it. "I did."

The courtroom was flooded with gasps and shouts of outrage, making the Chief Warlock have to use a silencing charm to end the noise.

"Percy, please update the charges to include lascivious sexual acts, sodomy, crimes against nature, and violating the PoWFA law. And include Hermione Granger as a defendant. The Wizengamot will take a recess and return this afternoon."

Narcissa was glad to see her wife on the stand in her defense, but knew the risks that came along with it as she stood to hug her.

"Thanks, 'Mione, we're going to get through this."

"I know. I just... where's our son?" *She says it so naturally.*

"Draco? He wouldn't tell me. Shall we go get lunch?" She turns to the solicitor and Harry, who both
nod in agreement. As the four of them make their way up the elevators to the cafeteria, Surly pops into existence, shoving a piece of parchment into Harry's hands.

"Don't ask me to send a reply, I'm not a bloody owl." As soon as he showed up, he vanished again.

Harry snickered at the elf's attitude. "Where did you find an elf like this, 'Mione?" As he read the note, he frowned uncertainly. "Um, Ginny got injured at practice. The coach is assigning her to attend muggle sobriety meetings."

Everyone became very quiet, uncertain of exactly what to say. Narcissa was fairly certain that this would be the best thing for her.

"Surly is a long story. Helena, any ideas on how we can win this?" Hermione asked.

"We can play it as part of the Compulsion, or argue that the laws themselves are wrong. Two war heroines facing prison because their love has created new life? I'm fairly certain the court of public opinion is on your side here and the Wizengamot doesn't want to lose that much face as they unroll this massive mistake of a social policy."

"Do you really think that homophobia in the wizarding world has gone away?"

"No, but you two put a humanizing face on blind hated. No offense, Harry, but two witches together works better than two men."

"Yeah, I know. 'Homophobia is the fear that gay men will treat you like you do women'."

All of us save Helena filled our trays with food as the servers each gave us knowing smiles, and we're not charged for the food as we find a table to sit at.

"Okay, that was unusual. Since when did you get the free treatment?" Harry asked as dark-robed figures cut into the line and bullied their way through.

"Isn't that Scabior?" Hermione asked, face narrowed in fury.

Harry turned to look. "And he's part of Cormac's new security force. They must have really low standards."

Cissy shook her head at that. "This isn't simple nepotism in action, they want brutal and loyal. See the others there? All former Snatchers."

"Let's fight the law, then. I'd like to know the last time the Wizengamot but a witch on trial for fornication."

"1698. The Chief Warlock was having an affair and his mistress assumed he would leave his wife for her since she was pregnant. The wife spent a fortune buying the votes to have her banished."

Hermione's eyes perked up at this. "Fabiana the Fair. Wasn't she named after some famous witch?"

"You're thinking of the Amice Sisters. They were my childhood heroes when I was growing up and read about them." Cissy replied.

Helena's eyes shone as she took a sip of her flask. "I think I know what to do."

I fidgeted as the Wizengamot resumed their trial, Narcissa and I standing side by side in magical shackles. Delores must really be enjoying this, I thought darkly as the various media sources had
their cameras flash abundantly. I held my wife's hands in my own as a very pregnant Narcissa looked both vulnerable yet defiant by my side. I wasn't sure how she was able to convey such conflicting emotions, but I kissed her cheek as a sign of support as she smiled slightly.

"The court will come to order." Ogden declared. "The Wizengamot will give its opening remarks." He nodded to a more subdued-looking Delores to proceed.

"Look around us now. Notice the horrors and deaths that have overrun our once wonderful country. The Goblin's rebellion, the waves of Inferi attacks, and the near outing of wizard-kind to the muggles, are our just desserts for letting the Purebloods rule us under You-Know-Who! We are now surrounded by fornication and homosexuals! We must punish those who tempt us in their prurient ways for we understand that such carnal practices have been forbidden for good reason.

"The eccentricities of the Purebloods know no limits; some of them seemed harmless like Uric the Oddball wearing a jellyfish for a hat. But what about Araminta Black and her attempt to have us hunt muggles for sport, like foxes? We half-bloods know right from wrong, yet Purebloods seem to be unable to comprehend this. Aberforth Dumbledore has his little penchant for charming his goat, while the Carrows regularly engaged in incest, and now we have Narcissa's claws set deep into Hermione Granger, and the pair of them are violating the natural laws of reproduction itself forcing us all to redefine what makes a marriage as we try to preserve and promote it here.

"I say that we need to come together and refute this moral backslide that is beginning to happen; that we reject the libertine, that we stand fast against the new 'anything goes' mentality, that we not fall prey to the same type of depravities that corrupted and destroyed the Purebloods who violently overthrew the Ministry just months ago. This so-called 'marriage' between them must not stand. The fact that they have created a new life through their sodomy is not only an abomination, but we have to ask ourselves if it can even be considered human or just some sort of homuncular construct to bring back You-Know-Who, which is how he returned before he got his old body back! Even if the thing that is gestating within Narcissa is normal enough, they must not allowed to raise it as if all this were normal."

"The solicitor for the defense may proceed."

"Madame Umbridge is correct in only one thing. There was a recent war, but the enemy wasn't the Purebloods, which may I add Delores herself masqueraded as a descendant of the extant Selwyn bloodline, was the actions a fearful few took because they detested another minority who only sought fair and equitable treatment in society.

"Now it seems like my clients are to be discriminated against in some sort of backlash, though neither of them have anything to do with Uric the Oddball, have never wanted to hunt muggles, never have they done anything to a goat nor ever engaged in incest. No, these two women stand here accused of nothing more than trying to survive during the war, and their greatest contribution to ending the war was killing Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle once and for all. They did not choose to be together at first, but they have come to the defense of each other and have found an unlikelythat has made them survive hardships that few of us could.

"We all survived the Goblin Rebellion due in part to their contributions. The Day of No Magic, when the entire continent was Squibbed, it was the courage of these two women and their associates that saved us all. And here we are deliberating their fate because we are uncomfortable with the idea that these two witches are married and about to have a child. I realize how much this must scare you, to endanger 'the way it has always been'.

"However, homosexuality isn't a new or novel 'perversion', as much as some members of the Wizengamot might wish it were. Legend once spoke of a powerful circle of witches, whose tales of
helping the helpless are recorded in many children's stories. History remembers them as the Amice Sisters; they were not sisters by blood, but by something far greater.

"They were, in fact, lesbians, in relationships as strong as any heterosexual marriage today. Their dedication and power saved us from unspeakable darkness long ago, and we unfortunately discredit them as just a few powerful sisters who helped wizards and witches alike while never having husbands of their own.

"Wizards and witches of the Wizengamot, the facts in this case are indisputable; Hermione Granger defeated Lucius Malfoy in a duel on his own property, inheriting all that had belonged to him, including his wife Narcissa.

"Voldemort knew of the Compulsion-based Bonding that essentially made these two women magically married, and in his hope to have a new generation of competent Half-Blooded Death Eaters, tasked them to reproduce by use of a modified polyjuice potion. He even marked Hermione with a curse, as you can see on her right wrist, to force her to be loyal to him else he track her down and make her suffer a slow and painful death. She was as dammed as any other Death Eater was, except that she never chose to take the mark of her own free will.

"So I urge the Wizengamot, with the eyes of the magical world upon us, to dismiss the charges against these war heroines for taking solace in each other when forced to at wand-point. Dismiss these charges and allow these two women to live in peace and raise their child in a stable, loving home, because that is the objective of your new marriage law, is it not? I can understand the intention, but the execution of this marriage mandate is horribly done."

Delores fumed at that. "The PoWFA Law is perfectly fine the way it is! Chief Warlock, they have as good as confessed to the sodomy and fornication! Find them guilty and order the removal of the child from them once it's born!"

Chief Ogden frowned at the outburst. "The Wizengamot will take a short recess; Delores, my office now."

Narcissa whispered 'trigger' almost inaudibly, but Helena's nod confirmed that something was about to happen.

The reporters all began fielding questions as the robed judges stood and began to file out.

"Delores! Is it true your brother is a squib and your father is a janitor?" Umbridge couldn't get out of the courtroom fast enough as the other members of the Wizengamot pushed their way to the door first. I could have sworn Diggle was doing his best to block the doorway as he slowed down and turned to hear the questions being called out.

"According to the PoWFA law, who's the poor bloke matched up to marry you, Delores?" I was wondering that myself, to be honest.

"I head your mother was part troll? Would you care to comment?" Part troll? Okay, that question was completely facetious.

"Is it true you miscarried a part centaur and that's why you've applied to take custody of Narcissa's baby?" I glared at Delores, enraged as the magic sparked within me.

She was hoping to take my baby?! Narcissa's hands squeezed mine in her own cold fury as she comforted me. I sensed in that moment that while my Darkness was like a fire that could burn, hers was a dark kind of ice that would never thaw. She understood my anger but was much more
Delores' face is redder rage as she halts all questions as she pulls her wand out and screeches, "I AM NOT ON TRIAL HERE!"

I looked my wife in the eyes. Did you know they were going to ask questions?

"Yes, but I had no idea what all the questions would be. And I didn't know Delores had applied for custody of Carina."

"Is it true your long-term witch lover left you for your squib brother?" One reporter yelled in reply, and the courtroom exploded with exasperation. Holy shit.

A short hailstorm of red hexes flew across the room, making the reporters dive for cover. The photographers hunkered down somewhat but snapped a few shots as an enraged Delores angrily put her wand down and shoved her way out, knocking Diggle aside and cutting his forehead open as he fell.

More photos were taken as Daedalus Diggle touched his injury and his fingers came away red with blood while the reporters peaked back up and their quills scribbled furiously. Percy Weasley looked like he swallowed a frog as a note floated to him and he read it. Walking over to us, he released the shackles that my wife and I were wearing and shoved the note to our solicitor before packing up his things and leaving the courtroom.

Helena smiled as she read it. "This hearing has been suspended indefinitely. I daresay we achieved a nice stalemate."

We hugged each other in triumph, knowing that it wasn't a victory, but it was good enough for today.

Everything was back to normal, it seemed, as I continued my classes as normal and Surly retrofitted what used to be Cho's room into something that I could take care of Carina with on the weekends. Surly looked at me funny as he essentially duplicated the baby room in Narcissa's house in there, complete with an icebox to store food and bottles of milk. I even had a muggle bottle of medicine in my bathroom next to a breast pump to make sure I could lactate when Carina was born.

This is really happening. I'm going to be a mom.

I knew that I wouldn't be the one giving birth, but I couldn't see calling myself 'the father' or 'the donor'. Carina was going to have two moms, and I'm one of them. Crookshanks seemed to understand what was going on as he pawed at an empty space of the wall and made a meowing sound that gave me the distinct impression he was saying 'floo'.

"Crooks, there is no floo there. If you want to go somewhere, you have to go to a fireplace that's hooked up."

He meowed and pawed at the wall again, as if asking for one to be put in here. I sighed and thought how that might actually be a good idea. It would be an easy way to get to Cissy's new house.

"Okay, I'll ask the Headmaster if I can have one put in." Satisfied, Crookshanks rubbed up against my legs a few times in thanks before trotting off to the door to the hallway. It still felt a little bit odd, knowing that less than a month ago someone moved out of here because they got married and I'm about to have a newborn here while I'm still taking classes.
I'm going to have to get that door warded sealed, I thought as Crooks pawed at it to be let out. I rolled my eyes to let him out, uncertain how he gets around the castle if he depends on us to open doors for him. A knocking caught my attention and I peeked around the door and looked down the hall to the door to my room, where I saw Narcissa holding a potted white orchid. She turned her head and saw me, then blushed.

"Sorry, I must have had the wrong... door."

"No, you don't, just come in. I want to show you something." I was fairly certain I was blushing as well.

Narcissa made her way in and mouth opened at the sight of the room. "You recreated the... wow."

I shrugged. "I thought you might want to have some weekends and evenings free while I still live here."

She extended the orchid. "That's wonderful, thank you. I got this for you as a thank-you gift for your testimony. The Wizengamot is still repeating 'no comment' on anything to do with us as well as anything regarding Delores."

"You and Helena had that all planned out, didn't you?" I asked, proudly smiling at my wife's Slytherin schemes.

"Of course, did you think I was going to depend on calm and rational people prevailing in there?"

"Well, I guess not." I replied. Narcissa put the plants down by the window and I couldn't help but admire her.

"Such a Gryffindor. 'The Way of War is a Way of Deception. When able, feign inability. When deploying troops, appear not to be. When near, appear far. When far, appear near. Lure with bait; strike with chaos.' Sun-tsu, *The Art of War.*"

"Such a Slytherin." I replied. She shrugged at that, accepting the compliment for what it was. There was a moment between us, and I could feel the gravitational pull making me want to close the distance, and instead I just stupidly smiled as I waited for her to make any kind of move. Our eyes met, and I felt an unusual tugging sensation in my abdomen, and judging from Narcissa's look, it was Carina kicking in the womb. *Oh Merlin it's so real.* I wanted to touch her belly, but as soon as my eyes left hers, the sensation was gone.

Narcissa pointed to the plant. "Well, I just came by to drop this off to you and to say thank you. My plan worked even better with you by my side."

I wanted to hug her, hold her, kiss her, tell her I'm looking forward to our daughter... but instead I just nodded.

"Glad to keep Umbridge's stubby fingers off of Carina." *May that witch never have anything to do with my daughter.*

Narcissa's smile stayed, but her eyes seemed to go flat as she looked away for a moment. "Understood." She left the baby's room, gently closing the door behind her.

*I'm in love with my wife and I don't know how to tell her.*
as he wore trousers that weren't black. When the Gryffindor had seen the charcoal-colored garment, she nearly gasped in surprise.

"What has gotten into you, Sev?" She had asked him after a staff meeting.

"Proper rest, good diet, rigorous exercise." He replied dryly. Minerva's eyes shone as she knew who was giving him said exercise. The Headmaster refused to admit nor deny anything, but he was more than happy to see Fleur move into his quarters on the first weekend of January.

Now that the Veela had lost her wings, Severus was able to snuggle in behind her and hold her close, his nose buried in her golden hair. Fleur also enjoyed the way she could rock her hips against him and wake up him up, which is exactly what kept them up the night before.

After a marathon of spanking and fucking that lasted longer than some quidditch matches, Severus finally lay limp and spent in bed. The Veela seemed satiated as well, as she hummed in satisfaction.

"You know, Fleur, your arse is going to have a bruise in the shape of my hand in the morning. You should probably put a salve on it." Severus chuckled darkly.

"Let it bruise; I'm not getting out of this bed. Fairly certain my legs won't want to hold me up after all that." She rolled over in bed and kissed him deeply in thanks. "Besides, I'm fairly certain your back is bleeding from my claw marks after the second time..."

Severus winced slightly as he replied. "Fairly certain it was the third, Fury. And these are battle scars that I'll wear with pride." He took in the nude form of Fleur before him, and he was glad for the small nudge that the Veela did on his birthday to get them here. Sure, they had begun dating and having sex around Christmas last year, but it was his birthday that she had really pushed for more.

Fleur had remembered what Tonks had said about Severus and his predilections. She had been quite confused at how tender and gentle he had been with her, since she had expected something much more intense. So she did the only thing she could think of: wrapped herself up like a present to him. It was, of course, with magical bindings, but when Severus had broken through the wards to his bedroom and found Fleur tied spread-eagle to his bed, with a red bow tied strategically across her breasts while leaving her wet quim exposed to him, he understood that she was wanting to experience all of him.

And experience him she did.

Which left Severus wondering what he ought to do for Valentine's Day for her. His last few relationships had always been somewhat secretive, and now that he could shout it from the highest tower that he was in love with Fleur - he wasn't certain what to do about it.

"What's on your mind, Sev?" Fleur asked, her blue eyes fixed on him.

"What um, I mean to ask, do you have any plans... do you wish to do anything for Valentine's Day?"

Her hand slid under the covers and grasped him in the only way that got his full attention.

"Something to do? I have something in mind, yes."

"You insatiable witch." Severus said silkily, rolling on top of her and going for another round.

Draco frowned as he had to be searched to get into the building to see Ginny. He understood why, but it was awkward when they patted him down in order to look for any contraband. Once he was in, he was pointed to a visitor's center where he was told that Ginevra could come see him if she
wanted to.

If she wanted to.

He checked his pocketwatch, wondering how long he may have to wait. Wondering if she'd even see him.

Draco never even considered that Ginny would avoid him if he came to visit. Would she be too ashamed to see me?

Five minutes went by. He tapped his foot on the ground nervously. Then ten. Draco shook his head, giving up when the door opened and a shame-faced redhead timidly looked up at him. Her eyes were red from crying, her hair slightly greasy and limp-looking, her entire appearance seemed like she couldn't care what she looked like.

She didn't look like the Ginny from a few months ago when they started dating.

She looked like the scared and broken Ginny right after Dumbledore died, and she was forced to attend Hogwarts.

"Ginny." Draco said calmly, "I'm glad to see you."

"I'm ashamed for you to see me like this." She replied bitterly. "I was standing on the other side of the door, uncertain if I wanted you to see me like this." She played with her hair. "Hot water ran out this morning, so I couldn't wash it."

That's when Draco understood. She has to live like a muggle here, too.

"You're still the most beautiful woman in the world to me."

She smiled bashfully. "You're just saying that."

"No, I'm really not." He takes a step closer to her. "May I hug you?"

They embrace each other, and Draco can feel Ginny break down into sobs in his arms.

"I'm messed up, Draco. I needed this wake-up call. Just... don't abandon me."

Draco stroked her back in a circular fashion. "I haven't yet, love."

She shook her head. "Harry has."

He kissed her forehead. "He still loves and misses you; he's under a lot of stress with the ministry in order to settle down and marry, else he'll lose his job."

"Ogden's mad with power, if he thinks he can pull this off."

"He's got Umbridge running this stupid PoWFA thing. They are zealots when it comes to what they think is good for family values. I'm here to make sure you're getting better, because we're going to need to you in order to stand up and defy, maybe even overthrow, the current people in charge."

"What will I have to do?"

"Nothing that we haven't already discussed. We all love each other and need to show a united front. Prove that love isn't some 'one size fits all' method because every witch needs a wizard and that's it." Ginny's eyes shot open in surprise as she caught on.
"You don't mean... you can't." She wrapped her arms around herself. "This isn't going to work, Harry won't be up for it."

"Harry will, but he has to see you're doing better and are ready to prove your commitment." Draco reached into a pocket and took a knee. "Ginny Weasley, my world was full of darkness and despair as I thought all was lost. We found each other and brought ourselves into the light, and we didn't just survive, we thrived. And all those months, I was in love with you. Even though you promised yourself to Harry, even though he was on the run and you didn't know if he'd ever come back. That kind of loyalty I admire so much, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. So please do me the honor and be my wife. We'll figure out if Harry wants to be a part of this, and I truly think that he does."

Ginny's eyes were red as tears formed. "But what about tradition? What about my parents? My family? What will the world think?"

Draco shrugged at that. "We have each other, and our closest friends support us. So sod what the rest of the world thinks!"

Ginny chuckled at that, nervousness in her voice. "Will this even be legal? Can we three legally marry? What about PoWFA?"

Draco smiled at that. "Something I learned was that natural laws maintained by magic trump Ministry legislation. We can be Handfasted as a triad. And if Harry doesn't want to do that, you and I can do this and defy PoWFA just like Hermione and Mother's marriage does. Just say yes, and make me the luckiest wizard ever." He pulled out a small box and opened it, to show an intricate split shank while gold ring, a oval-cut ruby nestled by accent sapphires on either side.

"It's a family heirloom that I've had the stones replaced. And I'll track down your father and ask for his permission if you want. Just say you'll marry me, and I will do whatever it takes to make you happy and to make us whole again. I love you and Harry with all of my heart and I can't see us without each other."

Ginny felt tears roll down her cheeks as she pulled him to his feet, hands holding his face as she kissed him repeatedly with a single word mantra coming out between each kiss: "Yes."

Harry comes home from a tedious day at work, glad to know that at least he can be of use at home with Andi and Teddy. He finds her in the living room, happily enjoying some peace and quiet as she is enjoying a Weasley Daydream Charm.

"Hey Andi... Teddy asleep?"

She blinked her eyes a few times, tapped the charmed box to pause it, and looked around as she got her bearings again. "Yeah, we had a bit of exercise and then a nice big lunch. He's happily dozing away. Oh, and his hair is dark blue now."

"Taking after his mother, I guess." Harry said in amazement. "Did you need to go do anything? I kind of need to feel useful after today."

"Actually, Kreacher should be coming back with a few groceries from Figg's. What happened at work today?"

"The only thing I'm allowed to do anymore is chase after stray cats. Cormac has essentially taken over all of my duties with his new position, and plucked away a good portion of my staff." Harry huffed in indignation. "It's like they want me to resign in disgrace and to go away quietly."
"Fat chance of you doing that, right? Keep up the good fight; that's what we all need of you for now." A small pop of apparition alerted them that the House-Elf had returned, and the pair of them made their way to the kitchen only to see that the House-Elf brought back a lot of food.

*As in, a whole lot more than needed.*

"Kreacher, did you get more food than what was on the list I gave Mrs. Figg?"

The house-elf bowed apologetically. "Master Draco made an adjustment or two."

Harry looked at the elf in disbelief. "Kreacher, have you been sworn to secrecy about this?"

The elf clenched his jaw shut and covered his mouth with his hands as a single word escaped. "Yes." He looked around to find something to punish himself with until Harry stopped him.

"You don't need to punish yourself, you haven't said anything. Thank you. Let's make sure all of this is put away so it won't spoil." *What on earth is Draco doing?*

"Harry, will you and Draco be doing something for Valentine's Day?" Andi asked, disrupting Harry from his thoughts.

"Huh? Um, I don't know. He's been busy doing strange stuff as of late. I'm not even sure where he is today."

Andi blushed in embarrassment. "He's um, visiting Ginny."

"Oh, okay. I um, hope she's doing better." His heart throbbed with grief, realizing exactly how much he was missing the ginger girl. He was in love with her, but couldn't keep investing his heart into someone who loved her addiction more than him.

"I don't think I'll be doing anything special for Valentine's Day."

Odette Parkinson fidgeted as she re-read the note once again. *I thought my daughter was smarter than this!*

But the world has apparently gone mad as of late, and it has left her with few options. Ever since the war and her social circle collapsed, she really didn't have many people she could turn to. What was worse, was that she didn't have many friends she could depend on if there were a situation.

*Damn the Fates themselves for this,* she thought as she threw a pinch of floo powder into her fire and made her way to Narcissa's home. As she stepped through the floo, she finds herself surrounded by an odd arrangement of muggle books and medicine textbooks.

"May I help you?" A polite man asked, being distracted from reading in what appeared to be a waiting room. "Do you have a medical issue?"

Odette forgot that Malfoy Manor had become the new Wizarding hospital. *What are muggles doing here?*

"I was looking for Narcissa Granger-Black. I seem to have the wrong... floo." A large orange tabby cat quickly batted at the witch's feet, making her step away from the fireplace as it reset the
"Mrowrrrr." The cat said, and Odette was fairly certain that the cat had just insulted her.

"Well I-" she began to respond, affronted.

"-Hermione's cat Crookshanks is somewhat eccentric. I think he's going to lead you there, though."
Odette looked between the man and what he had said about the cat.

"Hermione Granger? You must be-"

"-her father, yes. I'm William." He looked to her in hopes that she would introduce herself, and she felt put on the spot.

"I'm Odette, um, an old friend of Cissy's. Are you saying that this cat knows how to use the floo network?"

William nodded.

"That's preposterous!" By the time that Odette had finished saying that, the cat had kicked enough floo powder and meowed into the fire, causing the color of the flames to shift. That just happened.

The orange cat hunkered down, waggled his rump a bit, then bolted forward through the flames and traveled to the other side of the floo connection.

"You'll want to follow that cat before the connection closes." William said, returning to his reading.

Odette gathered her nerves and ran through the floo, keeping an eye on the orange cat and following him until she found herself in Narcissa's bedroom, her ex-lover naked and sprawled out on the bed, focusing on a house-elf that was keeping her calm as it was apparent that her water broke.

"Odette? What are you doing here?" Narcissa said, trying to pull the bed sheet over herself for modesty as perspiration was beginning to coat her entire body.

"Showing up in the nick of time, it seems." Odette replied, casting scourgify over herself and taking stock of the situation. "Cissy, have you sent word to your wife?"

She shook her head as she tried to keep her breathing steady. "Haven't... but... don't want to..." she gasped in a great lungful of air, "involve her right now."

"Elf, go get Hermione!" Odette ordered as she took over his duties as the midwife.
Surly appeared before me as I was in the library, cross-referencing an Arithmancy textbook to figure out why equations failed after a certain point in time. Various students looked up from their own books in confusion as the elf closed the book in front of me.

"Hermione, it's time, we need to go!"

"Go? Surly, what are you talking about?" I pulled the book away from his hands, uncertain what he was going to do next.

The house-elf impatiently tapped his foot and snapped his fingers, making the book fly back to the shelf where it belongs. "I was told to come get you-"

"-tell my wife I'm studying!"

"She didn't summon me, daft girl! But she needs you right now, so pull your head out of the books and let's go because she's in labor!"

*Slytherin's Serpent!*

It's happening. I'm having a baby.

*I'm supposed to have a bag of supplies ready. The books told me to have a bag of stuff.*

"I'm having a baby."

Surly pointed to my belly. "No, you're not. She is. Aren't you supposed to be bright?"

I waved away his comment as he held his hand out to me. I packed away my notes and turned to leave the library. "I need my bag first!"

I ran down the stairs to the third floor and made my way to the 8th year corridor, and my mind was utterly blank on what all I needed as I pulled my wand out to un-ward my door for entry, tossing my notes haphazardly onto my bed as I ran into the baby's room.

*Bag.*

Blankets, chew toy, bottle? *Nappies! I need nappies!*

I read the books, and they said I wouldn't be prepared but I made sure to make a list so I would be prepared but where's the list? I ran over to the mirror and looked for a piece of paper with my list on it and couldn't seem to find anything. I huffed, frustrated at my lack of preparation.

"Surly!" I cried out, surprised to realize that he was already in corner of the room, waiting patiently. "How did you get here?"
"I'm an elf." Right. Okay.

"Where's my list?"

"You wrote it on the mirror. Well, you wrote to yourself 'make a list' on the mirror. Not sure that really helps now."

My eyes darted back to the mirror, my heart sinking in my chest. *She's too early! I thought I had another week at least to study and prepare!*

I grabbed a bag and stuffed some newborn nappies in there, some wipes, a blanket, her first book she can chew on, a plush cat for her, a bottle for milk... *does she need milk or formula? I have milk in me, I don't need a bottle.*

"May I suggest a calming draught?" Surly said, his voice cutting across my thoughts.

*Potions for a newborn? "That's a horrible thing to give a baby!"

His voice was raised in frustration. "The potion is for you!"

I need a calming potion? *I'm fine, I am just excited and surprised and freaking out that she's out already okay maybe I do need a potion but where can I get a calming draught I don't usually take any like that maybe I'll just go without but really I need to pack my bag and get to Cissy-*

"-drink this." Surly said sharply, handing me a phial. I look at it and my mind slows down enough to recognize it as a calming draught. The crystal phial tells me that it was heirloom quality. *Is the potion still any good, or is it old and worn out? Does the potency increase or decrease when... right.*

I gulp, opening the top and smelling it. *Relatively fresh, actually.* I gulp it down and feel my mind slow down slightly.

"Your wife has everything she needs for her child already."

*She does?*

"So I don't need a bag right now?"

"No, she just needs you."

I turn back to the mirror, and balk as I see my frizzy hair and my school robes. *I can't go like this; I should change.* I turn to my closet and rifle through it. Nothing seems right; nothing seems appropriate for a newborn parent. I have school robes, muggle teenage clothes, fancy dresses, and clubwear. Panic rose in my throat again like bile. *Nothing that says I'm a responsible adult ready to raise a child.*

"I have nothing to wear!" I look at my reflection again, panting and hating my hair as I try to put it in a bun. "Herpy, how's my hair?"

"Herpy is dead and I HONESTLY DON'T CARE!" Surly yelled at me, sticking his hand out to me defiantly. "Now can we GO?"

I nod, but have my wand out first. "I need to send a Patronus. Two maybe." I think the incantation and the silver vapor comes out in a strange shape that I can't recognize. "Mum, Dad, Narcissa is in labour." I repeat the action for Andi before putting my wand away and popping away to my wife.
Jean came into the study where her husband was sitting, glad to have one of the Mediwitches fully trained as a Healer and taking over some of the shifts. "Will, want to go out for dinner?" she asked, sighing gratefully as she took a seat by him.

"Didn't you put something out to defrost?" He asked curiously, putting down his book.

"Oh, it can keep, or I can ask Winky to put it away."

"What are you up for?"

"Greek?"

Jean grimaced at that. "Oh, you get the worst garlic burps! How about Mediterranean?"

William rolled his eyes. "That's practically the same thing." She sighed, ready to explain how it wasn't when an iridescent lioness floated in the room and spoke with her daughter's voice.

"Mum, Dad, Narcissa is in labour." The creature dissipated as quickly as it arrived, leaving the parents speechless for a minute.

"Jean, didn't she tell us her Patronus-animal was an otter?"

My mind reeled with trying to think of what to say when I saw Narcissa. I knew I've buggered this good, but as long as I tell her that I love her when Carina is born, it will be okay.

I know that you and I have been through our share of fights, faced unthinkable horrors, and though I may not have wanted to be with you at first, I have come to realize this one thing: I love you, Cissy. You have been there for me in ways I never expected, supported me in ways that I didn't know would need, and you brought a new depth of understanding to my life.

You've introduced me to new passions, and taught me that some things can't ever be learned in a book. Your problem solving methods differ from my own, but I realize that we compliment each other and we balance each other out in ways I never thought possible. You have proven to be more than just a friend and ally, but an understanding lover and companion that just fits into my heart and life in a way I never expected nor knew that I couldn't live without.

And I'll be damned before I let Ogden and his little bitch try to take this away from us.

And as I got my bearings in our new house, I recognized Odette Parkinson between my wife's legs.

"Hermione! Cast a cleaning charm on yourself if you want to stay in here!"

I thought I reacted with appropriate restraint. I didn't hex her on the spot. "What is she doing here?"

Cissy surprised me by actually snapping at me. "I would think that's obvious; I needed someone while giving birth! Merlin's Beard, you're still in your school robes for this?" I frowned at that.

"Well does it have to be your ex?"

"You're going to be complete prat about this, aren't you?! I never saw you as the insecure, jealous type. Should I call you Rita or Delores now?"

My eyes widened in horror.

"How can you say that to me?" She's being completely open, honest, and downright rude to me. And
"Looks like the rules have temporarily changed, *wife*. Fairly certain you could skin me alive and I wouldn't feel it."

Odette cut in right then. "Cissy, breathe, focus on your breathing. Hermione, she's in the middle of her contractions; don't start an argument right now!"

I recoiled at that. "But I thought we were-" I can't finish the sentence. *I thought we were doing better together.*

Narcissa bared her teeth at me malevolently. "What, did you think that this was going to be easy? Defeat the bad guy, win the girl, and everything else falls into place? Damn it, Hermione, this is life, not some fairy tale!"

I shook my head, horrified at how the conversation was turning out. "I never said it was, but-"

"At the Yule ball you swore that you could *never* love someone like me! So yes, while I'm glad you defended my son and I when we were put on trial, you've also been doing your best to convince yourself you don't want to be with me! So go let the Ministry marry you to Severus for all I care!"

Odette faced me, holding one finger up to silence me. *It's just the hormones talking, Granger.*

"Okay, Cissy, push! Hermione, you're *no help* right now, I'm sorry I even sent your elf to fetch you!"

Cissy groaned in obvious pain as she pushed and I was able to see Carina's head coming out of my wife. *This is so wonderful yet happening so horrifyingly wrong...*

"One more!" Odette blocked my view and I craned my neck to see the head poke out, covered in blood and other fluids. "Okay, now a little more, and then the shoulders. ...I felt rooted to the spot as the tiny, delicate baby slipped out and Odette cast anapneo, and the baby's cries were the most soothing thing I've ever heard.

My heart flipped as Odette pointed for me to get the blanket to swaddle her in as she cast a cleansing and diagnostic charm. As I hand over the baby blanket with shaking hands, Odette expertly wrapped my daughter and handed her to Narcissa as the magic surrounding us seemed to grow heavy and thick in the room.

Narcissa's eyes were soft and gentle as she held the girl against her chest, letting the magic radiate as her words took meaning: "I name you Carina Granger-Black." The thick, imposing magic coalesced for a fraction if a moment in time before dissipating, making the room feel back to normal.

"That was beautiful." I said, breaking the silence.

Odette smiled as she checked on Cissy. My wife, however, had her eyes fixed disapprovingly upon me.

"This isn't some fairytale where everything is solved after... an epic struggle! The hardest thing is the daily grind, the waking up *each morning*, *slogging through your day*, and having someone by your side to *support you unconditionally*. Not someone who has been hot and cold about supporting you when it seems important enough, and then runs when it *actually* gets difficult." She looked away from me. "I needed you here months ago, Hermione. So just... go and do whatever it is you want to do. I don't care anymore."
I was struck silent at that. "I'll help support and raise our daughter, Narcissa."

"That won't be necessary. You're still a student, anyways. Don't worry, Carina will have all the nurturing she may need."

Self doubt is a persistent weed, like fog on a window, you can try and get rid of it but it has ways of coming back. *I could see Odette as a friend, but watching her be so close and intimate with Cissy... self-doubt definitely reared its ugly head.*

*She's sexually submissive, beautiful, and a confident witch near her own age...*

They seemed to fall back into their old habits around each other, laughing at nothing and everything, casual touches and happy glances at each other. And now Odette was holding Carina, our daughter. *My daughter. At any other time I wouldn't consider myself too jealous or possessive, but seeing her hold Carina, I was. I don't know if I could share Narcissa with her like Ginny did her boys, but that's my child.* Today I finally realized what it would mean if I had lost her; only after I realized that she meant the world to me.

*I didn't just love her, I was in love with Narcissa.*

It would have been easy to write off what I wanted to do next; lose control of my emotions, let the Darkness within me lash out... but that would not solve the problem before me.

*I was afraid that I finally lost her.*

Worse, I was afraid that there was nothing there in the first place. That she wouldn't have ever had feelings for me had it not been for the Compulsion. Our daughter was made on Voldemort's order. She was willing to conceive by the use of a lust potion, and I instead willfully consented to having sex with her.

*She still thinks that I am going to run away, that I'm going to bring up how I never had a say in all of this. But I did, and it's too late now to explain it.*

I sighed in resignation. "Understood. I'll leave you two alone." I didn't know which two I was speaking about. *I guess that's up to her.* I thought as I made my way out of her bedroom and ran into the expectant faces of Andi, Harry, and my parents. Harry held an excited Teddy on his hip while the metamorphmagus turned his hair into a dark chestnut brown.

"Oh, uh, Carina is healthy and Narcissa is doing fine. Can I just, uh, go home with you, dad?"

Harry shifts the baby in his arms he hugs me. "Everything okay?"

I frowned at the suspicious lack of Draco and Ginny here, and I no longer care why Narcissa broke them up. *People ought to just be with people and be happy.*

"Yeah, I'm um, just... tired." I shrugged. "The bond between us... takes a lot out." I fibbed to the group.

My parents nodded, exchanging a glance to each other.

"Hey, 'Mione..." Harry said, grabbing my attention. I looked up at his green eyes to see them shine back at me. "Congrats. You're going to be a great mother."

I nodded, feeling my eyes tear up as Winky was there and ready to pop us out of here. *It wasn't supposed to happen like this.*
Narcissa smiled at the sight of Carina pressed against her busom, contentedly hearing her mother's heartbeat as a familiar sound. *Born just before Valentine's Day.*

"Your wife has the wrong impression of why I'm here."

Cissy rolled her eyes at that, her friend's words stabbing her with guilt.

"Yeah, well, I thought maybe she'd stick around if I made her jealous. I was wrong."

Odette looked at the Slytherin incredulously. "You really don't understand Gryffindors at times. She's going to 'do the right thing', and let you go and try to move on."

"Well I wish her the best then. Merlin knows I can't move on."

"You can't, can you? And since when have you taken Merlin's name in vain? She really has gotten to you."

Narcissa clenched her jaw, upset at herself for the flippant revelation.

"Yeah, she has. Now I'm a *white-hat*, and I *always do the right thing* even if it gets everyone around me killed." She dropped the sarcasm from her voice. "So your daughter ran off with Krum, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Cissy, she deserves better than him. You know the kind of boy he is, don't you?"

There was a pause as Narcissa sighed.

"Yeah, I do. Lucius paid off all of his gambling debts when we dropped him for the World Cup snafu. We didn't want the scandal to taint the league."

"You were worried about your bottom line, just like I am. Now, I'm asking you, as a friend, as a mother... as an ex-lover. Please, I think they are going to try and elope."

Narcissa's cold exterior fractured at that. "Does she love him?"

"I think so, more's the pity. You know he's only going to marry her as a meal-ticket, and then find a way out of it later on."

Narcissa nodded as a plan began to form in her head, and her stomach churned as she knew what she'd have to do.

"I have a solution, but um... it's going to take a lot of skulduggery. Surly! (elf appears) I've going to need you to get some potions from Severus: pepper-up, confusing concoction, truth serum, and Felix Felices."

Odette scoffed at that, knowing the cost of the potions. "That's... I have to repay you-"

"No, my wife and I owe your daughter for what she did for us. Consider our debt paid." *And my own damnation just beginning.*

---

*Understood.* One simple word, completely nebulous in meaning when Narcissa heard it. *She was going to let the two of us be?* She didn't want that; she wanted Hermione. And as she shifted through
Hermione's memory of the situation, she knew Hermione wanted her as well. She had to admit that Odette was right.

Her Bonding was nudging her to go to her wife and clear things up, her body craved her wife's warmth, the touch of her child. She pushed it all aside as she went through the plan in her head, organized the various potions she requested in her robes, and did her hair and makeup impeccably for her full effect.

"Surly, I have some business to attend to. Please let Odette in as she will be babysitting for the interim." The elf nodded and popped away, muttering something about mad women.

I was back at Hogwarts for Monday morning breakfast, my father's chastisement reverberating in my mind. *I've never seen you give up on something, and frankly, now isn't the time to start.*

He knew how to deal with difficult women, he said, and running away want the solution. She should just go and confess her heart to her wife, attempt to reconcile, and find out what they can do about circumventing the marriage law.

I looked up to the Head Table to see the Headmaster cast glances to the human-looking Fleur, and her subsequent blush told me that I couldn't let the Wizengamot get away with this. What I didn't notice, however, was my wife Cissy. I was too far away from Severus to get his eye to ask through Occlumency, so I finished my food and made my way to her room only to find it empty.

*She's not here? Where's Carina?* My mind panicked as I wondered if she was going to flee the country in order to avoid being forced to marry now that she was no longer pregnant. I used her floo and found myself in our - her? - house, and I could distantly hear Draco talking to someone.

"I just needed a secure delivery address for some items, and I've run out of room at Grimmauld Place."

"And you're just going to use your mother's place for storage?" The voice obviously wasn't Narcissa's, but I couldn't place it from here.

"Just for a few days; I need to perfect my extendable charms and then I'll have all this sorted."

"What's all this about? Is this Muggle stuff?"

"Sure is; ever since Kingsley was made nothing but a figurehead by Ogden, it's only a matter of time before the Auror Guild gets disbanded. Cormac's 'security' is nothing but snatches and thugs looking for a way to lawfully bash heads. Apparently INTERCON had been monitoring the situation here and they are ready to condemn this new regime entirely. They just need a little push to prove the citizens are unhappy and demand a snap election."

*Draco is preparing a peaceful ousting of the Wizengamot.*

"That shouldn't be too difficult." The feminine voice continued as I finally turned the corner and saw Odette looking at a room full of boxes stacked chin-high with Draco.

"Odette." I said, wondering what all was going on. Draco cursed silently as he checked his pocket-watch.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"I came looking because my wife wasn't there." I turned to face Odette, itching to pull my wand.
"Where is she, and where is Carina?"

"Hermione, wait- it's not what you think. I'm watching the baby as she's off doing some business."

"Okay... what's going on between you and my wife? I saw the way she looked at you and-"

"Merlin, no. She's in love with you."

I sighed, feeling comforted at that admission. They aren't resuming a relationship.

Carina cried loudly and the sound was like a jab to my gut. What just happened?!

Odette closed her eyes as she listened carefully. "That's a hungry cry. I can go make a bottle."

I raised a hand to stop her. "No, I've got this. Breast milk is better at this stage anyways."

Draco winced at the thought. "Breasts? Okay, ladies, I have to... go. Now."

Narcissa had liquid luck running through her veins as she found Pansy and Viktor ready to elope using a traditional Handfasting and she was able to convince them all to have a quick brunch with her first. As they looked over the menu, she expertly dropped the hint that Odette would be cutting her daughter off financially if they didn't at least adhere to a more traditional Bonding, which was why Narcissa went out of her way to find the girl whom her wife owed for the invaluable lessons on dealing with her Dark Magic. It was a steep bribe, but the waitress had dosed the drinks of the smitten couple with the mixture of the confusing concoction and the mild truth serum, both of which were temporary and nearly untraceable.

Potions always were her weakest subject.

Viktor, of course, immediately agreed to hearing Narcissa out as he was scared he'd lose the fortune in Galleons that this marriage would net him.

"Mrs. Granger-Black."

"Oh, call me Cissy, please." She gently corrected, establishing a better rapport with the girl.

"Cissy, I know that you and Hermione are Bonded in the Old Tradition, and I've seen how you two have been going at it. It won't do that to us, will it?" Her mind went to Hermione's thoughts at her birth.

"Oh, Hermione and I do love each other, though. We fought as much as we did because she is quite stubborn and wasn't in love with me before the Bonding took effect. Not to mention she was convinced she fancied men because of her long-standing infatuation with the youngest Weasley boy." She gave a slight look of revulsion as she said that, which was instantly copied by Pansy.

"I never liked that twat."

Cissy gave a slight smile to the girl, catching her eyes and pictured a gushing waterfall, sending the idea into the other Slytherin's mind.

Pansy frowned and excused herself to the loo immediately. I still have the touch.

Viktor sipped at his drink again, looking relieved as Pansy left the table.

"Eloping, really? How much do you owe?"
Viktor's eyes shot open. "What do you mean?"

"You've been living well off for someone who hasn't been making any money. Between your gambling debts and the loan sharks, how bad is it?"

Viktor looked at his plate shamefully. "Ten thousand Galleons, according to the Varbanovs. The only money I've made lately was from Rita Skeeter."

*He's up to his neck in debt with a crime syndicate worse than Lucius' and he was leaking details to my ex who has been trying to destroy my reputation.* Lovely. What she didn't understand was why Pansy would be willing to risk her mother's ire - the thoughts flooded into her head as it all began to make sense.

"Pansy's pregnant."

Viktor looked towards the ground. "She's three weeks late, and we didn't want the Ministry to find out she's pregnant yet."

Narcissa no longer felt guilty for what she was going to do.

"Do you love her?"

He shrugged. "She loves me, and she's a more attractive solution compared to a slow and painful death."

"You tried to woo my wife, didn't you?"

"We used to have something; I didn't know she quit... riding a broomstick."

"I'll settle your debt if you agree to be Bonded to her. She never has to know." Viktor nodded shamefully. "If anything happens to her, you're going to wish that the Varbanovs got to you first. Now smile, Pansy's coming back."

Narcissa smiled sweetly as Viktor took an extra long sip of his drink.

Pansy returned to the table, looking relieved and curious. "So what's going on here?"

Cissy smiled brightly. "Oh, Viktor was telling me how much he loved you and was looking forward to being Bonded in a way that the Ministry couldn't void or annul."

Pansy's eyes lit up as she wrapped her arms around her fiance. "Thank you! I don't want to lose any family in this, and we're going to have a wonderful babies together!"

Cissy paid the bill for the brunch, carrying a modified version of the Compulsion-based Bonding that would make Viktor the property of Pansy so that she could control his is inevitable gambling and infidelity that would occur. "Well, lets go get you two Bonded, okay?"

---

I was nervous as I exposed my breast in front of my wife’s ex, but I was more nervous about hurting the tiny infant in my arms as I placed her mouth to my breast. *Nature always finds a way,* I thought as my daughter began to feed from me.

"Slytherin's Snake, it's working!" I said, gasping in surprise. "And, um, it's a weird tugging sensation. Is this normal?" The Gryffindor arched a curious eyebrow at me as I said that.

"Perfectly normal." Odette said, grabbing a small blanket for me. "After this you'll want to burp her
to release the excess air she's swallowing."

"Oh, okay. How do I know she's done?" I ask nervously, careful to support my daughter's head as she suckles away at me.

"Oh, you'll figure it out."

"This is all way too new and real; I'm never going to understand this."

"I'd say you're going to do just fine."

Carina stopped drinking and seemed to rest her head upon me, trying to place her face against my chest. My heart seemed to shatter in a million pieces at the small attempt of movement. "So, Narcissa. Where is she?"

"She's... well, doing me a favor. I'm not sure I'm supposed to tell you. Time to burp her."

I carefully moved my daughter up to the top of my shoulder, resting her head on me as I gently tapped her back as I had read in the books before.

"Oh, that's not doing any good, Hermione. You have to hear a slight thump. Don't worry about hitting too hard, these little buggers are nearly indestructible right now."

"I um... are you certain? I don't want to break her, or bruise her back..."

"You're not spanking her, just giving a good little set of thumps to help her digest without getting gas."

"What favor requires my wife to abandon our baby for a few hours?" I asked, my nose flaring at an unusual scent. Is that...?

Surly walked into the room, hands outstretched for the baby. "I have this, Hermione."

I looked down at the elf. "What? No... you don't have to do this. Okay I might rather have him do this though..."

"I did this for years for the last wizard who owned me; he was that far gone. Trust me when I say I'd rather change the diapers of a baby." Surly said as I handed Carina over to him carefully.

"May I watch and um, learn?" I asked tactfully. Odette stifled a laugh as Surly looked at me like I was crazy.

"You want to watch me deal with baby poop? Anyone tell you that you're really weird?"

I frowned at him and he rolled his eyes, relenting. "Fine, you can even take notes and make a diagram if you must."

"Thanks, Surly! Where's Narcissa?"

"She didn't tell me and she ordered me to not keep track of her until she got back. So I have no way of finding her."

I pondered on that for a second. "Well, I countermand her order-"

"-Can't. She planned for that and ensured her order couldn't be countermanded."
"Damn!" "Any idea when she'll be back?" I asked as Surly put Carina on the changing table in the baby room.

"Judging from the invoice from your solicitor, she should be back later today. Bonding ceremonies don't take too long."

_Bonding ceremony? Solicitor?_ "Surly, do you know where Pansy Parkinson is?"

Surly was in the middle of wiping down Carina as his eyebrows raised in thought. "Yeah, she's eloping with Viktor. Hope she gets him to sign a pre-nuptial contract."

"Really?" I say out loud, leaving the baby room to confront Odette, who was sipping some white wine in the study.

"Odette, what the hell is my wife up to now?"

---

Kingsley saw his office shrink as ordered by the Magical Maintenance order left on his door. _Not only did they strip me of all power during this 'emergency action', they went so far as to turn my office into a closet._

The Minister grit his teeth together as he made his way through the Ministry of Magic, taking the lift down to the lowest floor to talk to "Bob", as Harry had nicknamed the Unspeakable. Of all of the departments, the Department of Mysteries seemed to operate as a completely individual branch at times, only disclosing certain things when needed or during dire emergencies.

"Bob?" Kingsley asked into the empty area. The entire floor seemed deserted, so he jumped as the wizard was standing directly behind him as he replied a greeting.

"Damn it, you scared me!"

"Sorry, Minister. My department has been on lockdown since Narcissa's Trial. Ogden thinks he can just rule the country this way, doesn't he?"

"Okay, I'm glad to know you're not on his side at least."

Bob shook his head. "We're not in the business of taking sides. That being said, things are about to get really bad."

"Can you say how bad?"

"No, and not because I am sworn to secrecy, but because I don't know. Nobody knows what's going to happen on the Ides of March."

"You are inferring that someone does know the future, and that this one day is a complete blank?"

"The Arithmancers are scared, because no matter what equation they do, nothing is certain beyond that date. The known values in our world, the... constants that we can depend on to calculate out the probabilities of the variables that can change in our world... those aren't constant anymore."

Kingsley furrowed his eyebrows in thought. "I don't think I'm following you."

Bob conjured a meter-stick and handed it to the Minister. "With this you can measure how large something is, because a centimeter is always the same length. It's a constant. But what if it weren't?" He tapped the meter-stick and the lines started to melt and move around.
"Now measure with that."

"I can't, it's.. well, chaotic."

"Exactly! When the Ides of March comes... it's going to be chaos. Every stabilizing factor we've had in the magical world seems to end then. That's why we're locking down, because we're all scared that we don't know what is going to happen."

Harry is at his desk, having seen most of this staff desert him to join Cormac's Ministry Security detail. My department does feel like a sinking ship at times. A sheet of folded parchment flies into his office and lands in front of him, notifying him that the Auror Guild has been disbanded due its members not being in compliance with the PoWFA law.

"I kind of expected this." Harry muttered to himself, understanding what Albus must have felt like when the Minister had him removed from Hogwarts. A knock at his office door alerted him, and the long face of Cormac was standing there for him.

"What do you want, McLaggen?"

"My department was assigned to um, escort you out of your office. Thought I should do it myself rather than send someone else to do it."

Harry nodded at that. "Fair enough. This is a load of bollocks, mate. Firing a law enforcement agency because we haven't been able to find the right person to marry."

"Well, that's the law, and you'll be happier once you're married." Harry looked at him curiously.

"Say that again, and try to actually sound like you believe it."

Cormac was silent. For some reason, Harry had some sympathy for him.

"Things not going well between you and Cho?"

"I was told that this would make me happy. I even got a promotion out of it."

"In exchange for not following your heart and being obedient to your uncle?"

McLaggen frowned angrily. "She's pretty enough, she accepted, maybe I'll grow to love her." He looked at Harry. "Better than losing Ginny for Draco Malfoy-Granger-Black, whatever he's calling himself now."

Harry shrugged. "I love Draco."

"I was always told that kind of thing was sick. Wrong. And now I'm supposed to crack down on that because the Wizengamot is ready to declare it illegal."

Harry took a deep breath as it hit him. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Fair warning, I suppose. Remember when Mad-Eye turned your boyfriend into a ferret?"

They both smiled at the memory. "Yeah, that was actually Barty Crouch Jr., a rogue Death Eater."

Cormac shrugged at that. "Not the point. He said it wasn't honorable to jinx someone in the back when they can't defend themselves. Death Eater or not, I can understand the sentiment."
Harry nodded in understanding, raising his wand. Cormac had his up warily, worried that they would wind up dueling. Harry shook his head, grabbing a nearby box and enchanting, "Pack!" All of his personal belongings flew out of the drawers and cabinets, all stacked neatly in the box before he put his wand away.

"For what it's worth, I disagree with this." McLaggen said.

"It's not worth much, because you're still following orders you don't think are right."

Harry was escorted out of the Auror office and watched Cormac change the wards so as to lock him out. Ogden was worried I'd leave with the potion-based ammunition I confiscated when McLaggen was in charge. Harry realized that as soon as he was out of the Ministry, he had a few Patronuses to send off to his friends.
Draco received a Patronus from Harry, explaining that he has been sacked from the Ministry. "Bloody hell, that's ahead of schedule." Draco sends his own Patronus to Xenophilius Lovegood, promising to reimburse him for the printing costs as long as the entirety of Wizarding Britain gets a copy. *I'm about to drop the first domino.*

Recalling what had happened when Delores tried to ban the Quibbler in Fifth Year, Draco understood the need for the dissemination of information to a wide net all at once. They had at least the press available to them, and it was the only guaranteed method to get the word out. Since Lee Jordan wasn't around anymore, Draco had to trust that Ernie Macmillan could re-launch the pirate radio programme *Potterwatch*. He was told that cutting into the Ministry's feed shouldn't be too difficult, but it felt like a gamble.

He knew he had to hit hard and fast, and hopefully this massive form of protest wouldn't be seen as insurrection when the dust settles.

Gathering his resolve, Draco threw turned on the spot and met up with his co-conspirators as they set about shutting down the entire country.

*Merlin protect us all.*

---

Ron huffed in frustration as he got the Patronus that he had been expecting for a while. Harry was upset that he had been sacked due to 'that damned new law', and there was a twinge of guilt as he was in his new office alongside Percy, ready to debrief PoWFA’s implementation.

They were assigning Ministry Security Specialists to go door to door, informing people who are in non-compliance with the law that they had until the end of February to marry the individual prescribed by the Ministry. *They could have avoided this if they had found someone by now.*

Ron's designated partner, Parvati Patil, had absolutely refused to marry him and had escaped to the Americas with her twin sister. It really stung him to see the first love of his life wind up getting Draco's mum pregnant, then kill the only other woman he loved, and when the Ministry intervened and explained why Parvati would be his ideal mate? She decided to run away than be with him.

Ron knew he wasn't a horrible bloke, and that any witch should be glad to marry him. *So how come I can't find a girl?*

Percy saw his brother's frustration as he handed him some coffee. "I'm sorry Ronald, but Harry made his own choices."

Ron nods sadly. "What? Oh, right. Well, I need to find a wife soon."

"I'm certain Penelope and I can find a decent muggle-born girl for you."
Ron shrugs the idea away. "I don't want any decent muggle, I want... well, doesn't matter." Percy nods in understanding as they wait for their daily briefing.

"We're going to put things right, just you wait."

Ron smiled at that, as he sipped the coffee and felt a bit more relaxed. *Yeah, that's what Harry and I always meant to do. Make things right.*

Odette wouldn't tell me anything, and she was smart enough to not look me in the eye, either. *Damn it.* I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the bond that existed between us, and I started to replay recent memories that weren't mine.

"Eloping, really? How much do you owe?"

Viktor's eyes shot open. "What do you mean?"

"You've been living well off for someone who hasn't been making any money. Between your gambling debts and the loan sharks, how bad is it?"

Viktor looked at his plate shamefully. "Ten thousand Galleons, according to the Varbanovs. The only money I've made lately was from Rita Skeeter."

*He's up to his neck in debt with a crime syndicate worse than Lucius' and he was leaking details to my ex who has been trying to destroy my reputation. Lovely. What she didn't understand was why Pansy would be willing to risk her mother's ire - the thoughts flooded into her head as it all began to make sense.*

"Pansy's pregnant."

Viktor looked towards the ground. "She's three weeks late, and we didn't want the Ministry to find out she's pregnant yet."

I gasped, shocked at how our very consciousnesses were intertwined now. *She can read my memories, too.* I went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, committing this moment to memory.

"Narcissa! I want you to see this memory first! It's a message; I understand what happened with Viktor before and that he was selling us out to Rita. Also, I'm kind of impressed that my Crooks got to beat her up a little. Anyways, I um... I understand why you're doing what you're doing right now, and support it. But get back to Diagon Alley as soon as you can because it looks like Draco, Harry, and I are about to launch a peaceful coup to get Ogden out of the Wizengamot. Surly, Crooks, and Odette are going to continue watching Carina for now. I used the pump so there's some extra milk for her along with yours under a preservation charm, so our baby should be good for the next day or so."

I pause, gulping my fear down.

"Come home safe. I love you, wife."

Surly popped into the next room, and I was worried that he'd either startle or wake my now-dozing daughter, but she seemed content in her crib. "Hermione, special delivery for you." He handed me a small periodical and my first instinct was that it was the same size and format as the Quibbler, but I knew that I didn't have a subscription as I read the headline.
It has come to our attention that the Ministry, after having been liberated from Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle, has gone from one extreme form of fascism to another. As of this week, the Daily Prophet is being heavily censored and manipulated as propaganda in order to sway more support towards the latest sweeping changes enacted by our un-elected Wizengamot under 'emergency powers'.

We are supposed to feel safe and secure in the new Ministry Security department, but many known snatchers who worked for bounties under Voldemort during the last war are now 'Security Specialists' who will be notifying those not in compliance with the new PoWFA law of their due date, else they will be arrested and have their wands snapped and ejected from Wizarding Society.

Chief Mugwump Ogden has overstepped his authority and is abusing his power from the days of the Goblin Rebellion. We citizens must unite as one and demand that he step down and that we hold snap elections to replace the Ministry as it now sits. We have recently come to learn that the Auror Guild, headed by Harry Potter, has been shut down entirely and that the Boy Who Lived has been terminated from the Ministry entirely.

So I ask you, please make your presence known and your voice heard. Congregate in Diagon Alley, where various shopkeepers will be joining in this public uprising and shut down all of their stores and markets until the Wizengamot surrenders and these egregious abuses of power are reversed. Stay informed by tuning into PotterWatch.

We are Wizards and Witches. Despite whichever side of the last conflict you were on, we cannot be forced to pair up and mate like chattel. It is time to put our differences aside concerning blood purity and it is time we all rise, Muggleborn and Pureblood alike, to defy the Ministry and demand that they stop this.

Those who come out to the protest zone will be cared for and fed. If the Ministry Security attempts to break up our protest, they will be met with peaceful resistance and defensive shields. The media outlets of the wizarding world have been invited to record this, in hopes to reduce any chance that the new Ministry Security will engage in unlawful abuse of citizens exercising their right to protest.

JOIN THE PROTEST TODAY.
END OGDEN'S REIGN!

I put down the paper. Harry was fired and the Auror Guild was disbanded.

I looked to Odette, handing her the parchment. What did Draco leave here? I left the nursery and opened one of the boxes, surprised to see a muggle gas mask. Odette came out behind me, gasping as she took in the mask I had in my hand. Bubble head charms would work just as easily, unless...

Fuck. Me.

"This is why Draco practically bought the Grocer's a while ago." She said.

"Well, I doubt he can shut down the whole economy; I mean, the banks will stay open, right?" As I thought about it, I realized that if the majority of the shops were closed, that there would be no need for the bank to be open. You brilliant bastard!

"Odette, I think we're about to have an outright rebellion. Will you watch my daughter while I figure out what's going on? At least until my wife returns?"
Odette smiled at that. "So she's your wife now?"

I look at her, stunned. "She always has been, and our son has a lot to answer for." The words were out of my mouth before I even knew it. She nodded once, and I could see in her eyes what she wanted to say. *Take good care of her.*

I nodded back. "I will. Crookshanks, you're in charge while I'm gone!" I call out as I take the floo to Diagon Alley.

---

Cormac was enjoying his morning tea when his uncle barged into his office, holding a crumpled newspaper.

"DID YOU KNOW THIS WAS HAPPENING?!" Ogden roared.

"What was happening?" The paper was slammed down on the desk. "END OGDEN'S REIGN" was printed in large block letters across the bottom of the sheet. *This isn't good.*

"Cormac, I want the people behind this insurrection to understand what terror really means. I want them all rounded up, and in Azkaban, NOW!"

"Who? And for what? I thought the press had every right to promote a rally..."

"This is *sedition*, nephew. I put you in charge of security around here, now I want to see things get *secured*, understand?"

"I want this country to realize that we stand on the *edge of oblivion*. What we need right now is a clear message to the people of this country. I am going to invoke curfew on this nation, I have already sent an owl to the *Daily Prophet* to send out a special edition to inform the people and I will have it read on the Wireless, because I need *everyone* to *remember* that *I kept us safe!*"

"Yes, uncle."

"And SHUT DOWN POTTERWATCH! Where are all your people?"

"Following orders, finding everyone and informing them of the deadline of when they are to be married by and reminding them of the penalty if they don't."

Ogden sneered at that. "Well, call them back! Call them *all* back! And get me lunch because for some reason the damn cafeteria hasn't been opened!"

Cormac scoffed at that. "Call magical maintenance, someone probably fudged a locking charm last night when they closed."

The Chief Mugwump fumed. "I did, they all *called in sick*. Now get this rebellion crushed, or YOU ARE FIRED!"

Overhead, an alarm went off and a disembodied voice chirped to life. "*Fire detected. Fire suppression systems have been engaged.*" The office began to have rain fall from the ceiling, soaking everything in the room in order to put out the non-existent flames.

"MERLIN'S TAINT!" Ogden said, stomping out of the office and slamming the door behind him.

Cormac sighed as his desk was deluged with the rain, and went to send off owls in order to find and recall his staff. *Scabior won't be happy.* He reflected on how most of the Aurors who quit the guild
and joined his security team accused half of his staff, Scabior included, of being snatchers working under Thicknese. But Uncle Tiberius personally vouched for them, said that they could get the job done.

As McLaggen left his office, he decided to test something. "Fire!" The alarm and rain went off again, soaking the floor as he made his way to the lift. Okay, so it wasn't a Weasley prank centered on just my office. His stomach rumbled as he waited for a lift to arrive, only to realize that they have been deactivated due to the 'fire' that was happening.

Sighing, Cormac took to the stairwell to send the owls, and then grab some lunch for himself and the Chief Mugwump.

Harry made his way through Diagon Alley, surprised to see the impromptu encampment made just in front of the Wizarding Bank. Draco was directing boxes of supplies to be set out as Luna passed around a petition to enact snap elections through an obscure rule that would also remove the Wizengamot. On the sidelines were the Magical Press corps from Paris, Germany, and the Americas. Ernie Macmillan gave a thumbs-up as he successfully hacked into the airwaves with their reverse-engineered Wireless.

"Listeners, welcome back to a new episode of Potterwatch. Lee Jordan may not be with us anymore, but that won't stop us from doing the right thing and taking down a corrupt government. Only this time, we're not doing it in the shadows. That's right, no more passwords, no more cloak and dagger. This is Ernie Macmillan, live in Diagon Alley, ready for the protest to get underway. Come on down and support this cause, sign our petition to force immediate elections to replace the Minister and Wizengamot.

"Most of the shops have closed in the area, and we're seeing a record number of walk-outs from the Ministry. We don't want to name any names, but as of right now, there are no blue robes in the Ministry. Let's see how long they will last without their support staff. Oh, and you probably shouldn't take the floo to the Ministry right now, either. There might be a bit of a backup if the system's integrity isn't being maintained.

"We're going to be broadcasting another update at the top of the hour, and hopefully have a few special guests to help explain the Ministry's recent anti-Pureblood stance and its policy refusing to treat Veelas, Centaurs, and other humanoids and half-breeds with the same respect and medical care as they do their own citizens. The eyes of the magical world are upon us, so let's use this and put pressure on old Ogden to step down!

"And as always: Keep each other safe. Keep faith. Good night."

Harry waved to him, glad to see so many familiar faces as more wizards and witches came in through the Leaky Cauldron. Tom said that he was all rented out before having to stop serving food and drink due to simply running out of supplies. He didn't miss the wink that came with it, however. What has Draco done? The bank, now under Ministry control, was dealing with a small mob of wizards and witches trying to pull out their life savings in muggle money as the markets had all closed and the Galleon had begun to plunge in value. Draco is going to crash the economy, isn't he?

"Hey, Harry!" He turned and saw Hermione's parents, both wearing t-shirts that said "MUGGLES FOR MARRIAGE EQUALITY" as they were helping serve food in the impromptu outdoor kitchen that had been put together, Winky on a nearby step-stool stirring a pot over a small flame.

"Doctors Granger! What are you two doing here?" Harry asked, surprised.
"Well, we may have been informed that there might be need of help and, if you know our daughter, we can't miss out on a political rally." William said.

"Seriously, this Ogden fellow sounds worse than Thatcher the milk Snatcher." Jean added, "And I thought Tories were bad."

Harry grinned at them both. "Glad to see you two here. Does Hermione know you two are here?"

"I had no idea they were going to be here, nor that your boyfriend was pulling this off!" Hermione said, taking him into a big embrace. "Hi mum, dad."

"Where's the baby?" Jean asked.

Hermione cocked her head to point back towards their home. "Surly and Odette are watching Carina while my wife takes care of some business up north. I um... don't think this place is going to stay safe for long. Are you sure you two want to stay here? Ogden's security thugs might try to cause trouble."

William beamed at her. "Oh, don't worry about us. Besides, you lot will need first aid and Winky here said she'd be honored to protect us should there be a firefight." Harry looked at the diminutive house-elf and realized that there was a look of steely resolve on her face. *Give an elf a bit of loyalty, and they will give you the world.*

Hermione looked around and narrowed her eyes. "You two were the ones to suggest the gas masks to Draco."

Jean shrugged. "Magical or muggle, it's still the same tools of oppression. Pepper spray, tear gas, whatever they try to do and starve us out... so maybe we researched a few well-known riots in recent history so we could be a step ahead. Could you help make signs and banners, dear? Harry, I think they'll be wanting you to make a speech later on."

Hermione and Harry exchanged a look of confusion. It wasn't everyday that Hermione's parents assigned tasks in the middle of a political rally to overturn the current regime. They shrugged as an owl delivered something to Hermione; the ink was still wet as Harry read over her shoulder to see a special edition of the *Daily Prophet.*

"Harry, call in the D.A. We're going to need everyone here."

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**CURFEW IMPOSED TO STOP ANARCHY, RESTORE THE PEACE**

Written by Tiberius Ogden, Chief Mugwump and Warlock of the Wizengamot

*My fellow Wizards and Witches: tonight our country, the Ministry of Magic, and all the laws upon which we hold dear, faces a grave and terrible threat. This violent and unparalleled assault on our very safety and morality will not go unchallenged... or unpunished. Our enemy is an insidious one, seeking to divide us and destroy the very foundation of our society. Tonight, we must remain steadfast against the Goblins who wish to kill us all, and their enablers - Harry Potter and the homosexuals - who wish to destroy the institution of marriage with their perversions. We must remain strong. We must be determined to stop them at all costs. We must remain united.*

*In light of this illegal action, I am hereby imposing an immediate curfew in order to end the occupation of Diagon Alley. Those caught tonight in violation of curfew will be considered in league with our enemy and dealt with as quickly as we have been dealing with the Goblins; without any leniency or exception. Tonight, I swear that by the time the sun dawns, that this rebellion will be utterly crushed. The Wizengamot's justice will be swift, righteous, and will be without mercy to all*
Draco was marking off the barriers as the Hannah, Luna, and Terry went about the protest zone and etched their assigned runes, negating most offensive spells and hexes from passing through, along with a strong repulsion jinx to anyone who isn't pulled in through the barrier. He looked over to see his boyfriend writing something down on a piece of paper, squinting as he nervously tried to recite it. In his pocket was a red-and-green cord, tied off with silver and gold on opposite ends. *Don't be so bloody nervous; you're a Granger now.*

He approaches Harry and smiles as he sees his boyfriend's eyes light up at seeing him. "Hey, you did an amazing job here. You planned for this way in advance, didn't you?" Draco grinned as Mrs. Figg was putting down a crate of apples on a nearby table while a portly cat twined his way around her ankles.

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd get sacked so quickly; made me have to rush a few things that I was nervous about. Worked out in our favor it seems, the Internationl Confederation of Wizards and Witches heard about the Aurors getting sacked all at once and has denounced Ogden's regime."

"Glad to see me losing a job is somehow a good thing." Harry joked. "Now what could get you nervous?"

Draco pulled out the cord, folding it in half. "Harry, the Ministry is trying to force me to marry against my wishes, to ensure that whatever offspring I have isn't a Pureblood. To hell with that. And um, I love you and want to do something quite rebellious and frankly, stupid."

Harry smiled at that. "Yes."

Draco shook his head, continuing on, "I know muggles have the bloke go on a knee with a ring, so let me explain this-"

Harry chuckled at his boyfriend's rambling. "Yes, Draco."

The blonde stumbled in thought, looking to Harry. "But I haven't even told you what-"

"Yes, of course I'll marry you! But..."

"I knew there was a 'but'..."

"Yes, you have a fabulous arse, but that's not the point. The point is, I want to do this, but I want to do this right."

"And the right way is...?" Draco hedged.

Harry lifted his wand and his Patronus flew out of his wand-tip, galloping away to deliver its message. "The three of us."

Draco didn't know why tears were flowing out of him, but he knew it would be okay since Harry was holding and kissing him right then and there.

Harry saw Xenophilius and Arthur Weasley handing out flyers, with a fascinated Jennifer nearby, meeting Hermione's parents and asking a lot of questions about how a Muggle can live in the
"Harry." Draco said, getting his boyfriend's attention. "Good luck on your speech, I hope it goes well."

"Thanks, Draco. Wish I didn't lose my job though. Makes me feel like a failure."

"Harry, had you seen the curfew get imposed over a rally for ending this marriage law you would have resigned in protest rather than let your people come and attack the citizens in order to stop the Wizengamot from usurping any more power."

"Do you think this protest will do any good? What if the people think I'm being stupid?"

"Anyone who can't understand the importance of this is a prat and not worth your time. And Ogden is definitely a prat, if not genocidal war criminal."

He nodded and kissed his boyfriend, making his way to the raised platform with podium and casting sonarus on his vocal cords. Oh, damn, that tickles. Harry cleared his throat as the crowd became quiet. In the distance, he saw the various reporters all ready with dictation quills ready. Looking down as his parchment, Harry nodded and pushed himself to speak.

"Wizards and Witches, citizens... friends. We have lived through war, strife, and bloodshed; and we have prevailed. Yet we are still living as people in fear. And now—when our very rights to assemble here today are in peril—we slowly realize that we have been afraid of the wrong thing. When Ogden invoked the Emergency Powers Act, we hoped that it would save us. Instead, we now face what our ancestors faced in desperate moments in history; during the Burning Times before we implemented the Statute of Secrecy, when Grindelwald rose to power, during the first war with Voldemort, as well as other times of exaggerated crises and manipulative fear-mongering: we are faced with a government more dangerous to our liberty than the enemy it claims to protect us from.

"We have been here before, led here by men better and wiser and nobler than Chief Warlock Ogden. We have been here when Minister Fudge insisted that this was necessary to save people's lives, only to watch him use those acts to restrict the Prophet and hide the fact that Voldemort had indeed returned. Albus Dumbledore and I were ridiculed as they tried to silence us from speaking the truth, because the illusion of safety was better than admitting we weren't safe.

"We have been here when MLE Chief Barty Crouch insisted that permitting Aurors to use Unforgivables was necessary to stop the Death Eaters at the end of the previous war in 1980, and again by Minister Scrimgeour in this more recent conflict. We're still finding sleeper citizens getting triggered under a latent Imperious Curse, confused as they are trying to attack and arrest or kill someone. Beyond that, in order to 'make us feel safe', Scrimgeour threw innocent people like Stan Shuntpike in Azkaban.

"Each of these actions were claimed to be taken for the most vital, urgent, and life-preserving reasons. Yet each was a betrayal of the trust that the people gave to those in power. Fudge was swept from office, and Crouch resigned in disgrace, and their own acts designed to 'keep us safe' were repealed and forgotten.

"If we wonder why leaders could be so spineless, why they could do such a reprehensible act as to restrict our liberty, we must look to ourselves. It is a simple answer, that in times of fright, we have been only human. A Muggle President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, once said that "Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself". We have fallen prey to the platitudes and quiet assurances that "the wolf is at the door; this will be temporary; this will be precise; this too shall pass."
"We have accepted that the only way to stop the bad people is to let the government become just a little bit like them.

"Just the way we once accepted that the only way to stop the Purebloods was to let the government become just a little bit like the Purebloods.

"Or substitute in the goblins.

"Or the werewolves.

"Or the Centaurs.

"Or the Veela.

"Or the Half-bloods.

"Or the Squibs.

"Or the Muggle-born.

"Or the Muggles themselves.

"We all allowed this for the most vital, the most urgent, the most inescapable of reasons. To 'keep up safe'. And, always, always wrong.

"Chief Warlock Ogden, history will recognize that the threat we needed to take seriously was you. In invoking the Emergency Powers Act, you have usurped total control of the Ministry and left us no way to appeal your decisions, nor to ascertain if repealing our liberties truly made us safer. What on earth makes you think that forcing marriage and copulation to remove Pureblooded status in the next generation will protect us from harm? Blood does not make one evil.

"Another Muggle, Benjamin Franklin, stated that "those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." And I am here to say that you, Chief Mugwump Ogden, have now given us chaos and called it order.

"You, sir, have have engaged in genocide and called it the morally right thing to do.

"You, sir, are now imposing subjugation and are calling it freedom.

"For the most vital, the most urgent, the most inescapable of reasons.

"And — again, Mugwump Ogden — all of them, wrong.

"We handed the Wizengamot a blank check drawn against our freedom, the authority to override the Minister and placed the Chief Mugwump in charge; a man who refuses to compare anything this Ministry has done to anything the Goblins have done.

"We have handed a blank check drawn against our freedom to a man who may now, if he so decides, declare not merely any citizen an enemy of the Ministry and in league with the Goblins, but if he so decides, declare you in league with the Goblins simply because you disagree with his abuse of power.

"And if you think this hyperbole or hysteria, read the newspaper tonight, see what graces the the cover to the Daily Prophet is today.

"And if you somehow think that the curtailed rights only apply to the half-breeds and not you, ask
yourself this: If you are pulled off the street tomorrow, and the snatchers (now legitimatized as Ministry Security) call you half-breed, or a homosexual, or in league with the goblins — exactly how are you going to convince them to give you a hearing to prove you are not? Do you think the solicitors working for the Wizengamot are going to help you?

"The Chief Mugwump now has his blank check, and now we are to trust him to stop misusing it and to relinquish the unchecked authority given to him that has no expiration date? "One of the goblins believed to have planned the recent rebellion" you stated, "said he hoped the attacks would be the beginning of the end of Wizard Rule." Ragnok, in truth, could only hope for that. His actions, as reprehensible as they were, pale in comparison to what you have done to our nation.

"Right to trial? Gone.

"Humane treatment of our sentient magical brethren? Optional.

"The moral example we were to the world, proving that Light will always defeat Dark? Snuffed out.

"These things you have done, Chief Mugwump, were framed in the sense that if we did not do this, it would be 'the beginning of the end of Wizard-Kind.'

"And did it even occur to you once, sir — somewhere midst the months since the Goblin Rebellion — that with only a small shift in this world we live in now — did it ever occur to you even once that once you leave office, some irresponsible future leader and their lackeys would be entitled, by the actions of your own hand, to declare YOU as in league with the Goblins?

"For the most vital, the most urgent, the most inescapable of reasons. To keep us safe.

"And doubtless, Chief Mugwump - all of them, as always, are wrong."

I applauded for Harry as Draco embraced him and they vacated the podium, eyes lighting up as someone pulled Ginny into the safe zone through the barrier. Draco set up one amazing repulsion jinx. I made my way to the podium to ask if everyone has signed the petition to demand snap elections as I saw the raven-and-blond locks of my wife being let in through the crowd, pulling Pansy and Viktor in behind her.

My eyes caught hers and I could clearly hear her as if she were whispering in my ear.

"I got your message. Brilliant, my love."

I smiled back and nodded, thinking, Did you know that Draco was going to propose getting handfasted to Harry?

She shook her head. "But I know how to do it. Even if they want to join with Ginny." I look towards the trio and watch how they embrace each other, tears streaming down their cheeks as they are nodding enthusiastically. It looks as though they were going to be a lot less stubborn than I had been.

Putting my wand to my throat, I magnified my voice and asked to be certain that they have signed the petition as I pulled out my own parchment, glad to see Narcissa coming to the podium to stand by my side. It was heartwarming as I kissed her cheek in thanks.

"You'll do well, wife." Narcissa said as I took a steadying breath.

"Chief Mugwump Ogden has resorted to fear-mongering and manipulation of the public by suggesting that his removal could lead to another attack upon us. This ludicrous, infuriating, holier-
than-thou, and most importantly completely wrong statement is playing over the Wireless even now. The question was raised by Xenophilius Lovegood: 'If we were to repeal the Emergency Powers Act, or even recall you out of office, what's the worst that could happen, what's the doomsday scenario?'

"The Chief Mugwump replied: The doomsday scenario of course is that the Goblins would be emboldened, which would eventually lead to more deaths upon our land. The biggest issue we face is this... ideological struggle against cold-blooded killers like them who will kill people to achieve their political objectives. Mugwump Ogden, at long last, has it not dawned on you that the Ministry you run now, includes 'cold-blooded killers like them who will kill people to achieve their political objectives?' They are those in — or formerly in — your employ, who should be charged for their crimes.

"I held the blade against Ragnok's throat, ready to use his execution to end the Goblin rebellion in our land. I stopped myself because I couldn't justify genocide once his life was in my hands. You, sir, pushed my hand to do the killing. The blood was literally upon my hands, but in all truth, it belongs upon yours. Through your subsequent haze of self-congratulation and adulation, have you not realized that our nation's genocide of the Goblins has ruined any international respect we had, and only proves that the Goblins ought to be afraid of us?

"We stand here divided, it seems. There is a struggle between those of us who cherish our liberty, ours and everybody else's, and those like you, sir, to whom liberty is just a slogan, where it can ignored in order to achieve your own goals - provided it is the liberties of anyone other than you. But wait, there's more: You also said 'Here is where the Goblins have made their stand and here they must be defeated.' They made no 'stand', sir, our policies have shunted them to take this extremist position!

"I warned the Ministry that our treatment of the Goblins was reprehensible, and pointed out when they began to arm themselves. And yet you did nothing. The Goblin Rebellion is not an accident, but rather spurned on by your actions, Chief Mugwump! Rather than hand out awards and build memorials to the fallen wizards, you should build a monument to your own ignorance; to turning a deaf ear to the warnings of those paying attention while you are embracing anti-homosexual policies designed to tear families apart written by Delores Umbridge.

"We as citizens must, at some point, ignore the Chief Mugwump's fear-mongering. Not so we can prosper, not so we can achieve great things, but merely so we can function. For if there is one overriding theme to his reign; it is the utter, always-failing, inability to know when to quit when he is losing. And yet he is preparing for war against his own people who are standing up and saying, 'No More'.

"Chief Mugwump, I hate to break it to you months after you invoked autocratic power and wrote your name down in history as fighting the wrong war, in the wrong way, only to then turn against your own people, but the war with the Goblins was not about you. Or how you think you did all this to keep us safe.

"Chief Mugwump Ogden, we never voted you into the Wizengamot due to the urgent need presented in the post-war reconstruction, but we hoped that you would do your best to help all of us. And instead of working together to solve the issues we faced, Chief Mugwump Ogden took our silence as consent, transfigured it, and used it like a dagger to stab this nation in the back with it.

"Were there any remaining lingering doubt, or any remaining lingering hope, it ended tonight when Mister Ogden swore to break tonight's legal protest by any means necessary. In that moment, Mr. Ogden, you relinquished any claim of having authority. You broke that fundamental compact
between yourself and your citizens—regardless if they support you or not. In that moment, Mr. Ogden, you ceased to be the Chief Mugwump of the Wizengamot. In that moment, Mr. Ogden, you became merely a Warlock, an irresponsible one at that, with the fate of our country in your hands. And you have steered it drunkenly like a push cart missing a wheel through platform 9 3/4.

"This has been, of course, the gathering legacy of this Administration. Few of its decisions have been beneficial for our country, and instead a vendetta against a perceived enemy who deserves retaliation. Yet we have survived shrewder women than Umbridge. And we have withstood the political scheming that always threatens the effectiveness of our government. But this administration, with ever-increasing insistence and almost theocratic zealotry, has left a stain that will not be easily removed.

"And now, when the citizens stand up against you, rather than letting them peacefully assemble, you respond with threats of force. When I testified in my wife's defense when she stood accused of fornication, an archaic law that is completely baseless in any kind of foundation, Mr. Ogden failed at his prescribed role of being an impartial judge. Because as the de-facto, self-imposed leader of the country, Ogden decided that he, and not the nature of the justice system, must prevail.

"And so, I accuse you, Mr. Ogden, of lying to take unilateral control of this country.

"I accuse you of prevailing upon the people that the Goblins are the worst thing out there and they are all coming to kill us all.

"I accuse you of firing the Aurors because the leader refused to follow an unjust law that would make him betray his heart.

"I accuse you of causing unnecessary deaths and making our country a larger target for Goblin violence than ever before.

"I accuse you of subverting our legal system, not in some misguided but sincerely-motivated struggle to make the next generation less prejudiced, but to exact revenge on a minority for their blood status.

"I accuse you of fomenting fear among your own people, of creating the climate of constant panic and uncertainty which you claim to have fought against because 'the goblins did it'.

"I accuse you of exploiting that contrived fear, when your own people just wanted to live their lives in peace, as a political tool against your critics and crush any opposition.

"I accuse you of ignoring the actions of the Ministry during the last war and installing a Vice Mugwump who has proven to be a witch without conscience, and letting her enact a social re-engineering program.

"And I accuse you now, Mr. Ogden, of allowing that Vice Mugwump of yours, Delores Umbridge, have carte blanche to try and control Hogwarts again, when she ought to be facing a lengthy stay in Azkaban for the last time she was put into a position of authority.

"When Minister Fudge ordered the Daily Prophet to suppress news of Voldemort's return just after the infamous Death Eater attack in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, Amelia Bones used the power of the Wizengamot to block the Minister's order. Her words still ring true to this day. 'Whether ours shall be a government of laws and not of men, is now for the Wizengamot, and ultimately, our citizens, to decide.'

"Minister Fudge did not understand how he had erred in suppressing the news to keep the country feeling safe.
"The Rise of Voldemort—instantaneously—became a simpler issue: a single leader trying to keep the public uninformed—in a way that had a visceral backlash with his citizens - that his decisions were above questioning. That he himself could be above the law.


"But when the citizens converge and refuse to just subordinate themselves to your policy, Mr. Ogden—and then you spit in the faces of those who congregate here to speak against you—the average citizen understands that, Sir.

"You've fixed the system and rigged it for you to stay in power. And they know it. Fudge's mistake, the last and most fatal of them, was demanding the resignation of Amelia Bones; that was enough to cost him his career. And in the end, even Cornelius Fudge resigned rather than drag the Ministry through impeachment proceedings in the middle of a war.

"It was far too late for it to be noticed then, but as the year progressed, that single final gesture of non-partisanship, of acknowledged responsibility not to self, but to country, echoes loudly into history. Minister Cornelius Fudge knew it was time to resign.

"If only I could say the same for you, Mr. Ogden. And for Ms. Umbridge. You both crossed the point of no return. Whichever one of you chose to enact the PoWFA law, no longer matters. Only that you two have twisted the machinery of government into a tawdry machine of politics and revenge, is the only fact that remains relevant.

"For you, Mr. Ogden, and for Ms. Umbridge, there is only one relevant thing you can do now. You need merely display the same iota of patriotism which Fudge showed on his final day as Minister.

"Resign.

"And give us someone—anyone—who will not resort to the inexcusable 'support me in office or else bad guys will kill you' brand of politicking. Because we all deserve better than you, Mister Ogden."

Severus had decreed that he would excuse any and all absences to students who were of age protesting against Ogden's reign in Diagon Alley, and he was surprised to see a plethora of eighth year students from all four houses following him and Fleur there.

"You do realize that you could get injured in doing this, right?" Severus asked, looking at Crabbe and Harper.

Harper nodded as Crabbe frowned. "About time we stand up for the right thing." One of the Hufflepuffs, Leanne, clasped him on the shoulder in support. Slytherin's Snake, I do believe we're finally getting some inter-house unity now. Fleur smiled at them tearfully.

"Fury, you don't have to come." Severus said as he conjured a portkey.

Fleur leaned over and kissed him gently on the lips to silence him. "I know, but I can't let you go without me."

The group of them touched the portkey and found themselves near the owl shop. A livid Molly Weasley was screaming through the magical barrier where Ginny was clasping hands with Harry and Draco, the hands linked in a triangle as Narcissa and Arthur wove a braided cord around the hands. Ernie Macmillan reached over the barrier and quickly pulled the Headmaster in, who understood to link hands with Fleur and they made a chain of bodies to let all of the students in tow follow them in.
"GINNY WEASLEY YOU STOP THAT NONSENSE THIS INSTANT! YOU CANNOT BIND YOURSELF TO THOSE TWO FAGGOTS!" Molly's voice faded as Severus made his way to see his godson marrying the loves of his life. Arthur had a tear in his eye as he avoided all eye contact with his ex-wife and continued with the Handfasting ritual.

The Ministry Security forces were in disarray, seeing as they couldn't get past the wards and nobody would let them in to attack or detain them. In fact, any spells shot across the boundary bounced back onto the caster, making for some hilarious results. Hermione came over and gave him a massive hug, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Sev, I'm glad you could make it to see my son get married!" Even her inflections sounded more like Narcissa. The way she pulled away from the hug and the resulting blush, however, was entirely Hermione.

"Thank you, 'Mione. Am I to assume that they are marrying both as an act of civil disobedience and as an act of rebellion to defy the Ministry?" Severus asked, looking over at the media cameras flashing in the distance.

She nodded as the magical bonds took hold and the three of them kissed, sealing the magical vows for the year and a day, and the crowd erupted in cheers as Ernie reported it on the Wireless. "What can Ogden and Umbridge do now? Harry's unemployed, independently wealthy, and both his partners are free to do as they wish. The Wizarding Bank shut down due to the mob trying to run in there and empty their accounts, though no shop is open now in the Magical World in the UK, and due to recent politics, no outside sources seem to want to trade with us at this time."

Fleur gave a low whistle, impressed. "A complete economic blockade."

Hermione nodded, amazed at the situation. "Even if the Ministry and Wizengamot try to switch over to only muggle resources for goods and food, we've got at least half of the support staff on strike from working there because of the PoWFA law. Seriously, don't try using the Floo Network anymore. Those old connections need to be cleaned at least twice a week and Magical Maintenance might have been falling short of that goal for the past few weeks, just to annow the Snatchers working as 'Ministry Security'."

Severus looked out in the crowd. "Is that where they all are?" Pansy came over and shook his hand.

"Apparently Ogden got upset and ordered Cormac to recall them all at once. Makes for one hell of a traffic congestion in the network, might take them weeks to get sorted and fished out of there."

"Miss Parkinson, glad to see you and your husband here." Severus replied as she beamed at him.

"Well, I told Viktor we should come here and support this, and he was more than willing to." She beamed at him. "He's quite the catch, isn't he?"

Severus nodded politely. He's something, all right.

One reporter made their way to the boundary line, holding a microphone and his quick-quotes quill was at the ready. "Ginny Weasley! Which of your husband's name will you take for your own?"

Ginny turned to face the young reporter, who seemed genuinely interested in this. "You with Quidditch Quarterly?"

"No ma'am, Wizarding World News. Would you care to make a statement about your Handfasting?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm just here to support my husbands."
Draco nodded over to Severus. "Godfather, think you could say a few words to the world?"

Severus thought about it and nodded as he went to the podium, amazed at the number of people united and signing the petition calling for snap elections. He took a steadying breath before he magically magnified his voice for all to hear.

"The Proteciton of Wizarding Families Act, which rescinded the right of same-sex couples as well as Purebloods to marry or remain married to each other, needs to be repealed without delay.

"Before I delve further, allow me to say this: This is not about yelling, and this is not about policy, and this isn't really just about PoWFA. I don't have a personal investment in this: I am not gay, not one member of my family is gay, and I have no personal stories of close friends or colleagues fighting the prejudice that being a homosexual can still ruin their lives.

"And yet to me this law is horrible. Horrible. Because this is about love, and if that seems foppish for me to say, then so be it. If you supported this marriage law, or even supported those who passed it, I have some basic questions, for I truly do not understand.

"Why does this matter to you? What is it to you? In a world of impermanence and with so many lost in the war and an escalating divorce rate, these people over here want the same chance at happiness that is your option. They don't want to deny it from you. They don't want to take anything away from you. They want what you want—a chance to be a little less alone in the world.

"Only now, this marriage law is saying to them—no. You can't have it on these terms. No two Purebloods together. No two witches together. No two wizards together. Not even something similar, even if it existed before the law was passed. The Dark Lord was evil because he wanted to treat the muggle-born like vermin, but now that he is gone, we're to treat the Purebloods in a similar fashion? We're to scapegoat the homosexuals as well? What if somebody passed a law that said you couldn't marry, nor stay in the marriage you were currently in?

"I have heard the Wizengamot issue dire warning against "re-defining marriage”. Even if we ignore that PoWFA does exactly that, we must acknowledge that if this country hadn't re-defined marriage, magical people still couldn't marry Muggles. Ten districts had laws on the books which still made that illegal in 1969. This doesn't even count the number of wizards and witches who were forced by society into marrying the opposite sex, in sham marriages of convenience, shame, and unhappiness all because they decided to live a lie and break the hearts of their spouses and children, all because we have made ourselves beholden to an ideal that many children equals a good family, while few or no children means you're a part of the Dark Arts.

"How many of these loveless marriages have there been and how do they increase the efficacy of marriage rather than tarnish the term? Why is this so important to you? Nobody is asking you to embrace their expression of love. Merely let whatever love is there flourish. The world is barren enough; for it is stacked against love, and against hope, and against those very few and precious emotions that enable us to to do better in life.

"So I must ask, with so much hate in the world, with so much meaningless division, and people pitted against people for no reason other than blood status or their personal orientation, this is what your morality tells you to do? After the defeat of an evil man who wished to rid the world of muggle-borns and breed them out, this is what your conscience tells you to do?

"Knowing that life seems to tilt the playing field on which we all live, towards that of unhappiness and hate... this is what your heart tells you to do? You want to protect marriage? You wish to honor the institution of family that marriage represents? Then spread happiness—this tiny, symbolic,
Ronald stood between his brother Percy and Cormac as Chief Mugwump Ogden and Delores Umbridge joined the counter-protesters who hurled insults and taunts towards the rebellious faction inside. Molly was red with fury as she saw Arthur introducing people to his muggle fiancée Jennifer.

Cormac pulled out some sealed potion globes from inside his robes. "They are still doing their illegal radio broadcast. Percy, we need to shut that down I think we’ll be able to break the barrier with a Null Field, and Ronald here can stand outside of the field, use a bubble-head charm, and use the garroting gas to break this illegal congregation."

Ronald blanched at the idea of gassing the large crowd all at once. They could panic and trample each other, not to mention suffocate if they don't get out of there in time. "This is going to get bad, you know."

Cormac nodded in agreement, a curl of anger on his upper lip as he pulled out some of the muggle rifles and handed them out. "We're outnumbered, so make sure you have every shot count." Percy took the rifle and examined the strange weapon while Ronald checked the magazine and realized that the ammunition was green and not blue.

"We're not going to put them to sleep.

"Cormac, what's the green ammunition do?" Ronald asked warily.

"It solves problems. You have your orders, I have to go pull the rest of the Security out of the Floo Network."

I saw Cormac’s Ministry Security forming up a semi-circle around us, handing out the muggle weapons as the protesters got skittish. Draco and some of the others were issuing the gas masks and helping people put them on. It was unnerving to see this much muggle technology appear in the middle of Diagon Alley, particularly since Pansy was effectively leading the fellow eighth years in how to defend themselves against the muggle rounds.

Looks like we finally got the four houses to band together.

"Draco, I have a question. I tapped my knut communicator and looked to Harry, whispering. "Ask him quietly if his shield will keep out the potion rounds."

A second later I got my response. "No, they won't. But they don't know that yet." We're essentially bluffing right now, great.

Severus stood beside me, Fleur conspicuously absent from his side. "I tried to talk Cissy into going home to watch your daughter, but she refused. Apparently your Gryffindor bravado has rubbed off on her."

I frowned at that. "I understand where she’s coming from, but I also wish she got out of here. What do you think of this situation?"
Severus looked over the magical barrier. "Looks like we'll finally get an answer to the Irresistible Force Paradox."

"What is that?"

"What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?"

I frowned at the muggle physics question. "Stalemate? They cancel each other out?"

Severus shook his head slightly. "I would surmise that the object gets destroyed. Meaning, Draco's shield will collapse." He tapped the knut communicator behind his left ear. "Harry, get the D.A. in front, this might become one heck of a firefight."

I checked to see where Percy and Ronald were, and I noticed the two gingers huddled by a wall going over a book. "Got an extendable ear on you?" Severus shook his head as George came through the crowd with one in his hand and a worried look on his face.

"Hey 'Mione. Good speech. I, uh, think Percy is trying to set up a null field; we'll be defenseless." Damn it. Percy and Ronald were going to try and neutralize all magic here. At least I know whose side they are on now.

"Sorry that your family is on both sides of the conflict." I apologized to him.

George shrugged it off. "I believe in love, and I see it between Ginny and her boys, and I see it with dad and Jennifer. I don't see it the rest of my family out there."

I nodded my thanks to him, my eyes locked onto my wrist. "Why did Death Eaters have the ability to cast when we got Squibbed?"

Severus leaned over and whispered it into my ear. "There was a Dark Mark carved on one of the stones; so magic was 'turned off' for everyone but them."

That still disturbed me. "I don't have a Dark Mark, though."

"No, you don't. However, I think your mark makes you impervious to certain localized magic due to who it connects you to."

"That doesn't make sense. Voldemort is dead."

"And yet not all of him is dead. He's not alive, either. He's... in between, which I think is the reason why you could do magic." My knut communicator chirped alive with various overlapping messages, and I strained to sort them out. I should have added a mute feature, or at least so that only one could broadcast at a time.

Ron was far enough away from the barrier that he wasn't too worried about getting hit with a stray curse as he assisted Percy in trying to erect a null field, which would hypothetically collapse the magic and the barrier within so that the Ministry could crush the rebellion and not start an international incident... this doesn't sound right.

"Perce? Do you think this is... um..." Ron shook his head as his mind swam with conflicting thoughts, warring for supremacy.

Why the fuck was Harry handfasting himself to Draco?

Why was my Hermione snogging Draco's mum?
Why was Ginny willing to be with those two poofers?

Why was Cormac acting so strange? It's like he's...

"Ron? You okay?" Percy said, startling the younger Weasley from his reverie.

"Sorry, just um, nerves."

Percy handed him a flask. "Here, have some of this. Then get over here and help me balance the field, okay?"

Ron drank from the flask, feeling immediately better as he followed his older brother's lead without worry.

The Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot conjured himself a small platform that he stepped up onto and magnified his voice. "**Attention Citizens! You are participating in an illegal action and are hereby ordered to disperse immediately! The Wizengamot has authorized the use of force if you refuse to depart peacefully.**"

The reply was loud chaotic jeering that turned into a massive crowd chant of "SHAME! SHAME! SHAME!" repeated over and over again. Ronald recognized Hermione's parents in the crowd, sporting shirts that said "Muggles for Marriage Equality" and holding signs that said "OGDEN RESIGN" and "REPEAL POWFA"

*Muggles have no place here, they are going to get hurt!* Ron shook his head sadly as he saw the Ministry Security ready their wands and rifles as Ogden relayed orders and the reporters and media photographers were forced to leave for their own safety. Ron was glad that at least some people would be spared from getting injured.

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Harry was grimacing from the plethora of voices chirping in from his knut until they all faded and a familiar voice popped above the din. "Harry it's Royal. Coming in. Get your guys to back up a bit."

Harry relayed the order to Pansy who nodded efficiently and had her people fall back slightly.

Ogden could be heard telling the former snatchers to only use the muggle rifles. "Wands away boys, guns only. We want to keep the null field intact."

Harry looked around and couldn't figure out where Royal was coming in from. As the snatchers started to put away their wands, disillusioned witches and wizards shimmered as their wands blasted red jets of light at point-blank range, stunning about a third of the Ministry Security forces as they stripped them of the muggle weapons and Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep voice could be heard as he cleared his voice, dropping his disillusionment charm. Harry ran forward and pulled him through, and the chain reaction showed Harry that there were more people behind him - the D.A. members who had not signed up to join the Auror's Guild before, all now wearing Auror Robes alongside Minister Shacklebolt.

"Mind if we join in, Harry? I may have made a few field promotions while you were fired."

Harry looked back out to where they had come in from, and in each location the Ministry Security guards were waking back up, stripped of their wands and weapons.

"Um, be my guest." Harry replied, surprised to see Romilda, Dean, Leanne, and the Patil twins all wearing the Auror robes and handling the muggle weapons with a practiced hand. The other new Aurors were Hannah Abbot, Michael Corner, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Anthony Goldstein, and Seamus also worked the muggle weapons, but fumbled slightly as they all copied each other and
held the weapon at a low ready.

_They were trained to operate these. Kingsley knew this day might come._

"You know Harry, I was once told I'd make a good Slytherin." Kingsley said, winking to him. His jovial nature changed when he saw what kind of ammunition they had and would be up against.

Harry saw the green color and knew it immediately. _Acid rounds. And they still out-gun us if they are able to enact a null field here._

Kingsley spoke up, his baritone voice hiding the nervousness that they all were starting to feel. "You boys don't want to do this now. You know what kind of ammunition you have there?"

Cormac strode forward, an uncharacteristic snarl on his face."Oh look, it's the _cowardly lion_, here to tell us all to not stand up for what we believe in now that he's in power."

"Cormac? That doesn't sound like you."

"Nevermind what I sound like, listen to what I'm saying, Kingsley. Your protest and attempt to overthrow the Wizengamot is going to fail."

"This isn't my protest, and I don't want to overthrow the government, just remove the bad people from power."

_"That's why the EPA was enacted! Too many Purebloods were still running things. Now you have Draco Malfoy running the show, and you're his little puppet." _

Kingsley harrumphed loudly. "I am beholden to nobody."

"You know this little shield of yours won't hold, right? You're going to be held responsible for a whole lot of damage."

"I don't think so, Tiberius. Really, putting your own nephew under the Imperius Curse? That's saying a lot about who has the moral high ground here."

"We are in an emergency and I have to maintain order to combat the threat from the Goblins and the rebellious elements that seek to depose me!"

"So you admit it, Chief Mugwump." Harry realized what the Minister was saying and he tried to find where Ogden was at; _didn't he need a direct line of sight to cast the Imperious Curse? _

"I am doing what must be done to keep us safe!"

"Is that what you said to comfort yourself when your challenger for the Chief Mugwamp position _mysteriously_ died? Ogden, I've been following your unusual rise to power and there is more than enough to warrant a full investigation _and_ your removal from office. You've followed the footsteps of the previous Ministers, taking over the _Daily Prophet_ and spreading your anti-goblin propaganda as well as discrediting anyone who opposed your new regime. You couldn't exert your control over Hogwarts, but you used your Ministry Security to investigate the loyalties of your personnel and forbade anyone from speaking out against the decisions of your administration. And now you think you can breed out any resistance with this new law."

"That is a lie; propaganda from the Purebloods, Goblins, Centaurs, and other half-breeds who want to destroy my reputation! The Wizengamot has been around much longer than we've even _had a_ Ministry of Magic. And you've just proven _you're in league with them._ Percy, I want him charged,
arrested, and tried for treason."

The Aurors, D.A., and the eighth year students moved in between Shacklebolt and the Ministry Security, even though Draco’s repulsion charm was in place.

"Your autocratic rule is over, Ogden. Stand down and I promise you a fair trial for what you've done."

"You're mad. We outnumber you, and have you surrounded, Minister. Don't get all of these citizens killed because you're being foolish."

"Listen to yourself, man!" Kingsley looked past Cormac and to the Ministry Security behind him. "Are you all willing to harm innocent people who have gathered to say that what this Government is doing is wrong?"

"They will follow their orders because that's what they are supposed to do."

"INTERCON will rule this as an illegal order, and you know it." Kingsley turned and saw Molly Prewett, shaking his head. "Molly, you know better than this. Look at yourself, you're standing up for a corrupt system and on the same side as Umbridge."

Molly had her wand out and at the ready, along with other supporters of the Wizengamot who were flanked by the Ministry Security. "I'm standing against the perversion you're surrounding yourself with; sodomites and child abusers!" She spat that last part at her ex husband, glancing at his new fiancee.

Arthur met her glare with equal animosity. "Mollywobbles, I have had it with you! We both suffered after the war and I may have crawled into a bottle to deal with the loss of Fred, but I. Got. Over. It. Jennifer's been an amazing girlfriend and partner to me, and I've got more respect for the Muggles than ever. They are much more civilized and accepting of people who are different than we are."

"No, Arthur, there is right and there is wrong; there are things you're not supposed to be 'accepting' of. And I can't believe George and Ginny have fallen for that type of sickness!"

Cormac looked over to her and tried to give a consoling look, but it was entirely wrong for his face. "Molly, you've done your best. Security, prepare the garroting gas and target the armed Aurors first."

Harry couldn't believe that it was coming to this. He looked for Severus and Fleur for guidance but couldn't find them in the crowd. Kingsley was there, wand and weapon at the ready. The Boy Who Lived felt his pulse race as he gave his orders to the D.A. "Target the Ministry Security, but do not cast anything until they fire first. Cormac/Ogden, whoever you are, it does not need to go down like this."

Cormac didn't blink. "Open fire."

I panicked as plastic pellets and potion vials flew through the shield and burst against the hurried shield charms that the Aurors threw up, and the news cameras were flashing as reporters ducked for cover and began sending off owls to inform the world that civil war had broken out in the middle of Diagon Alley between the Ministry and the Wizengamot. Green Acid slid off of the shield charms to the concrete below, hissing and bubbling as it touched the pavement while the garroting gas expanded through air, though the Muggle gas masks filtered it out almost miraculously.

I took aim and tried to stun Percy and Ronald but missed as they activated the null field, neutralizing all of the magic in our area and all of the shields collapsed, acid rounds slamming into the Aurors as
they returned fire, hitting a few of the Ministry Security members squarely in the face. My mind still in a panic, I pull out the Elder Wand and cast a widespread reflecting shield curse to replace Draco's shield, glad to see that no spells could come in while my parents went to deal with the injured.

Everyone looked to me as their wands couldn't do magic and the spells and pellets from outside the shield rebounded off the magical barrier and was injuring their own side. The former Snatchers began conjuring and moving obstacles in the way to hide behind to avoid getting hit by the ricocheting spells and pellets. Kingsley looked at me in awe and fear. "How in Merlin's name are you able to do that?"

"Okay, nobody can do magic but me in here, well, maybe the House-Elves... and their shots can't get in." I said as I scrambled to check on a writhing Hannah Abbot. I used my wand to vanish the acid off of her while my parents irrigated the wound with a milk of magnesia solution.

"Arthur! Get the box of baking soda and bottled water! We're going to run out here!" My father said as Arthur and Jennifer went to the kitchenette area and began treating people.

"Is everyone okay?" Harry asked, feeling powerless as he stowed his now useless wand.

Pansy looked over the injured. "Yes, it looks like they were trained to shoot for center mass and not for the face. Mostly we just have burned robes here; they aren't the same quality as the Tactical Robes though."

Kingsley had his eyes set on the Weasleys outside. "Looks like they are going to try and re-do the null field to break your shield."

The Aurors all trained their weapons directly at Percy and Ronald. This time, there were no Snatchers in Ministry Security robes to defend them. I didn't want to look at the ground where a dozen of them had lost their heads entirely due to the acid rounds burning directly into their brains. The smell alone was wanting to make me vomit.

"Ronald! Percy!" I shouted out at them. They ignored me as they read from the spellbook again to recreate the null field. I cast relashio on the book, conjuring magical ropes to grab and pull the tome out of their hands.

"Hermione, don't you understand what has happened here? You're siding with evil! You've been corrupted by that woman, that Pureblood..." Percy shouted, genuine hatred in his eyes. I couldn't believe Ronald was doing this of his own free will.

"Ron, you know you're on the wrong side. You have to realize that." I said, pleading.

He shook his head, tears welling up in his eyes. "We were united against the evil Purebloods who wanted to use Dark Magic to take over, who hated Muggle-borns like you, and now you're fucking her and casting Dark Magic! She's corrupted you."

"And most of the so-called 'security' you have there are snatchers! Can't you realize that?! Don't you recognize Scabior?"

Ron shook his head at that. "You're lying. You've been corrupted by the Malfoys and don't even realize it." Percy began to try and enact a null field again and George was by my side, whispering an incantation into my ear.

I nodded as I focused on the intensive transfiguration and focused my magical ability, arcing my wand outward as the pavement under their feet rippled and changed into murky water. I closed my eyes and pictured the swamp from my fifth year, complete with the muck and the reeds and left...
planks of driftwood out for them to grasp onto as the transfiguration completed. Panting, I bared my teeth at them and magnified my voice.

"Next time, I turn the floor into lava."

Severus flew after Fleur as she chased Tiberius down the depths of the Ministry beyond where the lifts could go. The mad man is trying to break into the Department of Mysteries...

What in Slytherin's name is he up to?!

"Chief Mugwump! NO!" Severus heard Fleur yell before wand fire deafened him. Severus made it to the bottom floor only to see Fleur bent over the unconscious Bob.

"I can't seem to cast a diagnostic charm on him!" Fleur said in a panic.

"Check for breath and a pulse, muggle-style." Severus said to her as more loud explosions shook the floor beneath their feet.

"IT CAN'T END LIKE THIS!" Severus heard Ogden yell as he slams spells uselessly in an attempt to blast his way through a door. *If this were any other door, it would have been reduced to rubble.*

"I have this, go!" Severus' heart sank as he reluctantly left Fleur to face the unknown. As he entered the Department of Mysteries, he noticed exactly how empty it seemed there. Were there any Unspeakables left? Severus couldn't be certain as he found Tiberius Ogden standing uselessly in front of the ever-locked door.

"Chief Mugwump, back away from the doorway. The International Confederation of Wizards has authorized me to place you under arrest."

"BACK OFF! I can fix all this, I can stop the Purebloods better, stop the gays from corrupting... I just need the time-"

"That's not the Time Chamber. It's over."

The Chief Mugwump slumped, his head resting on the door in defeat.

"I uh... I know."

"INTERCON has charged you for the warcrime of genocide against the Goblins, and manipulating that emergency to enact martial law on your own people. Please put down you wand."

"I can't do that."

"You have my word that you will receive a fair trial, Tiberius."

"No."

"Don't make me use force."

Ogden clutched his wand tight against his own chest. Red light erupted from the tip and Ogden collapsed onto the floor, dead.
Endgame: Love Lasts Forever

Chapter Notes

Why I love fan fiction: You can delve into an already established realm and solve plot holes that always left you scratching your head. In my fic One Step Left, I use many themes from Pride and Prejudice and turn Viktor Krum's surprising loss at the Quidditch World Cup into him throwing the game due to gambling debts he had amassed, making him the George Wickham character while Narcissa Granger-Black is the Fitzwilliam Darcy who orchestrates a plot to get him out of debt and out of everyone's hair.

Here's a full correlation of characters as I made the parallels between my story and the Austen novel: (though there wasn't a inferi-fueled goblin rebellion there)

You have to ignore familial ties and instead see the friendships/alliances for these to roughly work.

Elizabeth Bennet: Hermione Granger
Fitzwilliam Darcy: Narcissa Black
Charlotte Lucas: Cho Chang
William Collins: Cormac McLaggen
Lydia Bennet: Pansy Parkinson
Anne de Bourgh/George Wickham: Viktor Krum
Lady Catherine de Bourgh: Delores Umbridge
Mrs. Bennet: Molly Weasley
Jane Bennett: Fleur Delacour
Charles Bingley: Severus Snape
Georgiana Darcy: Ginny Weasley
Colonel Fitzwilliam: Draco Malfoy
Mary Bennet: Harry Potter
Kitty Bennet: Luna Lovegood

Caroline Bingley was difficult so I split her up into different characters: Pansy Parkinson, Rita Skeeter, Firenze, and Odette Parkinson (Pansy's mom, an OC)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I was back at home with Narcissa, fireworks exploding in the distance as the snap elections put Kingsley Shacklebolt back into power as the Minister and Daedalus Diggle won handily the position of Chief Warlock over Delores Umbridge. At least some things are better, even if she got to avoid all charges.

The first thing that Diggle did was to rescind the Emergency Powers Act, and then ensured that it could never be abused in such a way again. His next piece of legislation that the Minister immediately signed into effect was to cancel the disastrous PoWFA marriage law and to allow people to be bound to each other as they saw fit.

Carina was a perfectly behaving daughter and I was able to sleep mostly through the night before having to get up around 2am to feed her. Cissy and I had even devised a schedule so that we both had time to ourselves (me to study, her to grade) so neither of us felt too burdened with the new
addition to our lives. It was the last weekend in February when I decided to take Carina with me on
the schools' Hogsmeade trip.

A lot of the older students wanted to finally meet her, and I thought taking her on a walk and getting
some fresh air might do us both some good. My wife even traded shifts so that she got to leave the
castle with me so we could take turns holding her and showing her the magical world.

Luna and I waved by to my wife as we instead went into Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes together as
she spoke animatedly about her girlfriend Sam getting along with her husband Rolf and Carina
cooed at all of the bright lights as I pushed the pram into the store.

"I can't believe they both are getting along this well. There's like, no jealousy there?"

Luna shrugged, smiling. "Rolf is a good man and wants harmony in his life. He also wants children
like I do, and the three of us just kind of... fit."

I shook my head at that. "But Sam and Rolf aren't... um, together as well, right?"

"No, they are just good friends, and they both are happy that the other makes me happy. Maybe Rolf
will find someone he loves and wants to date someday, but for now, we're just going to take it one
day at a time."

"I don't think I could ever share my wife like that."

Luna looked at me in question. "Why not? You're already sharing her after a fashion with
Headmaster Snape."

"Their love is platonic." I realize that the Pram won't fit through the store and I pick her up and hold
her while Luna puts the pram aside and wards it in place. I nod to her in thanks.

"Draco and Carina."

"That's familial love, and I love them the same way."

"Odette."

"They are former lovers and good friends; I wouldn't want to ruin their friendship and besides, I
know she's not going to leave me for her." I looked over the shelf of daydream charms, looking for
one I could give Carina in the crib. *I wonder if George has thought about marketing this towards
parents...* 

The nails-on-a-chalkboard *hem-hem* cut through the air as I turned and faced the Pink Menace that
Would Not Go Away. She was leaning on a pink cane that she had to use ever since one of the
former Snatchers mis-aligned a shattering curse and took out her left shin during the rebellion in
Diagon Alley. "Miss Granger, may I have a word?"

I look to Luna who gives an awkward smile and steps away, looking to find George in case there is
any trouble.

"Delores." My grip tightens on Carina just enough that I hear her cry quietly. *Even she doesn't like
this bitch.*

"I have not given you leave to use my given name. You do yourself a great disservice by being
so rude towards me. I dare say, the honor that I am bestowing by merely being seen with you, an
unwed mother-"
"I believe you are mistaken. I cannot account for any honor that involves me dealing with a deposed member of the Wizengamot."

Her smile was tight as she made a high-pitched squeak of frustration.

"I have come across some information and would like to thwart this rumor before it has any chance to spread."

I smiled politely as Carina's face turned away from Delores. "Let me see if I give a damn." I feign looking at my empty palm, imagining myself in front of the mirror as I had done before in hopes that Narcissa would see this memory. "No, it appears that I do not."

"Miss Granger," she replied with her sickly-sweet voice slowly turning into anger, "you ought to choose your words carefully; you know better than most that I still have power that I can wield against you. Now, as you know I am an honest woman of few words, so let me tell you what has been reported to me. I was informed that you might soon be legally recognized as married by the new Wizengamot... with that witch Narcissa Black. As abhorrent and scandalous as it must sound to you, recalling how you wished to have an annulment before, I must ask you to quell my concerns regarding this... detestable business."

"If you're so certain that this rumor is false, why are you here speaking with me?"

"I insist that you refute this accusation against your character, and the blatant assault on marriage that it is."

"You're willfully standing inside of a Weasley Joke Shop over a rumor? Considering how harried you were the last time you had to deal with these items going off all around you, I would say that you merely honoring this shop with your presence would confirm your deepest fear."

"Do you deny this rumor or not? Or will the Princess of Gryffindor claim ignorance in this matter?"

"I claim nothing." I said, narrowing my eyes at her.

"Miss Granger, you are trying my patience. I expected you to be reasonable. However, my curiosity must be sated, and I will not go away until you have reassured me that this rumor is false." I sigh and roll my eyes at her.

"And what rumor is that?"

"That you and Narcissa will be recognized as married!"

"You yourself have said that is impossible."

"Of course it is impossible! Nevertheless, the rumor has only been getting louder and I wish to have the pleasure of hearing it be denied by you, in person, now!"

"Then I shall apologize for I am not in the business of pleasing you. You might have to look elsewhere for such a pleasure, and guessing from your comportment, the brothels will charge a small fortune. And employ obliviation charms after."

"You stubborn girl! I am quite displeased with you! Did you not know it was I who had attempted to get my godson Cormac to marry you? Oh, it would have been quite the advantageous match, you would raise in your social standing and he would have your support to elevate him to being the youngest Minister of Magic yet!"
I couldn't help it, I laughed at her. "I have no need of an advantageous marriage." *I'm not Krum.*

"You obstinate, headstrong girl! I am... ashamed of you! Is this your attitude after all of the damage you've done to the Wizarding World? Let us sit down. You need to understand, Miss Granger, that I came here with the determined resolution of carrying my purpose; nor will I be dissuaded from it. I am not used to having to submit to any other person's whims. I am *not* in the habit of brooking disappointment."

"Then I believe now is as good of time as ever to learn how to accept disappointment."

*I will not be interrupted!* Hear me in silence. My godson and you were to be married, which can happen now that Cho has divorced Cormac."

I couldn't help but laugh in her face.

"You must be mad to think that I'd willingly marry myself to anyone of your choice, much less McLaggen!"

"His contacts and your social prestige, sodomite history notwithstanding, would make a powerful union to unite the Wizarding World!"

"I believe the union between myself and Narcissa as well as my son's marriage to my best friend Harry and Ginny do that quite well."

"Don't get me started with my cousin Molly's upstart pretensions of a poor Pureblood family that is riddled with scandal! And to think I almost endured him wooing Ginevra Weasley! But it must not, shall not be. If you were sensible of your own good, you would marry into the sphere of influence that would help everyone involved."

"If I were to marry your godson, I should consider that a blow to my social standing. He is no gentleman, and you are of no consequence. I must stay true to my own heart."

"Tell me once for all, are you engaged to her?"

As much as I wanted to lie to Delores Umbridge in order to anger her some more, I couldn't bring myself to.

"I am not."

The Pink Menace seemed disturbingly pleased.

"And will you promise me, never to become engaged to her?"

"I will not promise that."

"Hermione, I am disappointed in you. I expected to find a more reasonable young woman. But I will not go away untill you have reassured me that you wont."

"And I certainly never shall give it. I will not be intimidated by the likes of you. You want Cormac married, for some unfathomable reason to me, in hopes that it will further his political career? You don't know me if you think I can be persuaded by you to marry him."

"I am not done, Hermione. In addition to the objections I have already urged, I still have another to add. I am no stranger to the particulars of Viktor Krum's infamous elopement. I know it all; that his marrying her was a patched-up business, at the expense of your... Narcissa. And to think she did this..."
for her ex-lover's daughter's honor? Surely, you see the end of your 'relationship' coming to an end. So why bother? Will you stand by her while this blows up in their face, and let your own reputation be so polluted?"

"You must be done now," I sneered. "Because there's nowhere lower you could stoop to think I'm going to leave the mother of my child over what others think of me."

As I turned away from her, Delores became even more incensed.

"You don't care, then, for the reputation of my godson, a fellow Gryffindor?! You selfish girl! Don't you understand that staying with her and calling yourselves 'married' will disgrace you in the eyes of everybody? I'm trying to give you an out!"

"Delores, go away. You know how I feel."

"So you're going to marry her?"

"I didn't say that. I have only said that she and I are not engaged at present. As for whom I marry and whatever reputation I get for it, I do not care. If people wish to think ill of me for loving her, then said person is beneath my regard."

"Very well. You refuse to answer me. You are determined to ruin yourself in the opinion of all that matter, and make Cormac hold the contempt of the world on his own."

"He made his own decision when he showed up at the protests in Diagon Alley as part of the Ministry Security. He'll have his day in court to prove he was under the Imperious Curse. As for my own actions, I will only do that which, in my own opinion, makes me happy. Without regard to you or anyone who isn't in my immediate circle of friends and family. Your ideals of what you consider proper and moral mean nothing to me, for I have seen what actions you've taken because of your supposed morality. If the world castigates me for loving Narcissa, then let it. I refuse to let social niceties turn me into the kind of amoral monster that you and Ogden are."

I turned to leave, squeezing Carina in my arms slightly as my daughter gurgled as I heard something fall behind me. I turn back only to see that my baby cast a wandless summoning charm, leaving Delores to fall flat on her face. I bit my bottom lip in order to stifle my chortling as Delores got back up to her feet and reached for her cane.

"You ought to have better discipline over your child!" Delores admonished at me.

"Wandless magic happens spontaneously. Besides, she's barely two months old!" I replied, bouncing Carina gently in my arms, "I'm certain she didn't mean to do that..."

Delores gave an unconvincing smile as she hobbled out of the store, putting her weight on the cane as she made it through the doorway, only to have it snap in half and make her plant face-first into the mud outside. George and Luna peeked from around a shelf and finally laughed as she left.

"Did you do that?" I asked George incredulously.

He shook his head, bemused. "I would be the first to take credit for slamming that witches' face into the mud on the street." Luna's smile changed slightly and I turned back to the door to see Narcissa smiling at me, her eyes alive with humor.

"Reinforcement charms can be easily inverted, poor thing didn't realize how fragile she made her cane by messing with it in the first place. Hermione, may we have a word?" Carina heard Cissy's voice and squealed in delight, prompting me to hand her back to her other mommy.
George nodded his agreement. "It's a slow day, Luna, want to see my stuff in development?" Luna winked at me and followed George as they left us alone.

"I can't believe you did that to her." I said, blushing as Cissy made a face to Carina to make her chuckle.

"She deserved it after spewing that bile. Believing we were engaged and wanting you to marry Cormac." She scoffed at that. "You have standards."

"That's true. She wanted to make me jealous over Odette. You were right, she was a horrible Slytherin."

We exchanged a look and I knew she was trying to hide her feelings from me. I tried to see her recent memories, but she was Occluding.

I bit my lip nervously as we tiptoed around the subject. I knew it would only be a matter of time. "Why was there a rumor that we were going to be married?"

Narcissa gathered her courage as her hand rifled through a pocket, pulling out a small box. She paused as she gathered her courage and tried to open it one-handed. Carina magically summoned it to her and she popped it open, revealing an intricate gold and silver band with a sizable diamond, flanked by a ruby and an emerald on either side.

My jaw dropped as she went down to one knee, voice wavering with nervousness.

"You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged; but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever." [1]

I gasped, not expecting my wife to go through with the full Muggle tradition. "Hermione Jean Granger-Black, will you do me the honor of being my wife of your own free will?"

I closed my eyes and thought carefully of the precise words that I wanted to use as I nodded.

"I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is... too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun." [2]

I lowered my hand to help her up, and our lips met as we held each other and I said "yes", over and over, with our daughter Carina cooing happily between us.

The following week ran through like a haze, between my classes, planning a wedding (okay, letting Draco plan the wedding) and taking care of Carina while studying for my N.E.W.T. exams. There was an odd feeling of homeliness in my room at Hogwarts, with the crib nearby and a small mobile of cats chasing each other for Carina to look at as I reviewed my transfiguration notes and Golpalott's Laws of elementary transfiguration. I memorized them by heart, but it was writing out the proofs that got to be tedious.

Cho hadn't returned to Hogwarts, even though she had her marriage annulled the moment that the marriage law was no longer in place. She was going to sit her N.E.W.T. exams here though but said that she felt too old to be trying to live as a schoolgirl. I understood what she meant, but I was dedicated to finishing my year out here. Other eighth year students seemed to feel the same way, and had seemed to skip classes and study on their own as well.

It was the morning of the Wedding, and Surly was unusually excited over the celebration, and was
directing the House-Elves who were decorating the area just by the Black Lake where we were going to say our vows. Carina lay in Narcissa's crib in her room while Luna and Pansy helped me get up and ready for the day. *I never thought I'd have these two by my side, preparing me for my big day.*

"You know, Draco is really great with makeup charms." Pansy said as she had her wand pointing at my eyebrows, casting a plucking charm and comparing the shape of the two eyebrows to each other.

Luna looked amazing as she combed through my hair and wrapped it around her wand, using a heating charm in order to make the curls all roll together as if it were a curling iron. "And Draco is busy with the seating and catering, we can't add any more work to her son."

I looked at myself in the mirror and was amazed at how efficient they both were being.

Pansy twisted her lips as she cast the eyelash-darkening charm and began to work on the eyeshadow. "So you're staying married to your husband, but you and he are cool with you having a muggle girlfriend?"

Luna grinned broadly. "Oh yes. We'll be an odd sort of family, but that seems the norm for a Lovegood. My father loves them both and has said that the more are merrier. I think he's hoping for grandchildren soon."

Pansy grinned at that. "Viktor has been the sweetest man I could ever want; he's willing to let me pursue my own career while he stays home and raises the children." She sighed at that. "Can you believe that my attempts to push Headmaster Snape into admitting his feelings for Fleur is what got me and Viktor together?"

I smiled, biting the inside of my cheek to stay silent about the Compulsion that has made her superficially happy.

Pansy beamed back. "And, honestly, I need to thank your wife for her intervention as well."

My jaw dropped. *She knew?* "You're not upset?"

Pansy shrugged it off. "I always loved him, but knew he was a notorious gambler. His Quidditch career was shot after the debacle at the Quidditch World Cup, you know. Funny how that works, strong-arming the Varbanovs to call all of his markers in and leverage the top Seeker in the world to throw a game. I laughed my way to the bank on that, I didn't even care that I spotted Fred and George listening in on those extendable ears."

*That's how the Weasley Twins knew to play that bet against Ludo Bagman.*

I looked at her in horror. " Aren't you worried that he doesn't love you the way you love him?"

She shrugged. "He wanted to be debt-free, and now that he's married to me with the same magic that you and Cissy have, he is able to see reasons as to why he should love me. It's nothing worse than the arranged marriages that would have happened had The Dark Lord won. Besides, I'm spoiling the boy and I know he can't ever gamble again nor cheat on me. He was actually a few months away from meeting with an unfortunate accident by the Varbanovs."

*She literally knew he was about to be killed and she saved him.* I didn't know what to say to that. Even Luna was stunned silent.

Luna pulled her wand away from my hair and looked impressed with her work. "Done with the makeup charms, Pansy? We need to seal them with an 8 hour charm so that they don't break during
the ceremony... or you know... after."

Pansy winked back at her. "You two doing anything special for a honeymoon on Spring break?"

I smiled at that. "We're taking a luxury cruise through the Mediterranean. Something completely muggle and fun, so we can enjoy the journey together."

We all saw the final product of the makeup and hair and I nearly wanted to cry as I saw myself. "This... thank you." I didn't just feel pretty, or beautiful... but absolutely stunning. Cissy will love this.

They put their wands away, proud of their combined achievement. Luna checked her coming-of-age pocket watch and marveled at the time. "Well, we need to go get ready ourselves, and I think you said something about "borrowing blue?"

"It's a muggle thing. My mom is bringing something." The pair of them left my room as I nervously paced my room, two hours until the wedding.

Narcissa was frazzled, nervous and wanting to go up and see her 'Mione to be reassured that everything was going according to plan. It was a bright, sunny day, and a raven cawed outside on a nearby tree. It was only Odette's insistence that kept her in her chair as she and David Mallett worked her over and got her in her wedding suit. Their daughter Carina had a very busy morning and was now happily napping in her crib alongside Crookshanks, his tail swishing back and forth lazily as he seemed to watch the baby.

"Cissy dear, you know it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding." David chastised her as he worked on her hair.

Narcissa grunted his disagreement. "But we're both the bride. Brides? Ugh, you know what I mean."

Odette fed her a chocolate cauldron, knowing it would soothe her nerves. "You're wearing regency-era breeches, riding boots, and blouse, compete with a vest and tailcoat. Pretty certain you're the groom this time."

Narcissa had to smile at that. "Well I'm not wearing another wedding gown, and besides, I think I look quite dashing in this." She nervously flicked her wand up and her arithmancy equation appeared, fading into uncertainty as her projection lines shattered into little tendrils of lightning, denoting a broken equation. And of course it's happening on the Ides of March. "This still bothers me."

Odette cocked her head as she tried to make sense of it. "How come?"

Narcissa fiddled with the variables, but nothing made any difference since the constant values were breaking the equation every time she ran it. "Arithmancy will no be longer stable in a few hours. The future can't be predicted anymore with a statistical analysis."

David looked at her equation and frowned, uncertain what it all meant. "Sounds just like getting married, love. You don't know where the future will take you, but you're willing to make the commitment. It's not just you that can't get equations to solve, so I seriously doubt you will be the one to fix it."

Odette looked over the equation again, pointing to the symbols that represented the constants. "What are these called?"

Narcissa shrugged, uncertain where her friend was going with this. "Those are the constants, and
some Arithmancer long ago decided to name them Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. Clotho works on
the variables overall to begin working the equation, Lachesis solves the length of time it takes, and
Atropos gives you the final answer. But as you see here, Clotho's value that you're supposed to use
in this type of equation just doesn't work, and it destabilizes the entire arithmantic formula."
Odette shook her head. "You are speaking gibberish to me."
David finished his makeup charms and sealed them on her, giving a deep sigh of relief. "Well, come
what may, you're going to look fabulous. Now you need to go get dressed, while Odette and I go off
and have a torrid love affair in the other room."
Narcissa rolled her eyes as Odette pretended to fawn over the French wizard. "Oh you two go get a
room somewhere!"

Harry knew he and Draco were needed by Ginny's side as she read the owl from the Holyhead
Harpies. Her face was ashen as she read the note over and over, trying to glean its meaning.

"Apparently marrying two war heroes during a protest that essentially toppled the Ministry is a good
thing." She said, panting in shock and awe. "Provided that I not have another drinking fiasco that
gets me on Witch Weekly, I'm back on the team!"
Harry grinned at her as Draco kissed their girlfriend, (well, our wife now) Ginny in celebration. "I'm
so happy for you!"
Draco beamed at both of them. "There was always a rumor that the Holyheads were a lesbian team,
so I think they are proud to point out a player that has two husbands means she's extra straight. Not
to mention, they might get more support from the closeted gay wizards who know we're together."
Ginny's smile curled down slightly. "Well, that explains why you two got free season passes and box
seats so you could come support me."
Draco put his arm around Harry and kissed him as well. "Well, Gin, promise to not show up in my
Puddlemere United robes."
"Prat."
Andi showed up with Teddi in her arms, looking dapper in black and white baby dress robes. "You
would not believe how difficult it was to get my little man here to keep his clothing on! I swear, I'm
going to need to look into getting a dampener on his abilities, else we're going to have a naked baby
here. Harry, will you? I've still got to go get ready." Harry smiled and took his godson into his arms,
watching the baby's hair go dark purple as he cooed.
Ginny looked at her husband and his godson as she kissed the boy's hands. "I'm glad to see Teddy
here is fulfilling your baby fever for now, Harry. I swear, you're such a girl at times!"
Draco laughed as Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not a girl, just a good father. Aren't I Teddy?" The boy
clapped in jubilation as Harry kissed his forehead a few times, making Teddy laugh.
Draco looked past them and saw the band arrive and saw Surly trying to tell them where to put their
instruments and grimaced at the response. "Hey, sweeties, I have to go take care of a small crisis. I'm
so glad we eloped when we did." He gave Harry and Ginny quick pecks and flagged down the
distraught musicians who had never been yelled at by a House-Elf before.
"Should we go help him?" Harry asked.
Ginny looked off into the forest. "What? Sorry, for some reason I thought I saw Sirius in his Animagus form."

Harry smiled sadly. "I hope he is here in spirit; I'm certain he'd be happy to see his godson have an amazing wife and husband." He took her into his arms and held her, remembering how he fell in love with her in the first place. He loved Draco for the same reason, although that came on slowly and he didn't realize it at first. Sometimes you just feel at home with someone, and when you find that that home, you'll do anything to keep it.

Ron knew he was doing the right thing. He knew it down to his bones as he took a deep breath and made his way through Hogwarts and rehearsed exactly what he was going to say to her. She wanted him there for her big day as a way to get himself, her, and Harry to be friends again.

Hermione was so radiant in her wedding gown, it nearly made him want to cry at the sight of it. You're supposed to be with me, 'Mione! It was always you and me!

She was nervous, as he had expected. Wouldn't anyone be nervous before willfully binding yourself to a bloody Malfoy? He was convinced that this was her subconscious fighting to throw off whatever love potion she had been forced to consume, and there were few potions that could be this potent that would require so few doses, so he was certain his oldest and most favorite brother could figure out which one was used.

It's not the Imperious Curse; she's not acting strange for her.

As she licked her lips, looking parched, Ron took his opportunity and feigned taking a long swig from his hip flask.

"Fancy a nip of liquid courage?"

"What do you have there?"

He knew that whatever love potion running through her veins would eventually wear off or be reversed and then he could make her see reason, maybe even replicate the result and save Harry as well. Percy and I just need a sample of her blood and a few hours and this can all be resolved.

"Fire-whiskey, of course."

Percy would be at the rendezvous point, ready to cast every shield charm and anti-apparition jinx he knew once Ron was there with her. Ron knew that he had to play his part right, get Hermione out of here, and then everything would be good.

She shook her head. "I shouldn't. I'm breastfeeding Carina, but thanks. I should just get some water."

As Hermione faced her desk where a cup was at, he raised his wand to the back of her head and cast the strongest Stupefy he could manage at point-blank range.

Ronald caught her as she began to crumple to the ground, his strong arms around her torso and his nose buried in her soft curls as he knelt beside her, swept her hair out of her face, and kissed her tenderly before activating the portkey for the pair of them.

I'm going to save you, Hermione.

Ron had no idea how long she would be out for, so he acted quickly. He levitated Hermione gently onto the stone table at the rendezvous point and cast Relashio, binding her to the concrete as he trusted his brother Percy to put up the defensive wards. He took out his silver knife and cut off some
of her hair as well as made a shallow cut on her left forearm to collect a sample of her blood, grimacing at the "MUDBLOOD" scar that Bellatrix had carved into her. That's when it all started to go wrong, when they got captured by the Malfoys and he wasn't able to save her from being tortured.

Ron trusted that Percy would be able to figure out what was done to her in order to make her become this twisted. It had to be then when Narcissa started dosing her with a love potion. It's the only thing that could be doing this. Ron wondered if the snake mark on her other wrist had something to do with it, too. Harry doesn't have that, though. It might be the source of her Dark Magic, though...

"Ronald, you have it?" Percy asked, hand outstretched towards his brother. Ron remembered and patted down her robes, stripping her of two wands.

Why does she have two wands?

"Yeah, here you go. Wow, that one feels weird. And here's the vials of blood and her hair like you asked. You're going to find an antidote, right?"

Ron looked back at Hermione, his eyes wild in shock. "We're going to make you better, Hermione."

Percy pocketed the vials and examined both wands, easily snapping the vine wood wand and pocketing the dragon heartstring and found it impossible to snap the other wand and swished it around.

"Ron, hold this for a second, would you?" Percy asked and Ron distractedly took the wand back, wondering why it looked so odd as Hermione's eyes began to open groggily. Ron's face turned to face hers, his eyes wide in excitement.

"Hermione! We've rescued you from them! Merlin, you've been under a love potion. You have to be... it's the only explanation, Percy and I are going to set things right finally, okay?" Ron turned to face Percy, confused as to why his brother's wand was trained on him. "Right, Percy?" Ronald's eyes reflected the green light that hit him straight in the chest.

"Right, brother." Percy replied as he took the Wand of Destiny out of his brother's lifeless hand. A shadowy figure wheezed in the background as the heavy breathing grew closer.

"Dolohov, she's all yours. I have to get this to the Dark Mistress. Don't forget we have a wedding to crash."

Chapter End Notes

[1] — Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice
Slaughter of the Fates

Chapter Notes

This story, in its entirety, is dedicated to the love of my life, Bleu_Jay. Thank you for being there with me through everything: The ups, the downs, when the world seemed to be set against us, and when they cheered as we stood above the wreckage as those who would subdue us lay broken in our wake. It hasn't been an easy path, but it is OUR path, and the only way that WE would want it to be. I will love you, Always, and will tear the world apart in order to get back to you.

NIN Song Correlation: PERCY: My Violent Heart. This song gave me chills when I first heard it and this is possibly one of the few songs I'd say you should listen to while reading this story.

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
-Dylan Thomas

Delores had tried diplomacy. She had tried to make them see reason. All she had left was this, in order to protect society from veering into immorality. She could object to the wedding, and convince whatever clergy that they had bonding them today to refuse to do the ceremony. I can't believe the Wizengamot is just going to allow all of these so-called 'marriages' happen!

Delores made it to the outskirts of Hogwarts, just outside of the Apparition wards when she found herself standing face to face with Hermione. What is she doing out here? She thought something smelled putrid in the air for a brief second, but a moment later she wasn't certain if she had smelled it in the first place or not. She cleared her throat and the girl's eyes locked onto her.

"I cannot let this farce of a marriage happen, Miss Granger!" Hermione's eyes looked way more cold and distant than she remembered. The Gryffindor had always been a bit of a spitfire, and instead she seemed to be almost lazy, with a tightness around her eyes that she couldn't place.

"Delores Umbridge, my old friend. You served me so well when I ran the Ministry; all the time thinking Pius Thicknesse was really in charge."

Minister Thicknesse absolutely loved my service! What is this girl babbling about, calling me her old friend?!

"What are you playing at? I did my duty for the Ministry!"

"How many filthy mudbloods got the Dementor's Kiss on your order? My Horcrux Locket barely had to do anything in order have you fulfill my plan. All those destroyed souls, you exterminated them like vermin! Not as efficient as I can be, but I can still appreciate death. In fact, I have to deliver a gift to my sweet sister's wedding. Death shall make a wonderful gift from Lord Voldemort."
"She's calling herself Lord Voldemort? Whose sister, Narcissa? "This is no longer funny, Hermione!"

When Hermione laughed, ice tricked up her spine. *That wasn't a natural sound.* "Oh, you mistake me for the girl." Hermione, or whatever it was that looked like her, tilted her head and grinned madly. "I'm here to punish them all, kill them for embracing sodomy and those disgusting homosexual unions, just like you! And if I can kill more mudbloods and raise them to be my army, so much the better!"

Delores' eyes widened as she turned to see the bodies shambling in from the Forbidden Forest. It was the Final Battle all over again. "But... It can't be! You're not him! You can't be..."

'Hermione' let her face melt away as the glamour charm dissipated, and Delores frantically dove her hands into her robes to grab her wand, only to find herself bound in magical ropes. Umbridge was left staring into the rotting face of Bellatrix Lestrange, wearing a misshapen skull as a mask that was caked with blood and grime, black tendrils of hair jutting out in every direction that reminded her of Medusa.

"Behold Lord Voldemort, settling an old score with the blood traitors in the Ministry."

"Bellatrix, you've gone mad! You're... you're wearing..." Her stomach heaved as she understood the smell she had noticed before, realizing the stench of death came back as the glamour faded.

"Bellatrix? I am not she, I am me. I -" Bellatrix shook her head in a staggering, inhuman way. "...you say these things to confuse me! Why do you lie to Lord Voldemort?! ANSWER ME!" Bellatrix's wand was pressed so hard against her throat that she couldn't swallow.

"I do not... oh..." *I have to warn someone!* As soon as her anger came, it disappeared as Bellatrix smiled at her. *There was something seriously wrong with all of this.*

"Do not fear, Delores. Our goals have... always... been the same. Punish the wicked, protect the Pure of blood." *She's even creepier when she's happy and nice to me.* "I never got to thank you for making Harry carve himself in order to silence him about my return."

"Your face... you're wearing... Merlin, save me!"

"There is something wrong with my face? No, I cannot have this. Then, my friend, I am sorry, but I will need to borrow yours." *Borrow my face? OH MY GOD OH MY GOD...* "Yes, face for the faceless. Hide in sight I must Face with... yes must go, wear the face, kill the sodomite, protect the Pure."

A skeletal thumb gouged through her right eye, pulling Umbridge to her knees as Bellatrix's wand summoned Delores' femur bone out of her leg, tearing through flesh and skin as she screamed in agony.

"Be quiet, Delores! You are doing me a favor!" Delores was unarmed, tied up, and she screamed as she watched her own leg bone bash her in the head, knocking her to the ground. "Face for the faceless. I need the face."

The last thing she saw was broken yellow teeth biting and tearing at her eyebrow, sucking out her remaining eyeball. The fist pulled her up to her feet again and she could hear Voldemort's voice clearly through the pain and the blood, and she smelled the rotting army come closer and the ground shook as they all marched in step together. *I need to stop this...*

Delores began to crawl away, uncertain when her ankles and wrists were unbound and she was blind as she hoped she was getting away from Bellatrix and her Inferi army.
Percy had his orders, and he was more than happy to carry them out. The Malfoys got away with far too much, and now that their little coup toppled the regime that had been so good to him? He was more than happy to be there, polyjuiced as Hermione, ready to cut down the traitorous woman. He wasn't really certain when his loyalties changed; Minister Thicknesse had made a lot of sense about the dangers of the muggle-born and their social ills. Squibs were being born at a higher rate than ever, and morality was being undermined with this 'anything-goes' mentality that had Ogden and Umbridge willing to dilute the Purebloods with the dirty, diseased blood of muggles.

It made him sick to think of his own father, cavorting about with that simple slip of a girl, Jane, Jessica, whatever. He shrugged the name off and hoped he would be the one to cut her down, alongside his polluted father.

When he met his distant relative Bellatrix Lestrange, he knew he had finally come home. They understood right from wrong, and had the conviction to fix the world. Only The Dark Lord, with his attempts to defeat death in order to escape the prophecy that said he had to die, seemed to be the right side in this conflict. He pitied his mother and brothers for getting duped into Albus Dumbledore's clutches, being lured into the sodomite's vision for destroying society.

He had started the Unmarked program, in order to serve The Dark Lord without raising any suspicion. Once he got word that Proudfoot was given carte blanche to use the Imperius Curse to hunt down and kill known Death Eaters, Percy quickly set about flipping the Auror's loyalties by absconding him and putting him under multiple layers of a Confundus, sealing them in his mind so that the magic that ensured his loyalty to the Ministry were fooled as he instead served The Dark Lord's wishes and would have ordinary citizens hunting down the Undesirables.

Percy saw the decorations for the outdoor wedding and put down small vials of a volatile potion under the rows of seats, each of them tied together by a protean charm. When one was smashed, all of them would blow up. He pocketed an empty vial in his other pocket as the trigger for it as he heard Cho's voice call out to him.

"Hermione! What are you doing here? Why aren't you dressed yet?"

Percy shrugged, looking way too nervous to respond.

"Nervous? I can understand that, well you need to get into the castle and get ready, okay?" Percy nodded, glad to have gotten away with it then. He made his way into the castle and up the grand staircase, knowing exactly which room held his target. A witch and a wizard went by and he had to duck behind a hanging tapestry so he wouldn't be seen, recognizing the voice of Odette Parkinson as some of the traitorous Purebloods who needed to be purged. He was about to raise his wand and cut them down before he stopped himself.

"Not yet, don't ruin the objective."

He made his way down the hallway and into Narcissa's quarters. She was dressed in classic muggle male attire and was leaning over a crib to check up on the abomination she had created with Hermione. Would their perversions never cease?

The hissing sound of a ginger cat startled Narcissa, who turned to look at him and was confused as to why the cat was hissing and arched up dangerously. A house elf popped into existence, cursing about having to obey the pets now and disappeared with the baby in its arms as the large orange cat pounced up in order to attack him.

"Crookshanks! What are you doing to Hermione?" Narcissa asked as the polyjuiced Percy blasted the cat with a banishing charm, making a sickening crack as it impacted the railing of the baby crib, snapping bones as the impact cracked the skull and broke the neck, leaving the feline to bleed out.
onto the cold stone floor. As Narcissa reached for her wand, Percy used his Sweet Mistress' own spell, making her abdomen explode outward and leaving her prone on the floor.

The woman lay huddled in a fetal position, quickly casting a stasis charm over herself to stop the bleeding as Percy disarmed her of her wand.

"For the crime of creating that abomination, Sweet Mistress has decided that you shall never conceive again. And now that we have the Wand of Destiny, we can unbind the tapestry. Bellatrix sends her regards." He stomped on the woman with his boot and kicked her a few times before he pulled her left arm out and pinned it to the ground with his knee. Using the *Sectumsempra* curse, Percy went to work to carve **BLOOD TRAITOR** into her flesh, then spat upon her, and left.

Narcissa lay gutted on the ground, surprised that she was able to put a stasis charm on her body even as she felt lightheaded from the lack of blood. In the distance she heard her sister's voice cry out, "**Rise, my children! RISE! It is a new day; all that was dead shall rise and the living must fall. RISE!**"

People screamed as the death rattles of Inferi approached... *way too many inferi...* and she staggered to her feet and reached for her wand to try and find Hermione. Cissy saw her wife's dead familiar and was going to have to hope that Surly had taken Carina someplace safe. She conjured some fabric and wrapped up her bleeding left arm, the pain nothing in comparison to massive hole that used to be her uterus. Cissy summoned and closed up her tactical robes, taking any edge that she could at this point as she heard chaos happen and spell-fire erupted uselessly against the undead.

She didn't want to know, but she had to as she cast a diagnostic charm on herself. *Massive damage, death by exsanguination imminent*. Cissy grit her teeth as she pulled out a blood replenishment potion from her robes and downed it, and decided to also take the Brimstone potion along with a narcotic pain killer. Narcissa felt her magic compress itself down and concentrate, blood vessels rupturing in her sclera and eardrums, turning her eyes red and blood trickling out of one ear as her muscles tensed with a buildup of energy at the cost of her own longevity. *Either this will kill me now, or let me live long enough to save her.*

She didn't know how long her senses and abilities would be running this hot, so she would have to take full advantage as long as she could. Narcissa closed her eyes and reached out through her bond to try and find Hermione, to peruse her most recent memory, but found herself unable to focus amid the fighting outside and the adrenaline flooding her veins. Panic slammed through her.

"**HERPY!**" Cissy called, forgetting that she was dead. "**HERP-SURLY!**" The House Elf didn't come, however. Narcissa couldn't recall what Crookshanks had told her, but it more than likely included some sort of 'do not return until it is safe' order. *Probably for the best.*

As Narcissa put her free hand against the pit that used to be her abdomen only to feel blood seeping through the garment. *Slytherin's Snake, I'm still bleeding!* She reinforced the stasis charm on her organs as she made her way down the stairs and out of the castle. Something about the fake Hermione's words bothered her as she had taken in the battlefield ahead of her. This was unreal; it was worse than the Final Battle at Hogwarts, with ten times as many combatants than before. Patronuses flew out in every direction as reinforcements were being begged for as the Inferi just seemed to rise out from the ground.

Severus and Fleur were levitating mid-air, back to back, throwing fire and immolating the undead as fast as they could, but were barely making a dent as the undead throng threatened to overrun...
everyone. Among the inferi were Hermione's parents, Viktor Krum, and Luna. It was only a matter of seconds before they all were surrounded and killed. Molly, George, and Kingsley were blasting hexes at them as the Inferi slowly made their way past the dying bodies of Arthur, Jennifer and Madame Pomfrey, while Minerva lobbed large fire bombs into the dense crowd of Inferi.

Cissy was hoping that the Aurors were on their way with the conflagration rounds in their rifles, since nothing else seemed to really slow them down. As Arthur, Viktor, and Luna stood back up, Narcissa could see something was different about them. There was a glint of understanding in those eyes, and when they started to move with an unnatural quickness, something way too fast for Inferi. *The magical people who died were vampire fast now.*

As far as her eye could see, undead flesh rose from the earth and shambled forward, and the ringleader was nowhere in sight. The Inferi weren't measurable in the hundreds, or even the thousands, but in the tens of thousands. It was in that moment that Narcissa realized that this wasn't a skirmish, or even a war. *This was pure annihilation.*

Aurors and the Hit Wizards apparated in, wands and rifles at the ready, firing every kind of fire spell and potion rounds into the crowd of Inferi until they started to see the faster ones running through the crowd and they took down some of the Hit Wizards that stood too close to the skirmish line. Within thirty seconds, they had died and become the faster type of Inferi. Some of the Aurors panicked at the sight of Luna Lovegood staring at them, chewing on the flesh in her mouth, and saw a Hit Wizard's broken body shambling upright with vampire quickness despite the massive chunk of flesh missing from his neck that had his spine visible to daylight.

Someone exclaimed 'MERLIN FUCK!' as the now deceased mediwitch Madame Pomfrey ran him down and started to devour him alive.

The undead Arthur turned towards his former wife, mouth scarlet with fresh blood, unafraid of all the wands out. It was like in Saint Mungo's hospital: no fear, no thought of saving itself. *Did they have the Resurrection Stone?*! Arthur had ripped Molly's wand arm off of her body until tendons and red muscle could be seen in the daylight, blood gushing out ruined shoulder and drenching both of them with blood.

An Auror shot them both in the head with potion rounds; the head rocked back, the spatter of potion sizzling as it mixed with the dried blood, but Arthur wasn't stopped by it. *They don't have enough conflagration rounds, they are depending on the acid ones!* His jaw was deep in Molly as he took a bite. Fleur flew over and point-blank shot him in the face, repeatedly, with fireballs from her hands until his head was charred and gone. He still tried to stagger over Molly as she died, still screaming.

The Hit-Wizards and Aurors doubled back as they realized that their own deaths would make the vampire-fast, werewolf-hungry type of Inferi.

A nearby Hit Wizard trembled in fear. "Minister, I don't think I can do this! This isn't a skirmish against a dark wizard, this isn't even bloody war!"

Harry's amplified voice boomed overhead. "The Minister is down. Aurors and Hit-Wizards, fall back and use fire against the undead. Fiendfyre works best! If you're bitten, you're dead, so FALL BACK!" Minerva was surrounded by the faster Inferi and she transfigured the ground around her into a pit of lava, killing herself and all of the Inferi that blindly shuffled forward into it. *The Scottish battle axe was dead.* The Hit Wizard looked up at Narcissa, fresh tears shining in his eyes. "I can't do this. We're all going to die."

Narcissa nodded as she contemplated what to do. This wizard wasn't a soldier, but we all needed to
survive and that meant he had to be someone … harsher. So she cast the Imperious curse on him and ordered him to fight the Inferi without fear.

Draco, Harry, and Ginny were on brooms and also throwing fire down at the army of undead that was pouring on them. This was way too many undead all here, all at once. She walks out onto the grass and feels dizzy for a moment as she realizes that she's gone deaf in one ear, throwing off of her balance momentarily. No wonder it sounded somewhat silent out here. Cissy’s free hand feels wet as she looks down and sees that she is freely bleeding onto the grass now as she realizes Elladora’s words have finally come true.

"All shall be unbound and unwound as the wingless bird flies, Septimus' blood betrays blood, and poppies bleed their death upon the wedded grass as silence grows deafening.

The dead will be borne again as the lion and serpent clash in loving misery as the black swan lie gutted in a pool of her own blood."

Kingsley was bitten and blasted the undead back away from him, using his free hand to cover his wound as he stumbled to one knee, yelling at Molly and George to get away from him. "I can... MERLIN!" The Minister staggered to his feet, pulled a vial out of his pocket, and started to drag himself deep into the oncoming horde as he yelled to the others to get back.

No no... don't do that... don't do what I think...

Kingsley Shacklebolt must have had a large vial of conflagration potion as he single-handedly took out an entire city block at the edge of the lake, and Cissy could only estimate a few thousand Inferi were destroyed in that one hit. That it had barely decimated the Inferi army that was slowly marching upon us... that it was only a tenth of them... This was pure extermination, and she knew her sister Bellatrix's necromancy was at work here.

Come on, Cissy, think! What else did Elladora say about this?!

Narcissa scoured her memories and tried to remember the last lines about the Harbinger.

"Dementor, Thestral, and Unicorn wilt weave within the wood of the world as the young girl waits to live and rebuff the stains of sin."

Young girl waits to live? Narcissa couldn't make sense of that, but she remembered the bracelet that Bertrand gave her at Yule. The Unicorns had long since run away from Hogwarts due to the Final Battle. She cast another diagnostic charm on herself, feeling herself pale as she saw the cost of the Brimstone Potion still taking away her longevity. Fifteen years and counting... and I am still slowly bleeding out.

She knew she had to get to her wife, to explain what was happening. Her head swam with vertigo as she shook it off violently, closed her eyes, and touched the bracelet as she made herself twist into nothingness in order to find her wife.

The Harbinger Approaches.
A Black redeems with Light.
The Deathstick shall kill no more.

Narcissa got a flash of Hermione's recent memory, seeing that she was laid out on a white stone table, with a stone Angel of Death with a scythe in its hands nearby. Little Hangleton!

My eyes were open as I tried to make sense of what had just happened. Ron stunned me, and my
arm hurts. I look and see that I was cut, and realize that I'm restrained on a stone table as a foul stench was in the air.

"I've waited for this, pretty little mudblood." Oh bloody fuck! Dolohov is here!

My mind reeled at that information. Ron kidnapped me from my wedding and now I'm bound, without my wand, and Dolohov is going to kill and rape me... and in that order if I'm lucky. A silver dagger pressed against my neck as I tried to look behind me, but the pressure of the tip told me that I was to remain still.

"Don't spoil my good time. I get to have you all to myself for the next twenty minutes before... well, let's just say that the war isn't over yet."

I have to get out of this! I tried to distract him and stop his knife from trailing down my body as he was cutting the robes off of me.

"What happens in twenty minutes? Why do you think the war isn't over yet?"

The Time-Turners are all destroyed...

The tip of the blade scratched my skin as he gripped my wedding dress, making a sawing motion with the blade as it cut down my sternum and he re-positioned his grip to pull my bra up, slicing through that as well. I felt the elastic snap and the underwire break from the sudden change of force as Dolohov wheezed his pleasure as the knife kept going down through the gown that I was going to marry Narcissa in.

"I am going to fucking kill you for this, you Death Eater bastard!" I screamed as I spat in his face. Kill me first, please kill me first...

"Aw, Muddy doesn't like knives? Not what I heard from Bella..."

"As soon as I get out of these bonds you're going to wish you were never born!" I spat at Dolohov, the sputum landing directly in his face. Dolohov didn't get angry, however. He had his wand pointed right at my face and my heart thumped in my chest as he cast the spell.

"Langlock!"

My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth, and if I struggled too hard, I'd suffocate myself. Even if I had a wand in my hand, it would be harder to cast a spell now.

Dolohov cut through the dress and splayed it open, exposing my body as he took the blade to my panties and sliced it apart over one hip before the other.

Rage boiled inside of me, and I realized that I only had one chance to do this perfectly. No wand, no voice, just me and my magic. My intent to do harm.

IMPERIO!

Dolohov's blade went from my hips to his own neck, eyes warily fixed on mine. "You won't do this to me. You can't, you're too weak, muddy's..." His voice gurgled as blood gushed into his larynx, bubbles of air frothing out of the wound as blood slowly seeped into his lungs. He looked down at me, surprised that I was able to cast an Unforgivable without a wand as he felt his hand move over and over, sinking deep into his neck as his hot blood squirted out with each desperate beat of his heart until he fell over, drowning slowly from within.
Well that showed him. I cursed, realizing that I was still bound down to the stone table and had no idea what curse they used to bind me to it.

Cissy... I don't know where I am, help me... please.

"You're in... urg... Little Hangleton, my love." Narcissa's strained voice startled me and I turned my head to look for her as I felt the magical bonds released from me as I sat up, hands checking my neck and body for any bleeding wounds.

"You came. You saved me!" I took in my wife, who looked pale and haggard. Her eyes were Voldemort-red and her pupils were blown, and there was a deathly look about her. She's taken Brimstone and yet looks like she's at Death's Door. "What happened?" I asked, expecting the worst.

"Bellatrix." Cissy forced out. "No time." She looked at the ground where Dolohov's body lay. "You saved yourself." Cissy began to undo her tactical robes as I got off of the table, giving up the wedding gown as ruined. I looked around and saw the tombstones and realized that we were in the graveyard where Tom Riddle was buried. Oh Merlin, this is bad...

"What do you mean, no time? Dolohov said something about the war not being over yet..." Narcissa had a hand on the table, steadying herself by leaning on it as she stripped and handed me her bracelet. Her hand was soaked in blood. Cissy... why aren't you healing?

"You have Dementor and... thestral there. You need," she coughed, blood aspirating out her mouth, "Unicorn. Take it.

I put the Tactical Robes on to cover my naked body and pocketed the bracelet. "What are you talking about?" My hand came away with blood, making me look over my wife again and I saw what she had been hiding before. There was a stasis charm on her abdomen, the last-ditch effort to keep her body intact and from bleeding to death. I looked around and realized that I had no wand now, and my mind reeled at the implications.

My wife is dying and that bitch Trixymort has the Elder Wand.

"Har...Harbin." She took a shallow breath. "Harbinger. You must destroy the... wand." She collapsed to the ground like dead weight, and my heart sank as her head hit the ground with finality.

I panicked as it started to sink in and I took Narcissa's wand away from her and cast a diagnostic charm. She should have already bled to death. According to her vital signs and her quick heartbeat, she's dead already.

"Cissy?" Hot tears ran down my cheek. "CISSY!" I pulled my wife to me and rocked her as blood poured out of her eyes, ears, and abdomen. I was able to see that she had been killed with Bella's entrail-exploding curse a while ago, and that she was staving off death with the stasis charm and the Infernal class potion. I felt some sort of magic dissipate from me as I held and rocked my wife's body, my lips pressed against her cool forehead.

My throat hurt, but I didn't remember screaming. I had no idea how long I had been there, nor did I care. The one woman who stood beside me and supported me through everything, who walked through hell with me, was now gone.

"No... no... I love you... I love you..." I said as a mantra to myself, lost in the moment and wishing that I were dead instead.

Percy and The Dark Mistress played the diversion perfectly as they made it into the Department of
Mysteries without any trouble. Ogden had incapacitated the last Unspeakable, Croaker, weeks ago. The Dark Lord had been told by his Unspeakable Death Eater, Rookwood, about the Fate Chamber. It was locked at all times in order to protect the Fates from doing exactly what they were about to do.

*It was locked with the Wand of Destiny specifically by Albus Dumbledore so that no other wand could open it.*

"**LIBEROPORTUS!!**"

The doorway opened and the pair of them made their way into the giant chamber. Three women seemed to be working on some sort of magical textile, the threads and strands weaving into and out of each other as it covered the walls of the room just like an Arithmancy problem, except that this was infinitely complex. There was unseen music coming from the room and Percy's eyes darted around in an attempt to figure out where it was coming from, only to realize that the luminescent strands weaving around like Arithmancy was humming both with power and with the sound of the orchestral music.

*We were standing before the Moirai, the Fates themselves.*

"Lower your wand, mortal. You cannot kill a God." Said the woman standing before a distaff, spinning the magical threads that wove itself into the tapestry.

"Your path ends here, eater of shadows." The second woman replied as she pulled a thread from the tapestry and measured it out for the third.

"Child of Septimus Weasley, why are you here?" The third woman asked the ginger boy as she snipped the thread before her, watching it fade from existence.

His Dark Mistress looked at the tapestry and started to cast spells at it, though nothing happened.

"You cannot change Fate, Bellatrix." Clotho said haughtily.

"This is not your charge." Lachesis sneered at her.

"You should leave now." Atropos warned the redhead, snipping yet another stand as the music grew louder, making the Moirai look at each other in alarm as Bellatrix began to sing an incantation as the temperature dropped in the room.

\[
O Fortuna velut luna statu variabilis, 
semper crescis aut decrescis; 
vita detestabilis nunc obdurat 
et tunc curat ludo mentis aciem.. .
\]

The Fates were unable to move from their positions, even as they cowed and kept working on the Tapestry of Fate. Bellatrix put away her wand and brought her clawed hands up to the skull mask adhered to her face, pulling away with an unnatural wet squelch as liquid darkness poured out of her, letting Dementor after Dementor flood out of her body like she was a walking Trojan Horse, sucking hungrily after everything bright and living in the room as Percy recognized the Lethifolds' sharpened shadows piercing through himself and the Fates alike, crawling up the walls and slicing away at the fading strands that tried to re-knit itself.

\[
Sors immanis et inanis, 
rota tu volubilis, 
status malus, 
vana salus semper dissolubilis,
\]
As Percy bled out on the floor he saw his Dark Mistress take the wand out of his hand and slice away at the Tapestry, shredding reality back to before The Dark Lord was killed, expanded on a single moment, and tore a gash in reality and pulled the two of them into that moment of time.

We won.
We're back in the JKR Canon world, folks. In case you're curious about some things that aren't fully explained, look it up. I've been using actual mythology in order to keep this as real-world as possible.

EDIT: almost-canon... Rose Weasley was supposed to be born in 2006.

So I have over 651,000 hits on this story just on fanfiction.net alone, not including this site. I'm grateful to all of you for reading this.

NIN song correlations: I have one more for both Hermione and Narcissa at the end. This isn't the end.

Hermione : Right Where it Belongs

"...What if everything around you - Isn't quite as it seems? - What if all the world you think you know - Is an elaborate dream? And if you look at your reflection - Is it all you want it to be? - What if you could look right through the cracks? - Would you find yourself... Find yourself afraid to see?

What if all the world's inside of your head - Just creations of your own? - Your devils and your gods - All the living and the dead - And you're really all alone? You can live in this illusion - You can choose to believe - You keep looking but you can't find the woods - While you're hiding in the trees..."

"Ssh, it's okay, I won't harm you," I whispered as I spooned the woman from behind. I looked out the window and saw a raven perched on the tree branch, seeking refuge from the early morning sunrise as the witch in my arms turned to face me.

"Are you sure?" she asked worriedly. "You should go… If we're seen together…" The older witch said, her voice hoarse from crying. I looked intently at the woman, awestruck at my luck at finding love with this beautiful creature. Her features reminded me of someone… someone important. Someone who was just a thought out of reach in my mind. I should recall her, but it's slipping...

"I won't leave you here in this state… You look broken, exhausted, and-" I stopped talking and grasped her hand. "You're cold..." I whispered. The woman looked down on our joined hands and I realized that my own hands must have felt like they were burning against hers. The woman lifted her gaze and looked into my eyes. She should be able to think right inside my head. This woman is so beautiful – those eyes, those pink lips, those breasts… Oh Merlin.

Neither of us knew who instigated the kiss, but it was definitely reciprocated by both of us. I
wrapped my arms around her waist and leaned back so she could be on top. Everything disappeared around as we found ourselves on an enormous bed. Above us were swirling lights among the stars that were twinkling... no, they were going out. The stars above were fading from the night sky as the bed felt a bit too firm beneath me.

"Hermione."

I didn't care about anything but having this woman in my arms forever. She kissed me again and I felt her responding and holding me tight. I let my hands wander across her delicious body, exploring her soft skin and hoping the name would come to me. When I cupped her breasts, they filled my hands with an honest weight as her voice trickled in, but sounded off. Teeth scraped my neck and I was too aroused as I found both of us naked as the swirling lights dimmed around us. Her fingers traced and pinched my nipples and I arched into it, urging her lips and teeth to clench around my breast as we have done many times before. We hadn't had sex in so long, but Slytherin's Snake, how I have missed her!

"Hermione, wake up!"

I cried as my nipple was seized in her teeth, my hand trailing down to find her heat and slide my fingers into her folds, needing to find our mutual release. She kissed her way up my chest and jawline and I peered into the blue eyes as I felt cool fingers delve into me.

"Our time is limited. Heed my warning, Harbinger."

"It's Hermione." I gasped, eyes flickering open to see the room we were in was darker than before. Weren't we outside under the stars? Why doesn't my wife remember my name? Why don't I remember hers? Her fingers curl into me and I begin to rock into the sensation, needing to crest and break by her touch. I found her center and worked my way into her, eliciting a sweet gasp as I flicked my thumb in a tight circle and my two middle fingers reached home as she threw back her head in ecstasy.

"Okay, if you insist..."

"Of course I insist, wife."

"I'm not... you're dreaming, but... don't stop..."

Our lips clashed together as my wife bucked her hips towards me, letting me get a better angle inside her wet folds. The raven-blond haired woman groaned into the kiss as she enjoyed the merciless thrusting. It didn't take long and she was over the edge with the most intense orgasm she ever had. She screamed into my mouth as we kissed as her fingers hit home and set me off as well, my eyes rolling up to the ceiling and realizing the circling lights looked like Narcissa's Arithmancy problem... fading into nothingness.

Narcissa...

My eyes open blearily, and my head is pounding from the inside out. I try to sit up, only to realize that I'm in St. Mungo's.

This isn't right. St. Mungo's burned to the ground from the...

"You're alive!" The voice was attached to my hand, which squeezed to the point of crushing my knuckles. I pulled my hand away, feeling uncomfortable as I realize that I wasn't holding my wife's hand.
"Let go... where's my Cissy?" My eyes forced themselves to focus on the redhead by my bed and I panicked as I saw it was Ronald. "HELP!" My hands flailed as I tried to reach for a wand, only to see that I was tied down and couldn't really move. "MEDIWITCH! SURLY!"

"Sweetie, it's me, it's your Ron." There was something different in his eyes, something... scared? He was holding himself back, unsure as to why he was getting this kind of treatment.

"What do you mean, my Ron?!" I exclaimed, turning to face the mediwizard who came in and checked my vitals. "Get him out of here!"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave, the patient-"

'-she's my wife! I'm allowed to be here!"

"I'm your WHAT?!" I yelled, panic rising.

"-point is, you're alive, and that's all that matters. Blimey, 'Mione, we were all concerned about you."

I shook my head, looking at the nurse. "What potions have you administered to me? Did I get dosed in the wrong order, Severus mentioned something about 'canned coma'."

"That's not funny."

What's funny? "I wasn't making a joke. I just recall Draco getting treated and Cissy getting all worked up over- What?"

"Snape died in the Battle of Hogwarts."

"You must be mistaken. Severus survived, was Headmaster and dating Fleur-"

Ron looked at the Mediwitch nervously. "No, don't tell the Healer, she's just confused is all-"

The mediwitch shook her head sadly. "He said she might need to be transferred into the Janus Thickey Ward, it's much more comfortable for long-term patients."

Long-term? They are going to lock me up here?! "What's going on? Why am I here?" Why is St. Mungo's still standing?

"Hermione, tell her you were joking. You know what's happened. Rose was found-"

"Rose?"

"Our daughter. I was working late, and... you don't remember, do you?"

"My Daughter's name is Carina." Ron's face fell at that as the Mediwitch left the room.

"Hermione, you're here because you had a miscarriage."

"I was pregnant?"

"Yeah, supposed to be a boy, you picked out the names Rose and Hugo."

Why on earth would I name my children... Ron smiled as he continued his explanation.

"Our first date, real first date, was to see Les Misérables on stage. I loved it so much that you told me there was a book, translated by Julie Rose and written by Victor Hugo."
I was going to name our children after a liberal-minded French author and the woman who translated it into English...? "That um, actually sounds like me."

"Which reminds me, your manuscript was approved and here's a preliminary copy."

"Manuscript?"

"I was told to expect some memory loss from the... well, you got to translate the Tales of Beedle the Bard from the original runes so all the muggle-borns could enjoy it. You even put in Albus Dumbledore's notations that were in your private copy."

I had thought about doing that, but... Focus, Granger. "Ron, I think something happened..."

A look of grief washed over his face.

"Yeah, you've been lying to me this whole time. What is it? You really didn't want kids and just placated me? Or is there someone else? Have you met some other bloke?"

"What? No... How is it we're married?" I felt confused, my mind muddled with too many thoughts.

"You finally said yes, after Molly nagged me to ask after the Final Battle."

Ugh. How romantic.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember any of this. I need my wand."

"Fancy a nip of liquid courage?"

"What do you have there?"

"Fire-whiskey, of course."

"I shouldn't. I'm breastfeeding Carina, but thanks. I should just get some water."

Ronald stupefied me at point-blank range. I tried to access my wife's last memory but it was't there. I couldn't remember anything, and it felt like her presence was completely missing from me. What happened to our Bonding?!

"I um, do you think I can see Narcissa?" Ron went from incredulous to baffled as the Healer came in and cast a diagnostic charm over me.

"You want to see Mrs. Malfoy? Healer, what potions did you give her?"

"I'm fine, let me up. Severus can vouch I don't abuse potions."

"Misses Weasley, Headmaster Severus Snape has been dead for almost a year. And as for you, I've had your blood tested for baneberry, bloodroot, moonstone... all of the known abortifacients, really. You're lucky to be alive. Harry and Minister Shacklebolt won't press charges against you if you tell them your supplier."

Ron turned to the Healer. "Thanks, we get it. How is Rose?"

"She's fine, accidents happen all the time. Though maybe you shouldn't use wards from the war around children."

I was stunned at the news. "I wouldn't do this! Your tests must be wrong, the cauldron was
contaminated-

The Healer conjured a mirror and handed it to me. "The first step is admitting you have a problem." I saw the tell-tale blue freckles at my temples that came with habitual potion abuse.

Ron looked away in shame, his voice filled with guilt. "When we found you passed out, I cancelled your glamour charm and saw that."

"We?" I asked.

"Rose and I. Your own bloody daughter, 'Mione! Merlin, it's like you want to die and don't even care that it killed Hugo!"

*I'm married to Ronald and the Healers think I tried to kill myself while pregnant.* This can't be right, can't be real...

"I... I need to go. I need to get out of here." I struggled against the magical binding as Ron tried to calm me down. The healer's wand was pointed at me and everything went dark.

My eyes open to blonde hair, and I start to smile thinking it's Fleur.

"Hey, Fury." I say groggily.

"Hermione? I'm a pacifist." Definitely not my friend Fleur.

"Luna?" My eyes focus on her smile as she's got something magically knitting itself together as she charms different colors into the yarn.

"Yeah, Ronald and Harry had to go testify today, so I volunteered to stay here in case you woke up." What day is it?

"Testify?"

"Lucius' trial. It's the trial of the century, it seems. I just... didn't want to have to be there and was allowed to recuse myself from testifying by saying I'm here to take care of you."

*Sounds like Luna doesn't like being reminded of her stay in Malfoy Manor.* That seems familiar at least.

"How is it going?"

"Well he's already demanded that Draco be pardoned for his involvement because Lucius had forced him to take the Dark Mark. It's really swayed the Wizengamot; he's not the man he used to be. At least not on the surface."

"He never was."

"He sure looks repentant, but his wife looks... just plain beaten."

*My Cissy looks beaten? She's still married to that man who hated and did horrible things to her... Slytherin's Mudblood Whore.*

"Hey, did Ron tell you that I seem to have amnesia?" I look down at my arms and see the "MUDBLOOD" scar still visible on my left arm. On the right, the Ouroboros mark that The Dark Lord left on me was gone, and yet I could still feel its weight upon me.
"Yeah, what do you last remember?" she asked.

I rotated my left arm to show off the scar. "This."

A haunted look went over her face as she recounted her rescue by Harry, Ron, and Kreacher. Apparently we all escaped and I ran off with Harry and Ronald to break into Gringotts to destroy Hufflepuff’s cup.

"So Fleur and Bill?"

"-stayed out of the war in Shell Cottage. She gave birth to their daughter Victoire, same day that Harry defeated Voldemort."

"Wait, Harry defeated The Dark-um, Voldemort? Would that make him the owner of the Elder Wand?"

"Yeah, Voldemort killed Harry, or at least thought he did, and Harry came back and defeated Voldemort by bouncing off yet another killing curse. Something about Harry’s scar making him a walking Horcrux. Which, by the way, isn’t common knowledge."

I nodded. "Neither would be who owns the Elder Wand, right?"

She frowned at that. "He kind of mentioned that out loud during the battle. Some things never change. "But he did publicly destroy it; snapped it in two and burned it to ash." Really?"

"I didn't think that was possible."

"Least that's what all the papers have reported. I think Ron had a fake one built to look like it and they destroyed that instead."

"So how does this make me married to Ron?"

Luna shrugged. "I have no idea. I mean, there had been a bit of an interest in your school days, sure, but I was shocked when I heard you two eloped. You must have driven a hard bargain or something."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the Hermione Granger I knew wouldn’t have had children right after the war. I mean, you still finished your final year at Hogwarts while Harry and Ronald took the field commission as Aurors to avoid their N.E.W.T. exams, but you were already pregnant again when you sat the test."

"Wait, what's the date?"

"May 27th, 1999. Teddy Lupin just had his first birthday."

"And Voldemort was defeated by Harry?"

"May second, last year. Lost quite a few good people. Tonks, Professors Lupin and Snape to mention a few." My heart sank at the thought of Severus. What was it he said before? The Fates are in play?

"Bill and Fleur are alive though?"

"Happily married still, he's scarred up and she's as gorgeous as ever."
"No wings then?"

Luna chuckled. "No wings, Fleur is only half-Veela. If she were to transform, it would be permanent."

I nodded, my mind's eye replaying the moment Fleur did just that in the middle of Gringotts. The wings reminded me of the raven in my dream, the one where I made love to my wife... Mórrígan?

**Harry mentioned the Grim when Neville died.** "What about Neville?"

"Apprenticing with Sprout; Hogwarts was approved to get a cutting of Yggdrasil and it's pretty labor-intensive to get it properly rooted. Apparently it's really useful to siphon away the remnants of Dark Magic from the year that... you know."

"The Carrows." I said darkly.

"Yeah." Luna said, her eyes remembering something before they shot up in surprise. "Hey, you remembered that!"

This all feels really weird; like this isn't right.

"Luna, what do you know of the Unspeakables?" Luna's small smile faltered at that.

"My mother, Pandora, was one. I don't talk about it much; Cassandra's Curse makes it hard for people to want to hear anything I say, no matter how outlandish or true it is." *Was this why everyone would shrug off whatever she says and assume she's crazy?*

"I want to listen. Did she tell you much about her work?"

"She wasn't supposed to, but she could leave me clues. Her last mission was to go rescue Quirrell because he overstayed his visa in a foreign country, then she came home and must have accidentally blown up her cauldron." *That still doesn't add up.*

"Why would they send an Unspeakable for that?"

"I had wondered that myself for a long time. It wasn't until long after the war it was divulged that the Death Eater Rookwood was also an Unspeakable, and that he caused a lot of chaos when he defected. He even killed Bode with that Devil's Snare in St. Mungo's to cover up his trail. When Croaker finally captured him, the truth finally came out. My mother could have averted the wizarding war if she had captured Quirrell in Romania."

*The cauldron wasn't an accident.*

"I'm so sorry, Luna." She smiled wistfully at that.

"She and I shared a lot of the fairy tales. I think my father got obsessed with the Deathly Hallows in hopes to see her again."

"If I say something that sounds... improbably fantastic... would you listen to me with an open mind?"

"Of course."

"I think reality has been shifted and I'm the only one who realizes it. Or I don't belong in this reality and there's another Hermione somewhere else that's just as baffled as I am."

"Okay, that's an interesting hypothesis." Luna pulls out a pair of charmed spectacles and her
eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Yeah, you don't look like my Hermione. You're a fighter who wants to live, and you've used Dark Magic."

"So you don't think I'm your Hermione."

"She tried to kill herself with a poison after giving up on finding peace with the Goblins." Of course there's a Goblin Rebellion.

"None of this feels real, or right, or... well, my Luna once mentioned Elder's Bane, and I think that means... me."

"That would be quite exciting, but I've definitely never mentioned it."

"Well, you did... but in the other reality I was in. It's like maybe I'm the only one in the eye of the storm." Luna perked up at this like it were a puzzle to solve.

"Alright, but even still, the legend of Elder's Bane involves two prophecies, and something called the Cataclysm."

I nodded excitedly. "I know that one! 'Destiny's End... comes at the end of the Cataclysm... Darkness is swallowed as the Earth gives up her graves... And the Lineage of Blood will be broken in an act of true love... Once Fate is Twisted, Elder's Bane approaches, and none will come after.' And I think I had an avatar of Fate contact me in my dreams... So you're saying that there is a second prophecy?"

"Hermione Weasley, when did you become a believer?"

I shuddered at the name. "Oh that sounds... so wrong! What can you just tell me about it? Do you know the Prophecy?!"

"I can do better than that. I have it memorized. It's short and sounds like a poem."

"Elder's Bane. As a woman fights for love
Becomes a wife by ending life
As a woman fights for love.
Morals shed and Shadows fled
Magic fails and Fate is bled
As a woman fights for love.
Elder's bane lies in the fist
Ouroboros 'round its wrist."

I say the last line at the same time with her. "..As a woman fights for love."

I will destroy the Elder Wand.
Hermione Granger finds herself back in the Canon-ish world that we know from Pottermore that turns into the ‘17 years later’ epilogue, and it's much darker than she expected.

A/N: I've been having trouble getting this out and making certain it's fully explaining what's going on. I think that the rest of this story is going to be in Hermione's first person point-of-view. Anyways, here's a fic rec: The-Scientist. Fanfiction Story ID: 11118152.

I looked at my reflection in the hand-mirror and could tell it was my face, but it wasn't me. There was something missing, my eyes seemed flat and weary, like I had somehow burned out and given up ages ago. By my bed were copies of The Quibbler and Witch Weekly. One of them had me on the cover with the headline "GOLDEN GIRL NO MORE", and I didn't even have to guess who would be the author of the character assassination piece.

I put down the mirror, the utter feeling of wrongness pouring through me. This isn't right; I need to get back to my wife and daughter.
"Okay Luna, catch me up, what all happened?" _Where's my wand?_

"Well we won the final battle; Harry defeated You-Know-Who, McGonagall is the new Headmistress and we went back to finish our last year together. Kingsley was the interim Minister of Magic until officially appointed, Harry and Ron were made Aurors... they actually made news in February when a three-broom crash happened over in Liverpool because they were rushing to a Celestina Warbeck concert. Massive violation of the Statute of Secrecy."

"Wait, go back a bit further. Malfoy Manor... Harry and Ron rescued you?" My curiosity piqued. "Did Narcissa treat you well there?"

Luna nodded. "She didn't like seeing us there, changed out our water and made sure we were fed. I'm glad she avoided getting charged alongside Lucius."

I felt better at knowing that; _so Narcissa was never really evil._

"So we went back for our education and Harry and Ron didn't? Sounds just like what happened in my reality."

"Yeah, we went back with Ginny to study for our N.E.W.T.'s while you also got an internship with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It was impressive, really. Ron and you were always together when you weren't studying and he was off at work, and you got married just before Halloween."

I grimaced at that. "I married Ron?"

Luna shrugged. "You two were still in your honeymoon phase of the relationship, I guess, and a lot of people were eloping after the war. Ron was surprised that you refused to give up Hogwarts and a career to be the house-witch that he expected of you."

"Why would he think that? He knows that both of my parents-" Luna's face fell at that. "Luna, what happened to my parents?"

"They weren't happy with your decision to wipe their memories without even asking them. I think that was why you rushed into an early marriage, you were looking to belong to a family again."

_I knew that my parents might disown me for what I did, but it was the only thing I could to in order to keep them safe._

"But you've been instrumental in your work for the Ministry. You along with some pro-troll rights activists crashed an anti-troll meeting that Artemius Lawson was at, and it hit the news. Apparently they were about to lynch a troll and you all were able to save the Troll in question, although it knocked out the group's spokeswitch. When the Daily Prophet started to take your work seriously, you sounded the alarm that another Goblin Rebellion was imminent unless their grievances were heard and rectified with a Goblin Bill of Rights."

"Okay that actually sounds like me. How did I get here? Do you think I can get back? Who could have..." My heart felt like lead. "Bellatrix is dead, right?"

Luna nodded sadly. "Molly used the Killing Curse... after she killed Fred."

"Well some things seem to remain the same. Fred died in my timeline as well, though Bellatrix escaped with the Dark Lord's remains."

"That's what the Death Eaters called him."
"Yeah, Narcissa and I were bonded, and I was captured and marked by him after a fashion while you lot escaped."

"He marked you? He didn't torture or kill you on sight?"

I shook my head. "No, he knew I helped Harry escape him at Christmas in Godric's Hollow and recognized my talent despite my blood status, so he forced me to um, help make new half-bloods with Narcissa since I killed Lucius in the duel."

"You inherited her like a spoil of war." Luna said, her voice in soft horror. "She was as much of a victim of circumstance as you were."

My throat was dry as I nodded. "Yeah, she and Draco were... broken by then."

"She's worse now with Lucius than I've ever seen her. If you're here from a different reality or timeline and you didn't change anything, how come you remember who you were?"

I shrugged. "I was nowhere near anyone who seemed to be doing anything..." I looked to my wrists, my right wrist still throbbing where the Ouroboros mark should be and my left wrist with the silver bracelet that Narcissa gave me. That mark had linked me to The Dark Lord, and let me cast magic when TrixyMort squibbed the country. Luna handed me a pair of spectacles.

"Here, I think you'll need these more than I do. Someone tampered with Fate, so they are going to look... equally different."

I put them on and saw myself in the mirror again. The Ouroboros mark looked like it had been recently branded onto my flesh there, biting into my skin like I would expect any other Dark Mark would. My aura shimmered darker than Luna's, and I remembered how she flipped out in my wife's defense class on the first day. The more things change, the more they stay the same...

I shook my head as I wondered something out loud. "Something is off, there is... some detail missing from this. The Fates are three. The Elder Wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny... Three names."

"You think there's a third something?" Luna asked.

I nodded. "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.[1]" I said, biting my lip in concentration.

"Well, Hermione, there has to be something connected to you. One prophecy mentioned the Elder Wand, another was Destiny's End... so there should be a third about the Deathstick, right?"

I shook my head. "Except that there's no prophecy about Hermione Granger-Black destroying the Deathstick. There has to be some way I can save my family."

"Granger-Black? Family? You're actually dedicated to this woman, aren't you?"

"She's my wife, we have daughter together-"

"-as a woman fights for love."

My Cissy mentioned something about a Seer in her family. "Luna, what do you know of Elladora Black?"

"She went crazy, why?"
"Cissy said something about Elladora making a prophecy about a Harbinger saving the family. You ever heard of this?"

Luna shook her head. "Sorry. You'll have to ask Mrs. Malfoy herself." *It's so strange to hear her being called that now.*

"I need to get out of here first." Luna frowned at that.

"The Healers and Ronald won't sign off on that. You look and sound nothing like the witch they expect here."

"What did she sound like?" *It was odd yet felt right to refer to this version of me in the third person because I'm not her.*

"Complaint, capitulated. Very muted and dull compared to the Hermione I used to know. You still fight for goblin and house elf rights, but the fire you once had was fading. I had thought that maybe there were problems between you and Ronald, but the Hermione I knew wouldn't have ever let him raise his hand to you."

"Slytherin's Snake, did Ron ever-?"

Luna shrugged. "I don't think so, but he did seem embarrassed that you refused to let him be the man of the house."

"That sounds about right. Well, how do I sound now?"

"Like the real Hermione that's been missing for over a year." I grimaced as I started formulating a plan.

"Luna, I need to get out of here. Where is my wand?"

"Ron left it at home."

"Could you get it for me? I need to see my wife Cissy."

"Remember she's not your wife here."

"She still has the spell book, meaning she has a copy of the Harbinger Prophecy. I believe I'm going to need her for this."

Luna and I looked to the door, both having thought we heard something, but shrugged it off. "Do you think that it could explain how you got here?"

"Actually, I think I might know. ‘Darkness is swallowed as the Earth gives up her graves...’ In my reality, Narcissa said something about her sister, and she's really been into eating Dementors, controlling Lethifolds, and making Inferi armies. Also, ‘Once Fate is Twisted, Elder's Bane approaches, and none will come after.’ Well, this is one really twisted fate, right? So something happened to Fate."

Luna's eyes were wide in shock. "You mean the Fates? The ones that are protected in the Department of Mysteries?"

"They are protected in there?"

"Yeah, they exist outside of time, so there is a room that is always locked to protect them. Where do you think they got the Sands of Time for the time-turner you got to use?"
I shrugged. "I guess I never thought about it. Can you get my wand, though? This is the same building from my history, so I should know a way out of here."

In my head, I made a list of what I needed to do.

- get my wand back and make sure it still responds to me
- figure out where the Elder Wand is now
- escape Saint Mungo's, preferably without alerting the Aurors
- discover the unmarked traitor that helped TrixyMort get into the Ministry in the first place
- find a way to meet with Narcissa and get access to the book
- figure out why Cissy gave me that bracelet
- GET. HOME. (break into the Ministry's Department of Mysteries?)

The sound resumed at the door, and I recognized it as a cat pawing for entrance. "Luna, open the door please." As she did, a flash of orange chirped and jumped up onto the bed, dropping my wand into my lap from his mouth.

"Crookshanks!" My hands tried to pet him but the restraints held firm.

"Mew." He said, rubbing his head all over my restrained hand, demanding for pets as he said that he missed me.

"Hermione? I know I'm usually the odd one, willing to believe anything, but did your cat just say that he missed you?"

I nodded to her. "Crooks, put the wand in my hand please, so I can free myself." I turn to Luna. "Albus apparently put translation runes on his collar so those around him can understand what he's saying, although sometimes he just says 'meow' to throw people off. At least he did in my version, but he had to have done that before he passed away. There must be some key moment that changed, this doesn't seem to fit into the multiverse theory, which explains that whole 'twisted fate' thing."

Once the wand was in my hand, I freed my left and then my right wrists as Luna went ahead and undid the rest of the restraints that kept me tethered to the bed. Crookshanks was happily licking my arm as I scratched behind his ears and under his chin, and I was glad that he had shown up. My wand, however, felt different. This is my wand, but I've dealt a lot of Dark Magic with the Wand of Destiny.

Luna warded the door shut and transfigured my clothing into something more appropriate and hit it with a freshening charm. "How did your familiar know you were here and needed your wand?"

The look on his face said it for me. "When am I without my wand? Also, Crookshanks is part Kneazle and knows how to read and use the Floo Network." The way that he seemed excited to see me and kept rubbing his scent on me made me realize just how long he's been missing me. "Hey Crooks, I'm here, it's okay."

He chirped as I sat up and he jumped up onto his hind legs and rubbed my chin once for good measure, letting me know exactly how much I didn't smell right anymore before he jumped off of the bed. I climbed out of the bed in the private room, stretched a bit, and started layering shielding, silencing, and disillusionment charms on myself as Luna looked on in surprise.

"War's been over for awhile, 'Mione." Her face looked pensive. "It has been, right?"

I took a deep breath. "Wish I had tactical robes, and no. You haven't had your Goblin Rebellion yet. What have they been up to?"
Luna winced at the thought. "Hodrod the Horny-Handed... you know him, right?"

I shook my head. "We dealt with Ragnok the Pigeon-Toed."

Luna pressed on. "Hodrod and Ragnok disagreed on how to fight the wizards. Ragnok was mysteriously killed by a muggle explosion in Northern Ireland as Hodrod had pressed on about allying themselves with the Muggle RIRA group."

The Goblins are working with the Terrorist paramilitary group? "Does the Minister realize how dangerous this is?"

Luna shook her head. "He's a pureblood and thinks that muggles can't hurt them."

"Oh, fucking hell! Okay, you need to leave out the front and Crooks and I will make our way to the top floor and use the employee disapparition spot, and we'll meet back up at your dad's place."

Luna nodded, composed herself, and made her way out of the room. Crooks pawed at the door, showing his own eagerness to get out of here as well. I took two deep cleansing breaths, gathered my courage, and we were on our way to the stairwells that I had immolated months ago to stop Inferi from trying to kill everyone. This is insane, it's like I'm going to have to fight all these battles all over again without the Elder Wand.

I updated my mental list to include saving this reality from an impending Goblin Rebellion and realized that I'll need more allies to do this.

- Convince Harry the Goblins are about to revolt?
- Definitely get Cissy to help, perhaps obtain Tactical Robes.
- Confirm who has the Resurrection Stone, make sure Inferi can't evolve like before.
- Ask a Necromancer how to destroy a Lich... David Mallett?
- See if INTERCON can be of assistance? Agent Bertrand?

We made our way up the empty stairwell and Crookshanks was waiting by the door patiently as I caught my breath. Why am I out of shape? I remembered the face in the reflection, and I had to remember this body hadn't been taken care of for quite some time. It was laughably easy to get through the hospital as nobody seemed to mind a tabby orange cat making his way past the gift shop and to the service area where there were no anti-disapparation wards.

It was when I heard Ron's voice that I turned and looked into the gift shop that I saw him embracing Andi Tonks for a bit longer than what would be considered friendly as their hands lingered on each other's arms. He was sobbing and I wished that I had an extendable ear but had to settle for an eavesdropping charm.

"-glad Rose and Teddy get along, thanks again for watching her."

"I understand completely, Ronald. Getting your wife something?"

He shrugged. "I told her she lost Hugo, and she didn't seem to bloody care. How can a witch be so selfish with her body-"

Andi pressed a finger over his lips. If he is supposed to be my husband here, why are they so chummy? "-shh, my love, you know it's been over for awhile now."

Ron shook his head. "Why did he have to die, though? Part of me is glad she's going to be locked up in here for a long time. It's no Azkaban, but it's close enough."
Andi turned her head and looked around, guilt plain on her face as she backed away from him. "You know why. The Ministry wants to keep up appearances for their heroes. Miscarriages happen, and it won't tarnish the rebuilding effort. Come on, let's get home."

Ron nodded. "Let me get her something and say goodbye first." As the pair of them kept shopping, I ended the eavesdropping charm and hurried after Crookshanks.

*No Severus, I'm married to Ronald who is cheating on me with Andromeda, and Lucius is alive. This world is horrible.*

Chapter End Notes

[1] Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
Escape from St. Mungo's

Chapter Notes

This one was really hard to get out, and since then I'm giving up the weekly updates. Quality over quickness.

It dawned on me how much I've changed since I met Narcissa. Where I once would have gone and confronted Ronald and Andi, possibly hexing them with conjured birds, I was now more focused on keeping a cool head, grounding myself, and finding my way out of here. *Looks like Narcissa and her penchant for scheming has helped.* The last thing I wanted to do was rush into a situation like I did in Australia. My mind flashed back to when she and I were apparating into St. Mungo's and how much bloodshed happened in those few fateful hours. *I wish I had my Cissy here now...*

*I had held onto Narcissa's arm as we apparated into the Janus Thickey Ward, instantly turning back-to-back with our wands out as we analyzed the room for any threat. I had both wands out, ready to curse and kill if needed. I wasn't about to pull my punches anymore with these bastards. The first thing I noticed was that the lighting changed; there were pulses of red light alerted me that something was definitely wrong.*

As I got into the service area, a quiet alarm went off and a sign lit up, indicating that the hospital was getting kicked down. I couldn't help but think of the Goblin attack as panic began to rise in me. *No Elder wand, no apparating out, and I bet someone noticed my empty bed so there's going to be a search of the whole hospital.* My mind was still thinking of the Goblin Rebellion as flashbacks of rooms full of corpses came to life and chased after the living in order to kill and turn them as well.

"Glad you came. The hospital is going on lockdown; nothing can get out until the threat can be isolated and neutralized." Severus said gravely. "Protocol One was designed back when there were fears that muggleborns might bring back the bubonic plague or the Black Death by mixing our races."

"I knew that the hospital had a rudimentary sentience, but can it actually detect and fight an epidemic?" Narcissa asked, the nearby wandfire echoing as vibrations under our feet.

I remembered how St. Mungo's must have let us enter because it knew we could be the cure. *Except now I am the perceived threat.* "Crooks, any ideas?" I asked, wand out. He pawed at the wall, reminding me of the floo point he wanted in our room at Hogwarts. "The floo is being shut down too."

My ginger familiar was now pouncing on the wall, growling a single word, "break."

"Hospital security!" I heard at the entrance, and Crookshanks barked a single command to me as he ran off, "Fly." I knew what the next moment would hold, when I would be caught and I just wanted to curl up and hide, to make the memories of the kills I had caused to go away...

I backed away, closing and warding the door as a hailstorm of spells ricocheted around the hallway and a series of bright-orange spells slammed in a series against the door. There was an eerie thrum as each one hit, slowly tearing down the defensive wards Severus had laid into it. Putting both wands in my right hand, I cracked open the door and cast the strongest Confringo I could manage.
The explosion was nearly deafening, and there was no return of wand-fire.

Poking my head out, I saw a smear of red and I pulled back instantly. My mind wouldn't make sense of it beyond that the threat was neutralized. There should have been some remains, a scrap of cloth or bone or hair, but all I saw was red. Don't try to make sense of the carnage, just survive this now.

Survive, Granger! Fly! Something was wrong with my body, and it took me way too long to remember that I could cast a diagnostic charm on myself. I had taken toxic levels of Baneberry, Bloodroot, and Moonstone in this body apparently. I (well, the Hermione of this timeline, at least) had poisoned myself to miscarry, but this was suicide-level overdose. Is that why I'm having these flashbacks? I shook my head, forcing myself to focus on the problem at hand.

I have to jump out of a window and hopefully apparate safely on the way down.

The last time I did this, I was damn lucky as Nagini was hot on my heels. But the memories of Narcissa gave me an idea that was foolish but better than nothing. I cast a summoning charm, hoping against all odds that a broom would come to my hand. I had to depend on my memories of Narcissa's flying in order to convince myself that I wasn't about to fall to my death. As a Comet broom that was probably as old as I was landed in my palm, I quickly disillusioned myself and gulped down the rising panic that made me think of when Cissy and I left Gringott's. Nobody has to die today, though, just get out and get to your wife.

I walked between beds where Inferi were moaning, their bodies writhing and fighting against magical restraints as a few shuffled out of their beds. I recalled how all of their eyes had the same look in them. There was only one consciousness looking out all the eyes. ... As one, all the Inferi turned their heads toward me and tilted their heads slightly in wonder. It was fucking creepy. We had to be out of this room before they could get free.

I heard yowling as Crookshanks made a distraction, knocking over a storage cabinet that toppled and created a noisy clatter, which I realized was the perfect distraction as I blew a hole in the wall large enough for me to hop onto my broom and fly out, getting past the anti-disapparating wards to escape. Crookshanks! I wanted to yell, but realized it would give me away at this point, and had to trust that he could fend for himself as I made it out into the dusky evening.

I landed on the ground not even twenty feet away and looked back up to the hole I had made. Security Wizards were already there, peering out into the distance to find me. No time to sit around and get knicked. Turning on the spot, I focused on Ottery St. Catchpole, and found myself landing just outside of the rebuild home of the Lovegoods.

I looked for Luna, finding the front door open and I went in, going up the spiral staircase to her room. "Luna?" I found her sitting at her window, staring out into the distance.

"Am I happy in that alternate future? I'm engaged to Rolf Scamander here, and he's a lovely wizard, but..."

I grimaced at this. History itself was twisted here, so she never met Sam. "It's not an alternate future, it's still today, just history seems to have played out differently. You and Rolf meet and decide to marry in my timeline as well. You're happy, but there's extenuating circumstances that cause it to happen."

Luna nodded. "Okay. I like him just fine, but..."

"...he's not everything you want?" She bit her lip nervously.
"May I confide something to you?"

"You're bisexual and you worry you'll find a girl and fall in love with her, jeopardizing your marriage?" Luna didn't look surprised as I said that, but rather relieved.

"That is an incredibly astute conclusion, but I guess you saw it first-hand there. So I do break his heart."

"Actually, you don't. He's fine with you and Sam. You both seem to get your heads in the clouds at times and she seems to be a rock that keeps you tethered so you can come back down when you want."

"Rolf and Sam? Sam's not a girl's name."

"She goes by Sam instead of Samantha, and she's a muggle. A cute, bookish kind of girl and you two seem to get along great."

"So I had a husband and a girlfriend? My father would probably be okay with that since it means he still gets grandchildren."

I had to smile at that. "Some things never change, it seems. You said that over... then, as well. Now, how do I get in touch with my- um, with Narcissa?"

I found myself in an unnamed bar in Knockturn Alley, my back to the wall and wand tucked into my sleeve and at the ready in case anyone wanted to start trouble with me. A red-haired boy sporting freckles and shabby robes came and sat down across from me as I sipped my water to hide my nerves.

"Granger, what in Salazar's name are you doing here? Anyone can recognize you like this." The voice was gravelly but the eyes shone blue and familiar.

I rolled my eyes at the disguise in front of me. "I need to see your mother, Dra- I need to see Narcissa." I huffed indignantly.

Draco sat back in his seat, shocked. "How did you know?"

"The eyes. I know the particular shade your eyes are."

"How do you know that? We're not that close." As he looked into my eyes, I parried his probing with a casual mental shrug. "And you know Occlumency now."

Apparently the Hermione here didn't stop his mental probing before?

"It's a long story, one that I don't want to get into now. Where is she?"

"She's... busy. I can see about relaying a message to her."

"Busy? You mean playing the doting wife at your father's trial? I don't care, I need to see her as soon as I can."

"Look, you don't know what's going on, Lucius-"

"-has her wrapped around his finger due to the Compulsion, I know. Look, I know I may seem like the potion-addicted Hermione that has been in the papers, but I assure you that things are not as they seem. I need the family spell book in order to find Elladora's prophecy."
Draco's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How do you know about all that?"

I sighed, uncertain I could explain all this to him. "You are going to have to trust me. look, I need to see Cissy in order to set things right." He arched an eyebrow at my use of her nickname.

"Well, you lot seem to have everything set just right for yourselves. Order members are running the Ministry, all of the Death Eaters are dead or are getting locked up in Azkaban, and Pureblood traditions are now outlawed. Even the beneficial ones. As for me, I'm about to get married, have children, and stay out of Azkaban. So why should I risk changing this?"

"Because you know that this isn't winning, this is simply surviving. And if there's anything I know about you, is that you should be thriving rather than just trying to get by. Also, you don't love Astoria. If you're going to get married, it should be to someone you love."

"Marry for love? Granger, Purebloods marry for alliances and take a mistress for love."

I shook my head at that. "You have to know that Ginny won't ever do that to Harry."

His eyes went from suspicion to fear. "How did you...?" I met his eyes and he tried to read me, but this time I let him in.

*Your Aunt Bella somehow re-wrote time and changed everything. The timeline I'm from was horrifying, but we were all doing better than here. You were happy with Ginny and Harry.*

'Who taught you this?'

*I learned from Narcissa, we um... shared memories this way. Severus survived, Lucius doesn't.*

'And apparently my crazy aunt still lives? No thank you!'

*She's actually... undead.*

'Even worse! Best you stay here and make the best out of it, pop out a Quidditch team of gingers with Ron.'

"Look, I've seen the Fates in action, I've faced Vampire-fast Inferi, and I've seen what a Goblin Rebellion looks like when they use the Resurrection Stone like a weapon. I am *not about* to let a pissy, scared Slytherin *settling for a mediocre life stop* me from getting back to my timeline and my daughter!"

"Daughter?" Draco sighs at that. "Is mother happier there? Am I?"

I nod solemnly. "It takes a while, but we get there."

Draco choked on that. "We? You mentioned you shared memories with... Slytherin's Snake, you mean to say-"

"-I kill Lucius and inherit her as my wife. She and I have a daughter together." Astonishment was like a bludger to his head.

"Bloody hell, Granger, you mean to say my mum's a... actually, that makes sense."

"It does?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah, she had Rita over for tea a lot when I was younger, but that changed over the years when I started asking questions..." He looked up at me, concern back on his face. "I'll take you
to her, schedule an appointment, but you need to be in disguise, and um... don't judge her too harshly. She has to obey father, and she's just been trying to survive as well through this trial."

Trying to survive? What does that mean? "Draco, what's happened here? Your legal Solicitor Helena Harker must be doing a smashing job-" The look on his face sent a chill deep into my heart. What's the price she's asking for now?

"Hermione, Solicitor Harker hasn't been seen for months. None of the vampires have been, actually."

What the hell is going on here?
A/N: NIN Song Correlation for Narcissa in the Alternate Timeline: 'The Line Begins to Blur'. This is, in my opinion, the best one to accompany Hermione's Alternate Timeline song of 'Right Where It Belongs'.

'There are things that I said I would never do - There are fears that I cannot believe have come true
For my soul is too sick and too little and too late - And my self I have grown to weary to hate

As I lie here and stare - The fabric starts to tear - It's far beyond repair - And I don't really care
As far as I have gone - I knew what side I'm on - But now I'm not so sure - The line begins to blur...'

*Fate – monstrous and empty,*
  *you whirling wheel,*
  *you are malevolent,*
  *well-being is vain and always fades to nothing,*
  *shadowed and veiled you plague me too;*
  *now through the game I bring my bare back to your villainy.*

*Fate is against me in health and virtue,*
  *driven on and weighted down,*
  *always enslaved.*

*So at this hour without delay pluck the vibrating strings;*
  *since Fate strikes down the strong man,*
  *everyone weep with me!*

I was barely cognizant as it took great effort to open my eyes as the commotion kept me from passing out from the pain. Ron had burst into the drawing room, wand out as he roared "Expelliarmus!" at Bellatrix, disarming her as the wand spun in the air and Harry caught it and followed after him. Lucius, Narcissa, Draco and Greyback turned in surprise as Harry stupefied Lucius Malfoy to collapse on to the ground. Spells flew everywhere as Harry dropped to the floor and took cover behind a sofa.

A wandless Bellatrix was still dangerous as she held a short knife to my throat and held me hostage.

"STOP OR SHE DIES!"

There was no return of spellfire, and I worried that Harry and Ron would accede to her.
"Drop your wands," Bellatrix whispered into the newly-born silence. "Drop them, or we'll see exactly how filthy her blood is!"

Ron and Harry stood rigid, wands still pointed directly at us. They weren't so foolish after all, but it will probably get me killed.

"I said, drop them!" Bella repeated, pushing the blade to prick my skin in order to press her point home.

"All right!" Harry shouted as he dropped Bellatrix's wand to the floor, clattering loudly as Ron did the same with his. Both of them raised their hands to show that they were unarmed.

"Good! Draco, pick them up! The Dark Lord is coming, Harry Potter! Your death approaches!"

"Granger, wake up! Where were you?" I shook my head to clear it, apologizing to him.

"What? I was here, right?" Why am I having these flashbacks?

"You need to see a Healer."

"NO! I just escaped from St. Mungo's where they think I tried to kill myself! They catch me now, they won't ever let me out again."

"Look, Granger-"

"-you don’t understand; the last thing I recall was watching my wife die in front of me, and I lost the Elder Wand to... Ronald. I also killed Dolohov with the Imperious curse wandlessly, but I'm not about to admit that."

"Weasley wanted the Deathstick? No, that doesn't make sense."

"He went mad; for some reason thought we belonged together and that Cissy was feeding me love potions."

"I thought Ron was feeding you love potions to make you marry him in the first place, to be honest. But that doesn't change the fact that you're not well and need to rest." Draco said, concern in his voice.

"Fine," I relented, "Take me to a brothel where your family gets protection money. I'll rest there."

Draco paled at that. "How did you know?"

"I guessed that old habits die hard."

"You really do know my family's secrets," Draco stammered, "okay, let's go. But seriously, disguise yourself with a glamour, look like a scruffy bloke."

I nodded as I cast the spell on myself, imagining myself to have dark hair, stubble, and a scar on my left cheek. We left the bar and made our way down Knockturn Alley, letting him lead me as something he said hit me.

"Wait, what do you mean, the vampires haven't been seen for months?" As I looked around, I put the charmed glasses back on to help disguise myself and to see what latent spells and traps might be around.
"Well they always seemed to lurk in the shadows, so it didn't seem unusual until it was rumored that the Romanian Ministry was merely a puppet government and that some vampire was pulling the strings."

"Dominika."

"Yeah, that- this is getting creepy. The International Confederation wanted to investigate the spike in muggle deaths, but they have been stymied by the problems here."

"What problems?" I asked, finding more shield charms and notice-me-not spells woven into wards of the shops here than I ever noticed during the war.

"The Goblins have been getting seen by Muggles a lot lately; it's like they decided to flout the Statute of Secrecy and flaunt themselves for some reason."

We kept going down Knockturn Alley and turned into an even smaller, darker alley that seemed to turn into a dead end as we walked through the brick wall and found ourselves in a quaint but seedy establishment. My lower abdomen cramped so hard that it had me double over in pain, and I would have fallen to the ground if it weren't for Draco. The last thought that went through my mind was how the skin at my abdomen felt loose and stretched out before everything went dark.

"Now," Bellatrix cooed as Draco shuffled back with the wands. He looked beaten if not entirely broken by his role in this ceaseless war. "Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little heroes up again, while Greyback... takes care of Miss Mudblood. I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, Greyback, after what you have done tonight."

I realized that there was an odd grinding above us, as Bellatrix and the others looked up just in time to see the massive crystal chandelier fall to kill us all. "Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little heroes up again, while Greyback... takes care of Miss Mudblood. I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, Greyback, after what you have done tonight."

I turned to see that it was Ron who rescued me while Harry scrambled and wrested the wands out of Draco's grip, using all three to cast Stupefy on Greyback, making the werewolf bounce off of the ceiling before smashing to the ground in a sickening thud.

My Cissy was dragging our son Draco away from the firefight as her sister Bella brandished a silver knife as she confronted Dobby.

"Dobby! You!... You dropped the chandelier?"

The tiny elf trotted into the middle of the room nervously, his hands shaking as he pointed a single finger toward his old mistress Narcissa.

"You must not hurt Harry Potter," he squeaked to her as Ronald kept a white-knuckle grip on me.

"Kill him, Cissy!" shrieked Bellatrix as another loud crack broke through the air as Narcissa was disarmed of her wand as it landed on the other side of the room. "You dirty little... monkey! How dare you take a witch's wand, how dare you defy your masters!?"

"Dobby has no master!" squealed the elf. "Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends!"
"Ron, catch and GO!" Harry yelled, throwing a wand to him as he pulled the goblin out from under the chandelier. Ron let go of me as he scrambled for the wand, and they came back towards Dobby and myself and joined hands as I reached out and took Dobby's other hand as I felt the familiar bands of disapparition take hold of me.

I knew what was going to happen next; Dobby would move to the left, crashing into Harry and making him drop Draco's wand as Bellatrix's dagger sliced through the arm and left me behind to fend for myself as Cissy banished the wand to roll right beneath me so I would kill Lucius and inherit his estate.

But that didn't happen.

Instead, Dobby never moved to the left and the dagger hit him square in the chest as all of us disapparated away.

I didn't get left behind.

---

My eyes opened to the concerned eyes of Draco Malfoy in a face that wasn't his. I realized that I was laying on my back, and was almost certain that I was laying on a bed, but didn't want to turn my head to confirm it.

"Slytherin's Whore, Granger! Do you even remember getting here?"

I opened my mouth, finding it parched as if I hadn't had water in days. "Where am I?"

"Where you told me to bring you. You're at a family-protected brothel and I checked you in as one Robert Galbraith."

I tried to nod, but moving my head made me feel dizzy. "How... long have I be-been out for?"

Draco shook his head sadly. "Only twenty minutes. I think you're still dealing with toxins in your body; let me go get some powdered bezoar."

I gave into laying on the bed I was on, wondering how the hell I was going to get back to my reality while the Elder Wand was under lock and key with Harry, the Ministry and St. Mungo's were looking for me, and my wife doesn't even know that we have a daughter.

Carina...

I forced myself to sit up, and black starbursts took over my vision threatening me with passing out again, but I fought my way to stay alert as a tall, scantily clad blond witch strode in, her heels clicking loudly with each step and I took in her appearance over the charmed spectacles and couldn't help but admire the witch's creamy white skin and flawless figure and wondered how many Galleons she made here at the brothel.

"Already drunk? You must be from the Wizengamot; your glamour charm is pretty good. Okay, same deal as the rest of the guys: I get you off, you get Lucius Malfoy off."

Pushing the spectacles up the bridge of my nose, I took in the gorgeous witch all over again. Her hair was dark and blonde, and though she smiled amiably, her face was swollen with a purple bruise and she had what looked like fist-shaped bruises on her torso and ribcage. She seemed flat and lifeless as she disrobed, and I felt a mixture of disgust and anger as I choked back sobs at seeing what my Cissy was reduced to here. Lucius was pimping her out at their brothel to keep his sorry arse out of Azkaban.
"Cissy..."

Narcissa was shielding her son, ready to just pull Draco alongside herself and run out of the large room and leaving me alone to face off against Lucius, Bellatrix, and Fenrir. She set me up to be killed. She left me there as a sacrifice to buy herself some time.

Then in a moment of sheer panic and terror, I raised Draco's wand and cut Lucius in half. The blood poured onto the ground and I realized that there was no way that I should have been able to do that while obviously being outnumbered. They all must have been hit with a powerful body-bind curse from behind. It then I saw Narcissa double over in pain, similar to every time she was rude or blatantly disobeyed my direct orders to her.

"Stop! We must respect tradition!" Cissy called out, effectively ending the duel.

Bellatrix seemed upset as if she were being refused the right to rip wings off of flies. "What are you talking about, Cissy dear?"

"The mudblood... defeated my husband... in a legal duel, on his own property. She wins his estate by default."

Fenrir snarled in disgust. "Witches cannot marry witches."

Narcissa stood tall against him. "And yet, Fenrir, I can feel the bond taking hold."

Draco and Cissy were both above me, casting diagnostic charms as I fought to open my eyes.

"Sorry, Mother, I was looking to get powdered Bezoar for Hermione. I wish Severus were still alive, he'd know how to-"

"-this is Granger?! Slytherin's Snake, she's still hemorrhaging her miscarriage! EVANESCON CONCEPTUM! Blood replenishing potion, now!" Her spell washed over me and I felt lighter somehow.

Draco's voice was shaky as he handed her a vial and she poured it into my mouth. "She was still carrying the dead-"

"-it's out now. Ronald must have told the Healers to save the fetus at any cost, ignoring the bloody fact it was already dead and poisoning his wife. Fucking Weasleys, treating women like little more than baby incubators!" My wife was touching me once more, but all I could do was tremble as I bled out all over the ratty bed in the whore house.

"What did you give her? She's fading in and out..." There was pleading in my stepson's voice. "She may have been a self-righteous prat, but she doesn't deserve to die like this."

I sputtered as fluid filled me from the inside and all I could do was gurgle and sputter as I drowned on blood. Help!

"I told her the amount to lose the fetus safely, and what would cause an overdose. I just thought she wanted to abort, not commit suicide! I WILL NOT GO TO AZKABAN FOR YOU, GRANGER! ANAPNEO!"

I gasped as blood poured out of me and air filled my lungs as Cissy layered spells to heal my lungs and stem the bleeding. "Thank-"
"-don't bother talking, save your strength if you want to live."

"What's going on? What 'tradition' are you speaking of, who has been bonded?!"

"We're bonded; you and I." Narcissa laughed, and I could hear the desperation in it. "In the 'Till death do we part kind of way."

Draco shrank as he spoke up. "He will want to question her, possibly use her to his advantage."

I saw my own face shift from confusion to horror. "Voldemort's coming? We have to go!" I wanted to tell myself to run out of there.

An echo of panic went through me, and it was like deja vu.

"Why did I say 'we'? What has happened to me?!"

Narcissa frowned as she looked at the other me. She seemed regretful, but also resolved.

"I'm sorry Miss Granger, but I want to survive. Obliviate."

My eyes opened again to see familiar eyes on me. The face had more lines and wrinkles than I recalled, but it was still her. Still her, and yet not her.

Narcissa checked my vitals again. "For someone so willing to die before, you're putting up one hell of a fight to survive now."

"This Hermione came to you for a potion to kill herself?"

"What do you mean, 'this Hermione'?"

"Long story, I'm not from this timeline."

"What are you...? Very well, but you couldn't have known that you/she came to me for the potion, Misses Weasley. I'm very meticulous with my anonymity ever since I took over Slughorn's business after his death. Now what are you on about, saying you're not from this timeline?"

"The timeline changed. History, from my point of view, has been re-written." Her eyebrow arched in disbelief.

"That seems oddly convenient for you."

"I can prove it. Cast your Arithmancy equation; I was the dark line that split just after the war. I'm betting you couldn't define that Eigenvalue."

She let out a sour bark of laughter. "Arithmancy quit working a year ago; why do you think I've stooped to being a common whore? I can't predict and rig the quidditch games like I did to pay off my dowry."

"A year? No, it was scheduled to fail near the Ides of March."

"Scheduled to fail? That makes no sense, who could schedule the collapse of an entire field of magic?"

I shrugged uncertainly, exhaustion slurring my words. "More like who could plot to twist Fate itself."
I need to see your family spellbook, the prophecy of Harbinger-

"How do you know that exists?"

I coughed, and it hurt all the way to my bones. "You won't believe me anyways."

"Try me. How do you know of my family's spellbook?"

"We're married."

Narcissa lowered her wand, stunned at my words. "Draco, was she hit with a confundus charm?"

"I mean it, you're my wife!"

"You've gone mad."

"I killed Lucius, inherited the Compulsion, and can prove it!"

"How?"

"Severus is your best friend, you love The Rolling Stones, and because... well, *I am in love with you!*"

"No, Sev is- this can't be-" She shook her head, shocked at the admission.

"We have a daughter!"

Cissy sneered in anger and shame. "Nice try, Gryffindor. In case you couldn't tell, we're both witches. And I'm *barren.*"

"I know you regret using the potion so you wouldn't conceive again, but you heal it when you strengthen the bond between us that I inherited from Lucius."

She gasped, a mixture of shock and deep-seated yearning to have a child again. "I..." She frowned, forcing herself to try to go back to her neutral coldness, "*don't lie.-*

"I can prove it! We used Severus' potion, the andromorph potion, that you first used with your girlfriend Odette!"

There was a clatter as Cissy's wand fell to the floor, startling her enough to bend over and pick it back up and holster it.

"I... how do you know that?"

"Well we had one hell of a row and I thought you were leaving me to be with her to raise our Daughter Carina."

"Carina?"

"Yeah, the vessel that Jason and the Argonauts-"

"-I know what it means, Misses Weasley."

I retched at the name. "Please don't call me that. It's worse than wanting to name our daughter Aquila!" Narcissa seemed to be personally affronted by my response in her retort.

"There is nothing wrong with the Black family-"
"-tradition of naming our children after the stars, I know!" Narcissa looked at me strangely.

Draco cleared his throat to get our attention. "You two do realize you're arguing like a married couple, right?"

Our eyes met as I mentally kicked myself for the outburst. *I forgot exactly how frustrating she can be.*

'Tm sorry too.' I bolted upright at that.

"You heard my thought, Miss- um, Hermione."

"Yeah, Sev and you taught me."

Cissy nodded, collecting her wits as she came to terms with all this.

"Maybe you're not mad after all. Ever since the war, my Bonding has felt... weaker. I just thought it was my long-lasting hatred of Lucius had finally muted it."

"It may have, I can't tell if we're bonded or not."

"Well, there's an easy way to test that theory. Order me to do something."

"Kiss me." I commanded.

Nothing happened. Apart from Draco looking awkward and excusing himself from the room, that is.

I swallowed down my anxiety. "Okay, that settles that-"

"-okay." Okay, what? I wondered as cool, cracked lips touched my own and it felt like my very breath was knocked out of me. A beat later and I was returning the kiss as hands reached out and we held each other as I felt light-headed as hungry lips found mine and I poured out my need for her as we stood there, lip-locked, and just bonded.

"Why did you... did you feel compelled to? Are we still bonded?" I asked over the loud thumping of my heart.

"No... I just wanted to. Slytherin's Snake, it's been ages since a woman has looked at me like you did." Narcissa panted as she caught her breath. "So... my family spellbook. Why do you want to see it?"

"Your sister killed The Fates and seems to have re-written history to change reality to this. I was told I need the Harbinger."

"The Harbinger? I know what you're talking about and can get the spellbook, but my ancestor Elladora was mad."

"Okay, then let's go."

"I don't think you understand. That supposed prophecy-"

"'becomes a wife be ending life... as a woman fights for love.' That's the Elder's Bane prophecy, about us, and there's another one we fulfill for the Wand of Destiny. Trust me, Cissy. The Harbinger has to be real, and it breaks the Deathstick. Let's get that book."

"I can't. My home has been sealed off by order of the Ministry until after Lucius' trial."
"Well then we're just going to have to break in, because I'm not about to wait for the trial to end and have him try to take you away from me. I'm not about to lose you again, Cissy."

"Wait, Hermione, my mind is still trying to catch up. Just last week I gave you a poison that should have killed you. You must have wanted to die when you overdosed on that."

I shook my head slightly, feeling the room spin as I did. "That wasn't me, that was a... shell of a girl in a horrible life. Just like you are now." I licked my lips, feeling parched. "I need water. Herpy?"

Cissy's eyes softened. "We sold Herpy. We sold off whatever we could afford to be rid of in order for Lucius to keep up appearances and afford a solicitor."

"And that includes you selling yourself?"

"We all have our debts to pay, Granger."

"I'm telling you, this isn't the way the world is supposed to be. Let's get the book, see the prophecy to destroy the Elder Wand, and maybe I can un-twist Fate back to where we were."

"Hermione, you can barely even stand up on your own right now!"

Draco knocked but opened the door as he stuck his head in slightly, averting his eyes. "Sorry mother, but there seems to be a skirmish outside. We need to go, NOW."

Narcissa transfigured her clothing and helped me up. "Another raid by the Aurors? I thought we paid off Proudfoot."

Draco shook his head as wand-fire erupted and witches began shrieking down the hallway. "No, it's not Aurors. It's-

The walls shook as an explosion rocked the ground, followed by muggle gunshots cracking in the distance.

"-WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?"

"-IT'S THE BURNING TIMES ALL OVER AGAIN!"

"-MUGGLES! RUN!"
We made our way out of the brothel, wands in hand as gunfire and spellfire pierced the air non-stop. One of the women who had worked in the brothel was wailing in pain as she held the dead body of her son in her arms, a single gunshot having gone through his skull, leaving most of the skull missing as grey and red matter leaked all over the pavement. She was repeating 'Why? Why him? Why?' as she cursed Merlin's name for letting the Goblins and Muggles take away her son.

"KILL ALL THE TALL ONES!" Gornuk yelled as he flung out an immolation curse, fire exploding from down the alley. The various whores that worked in the brothel were trying to huddle inside, and it was only quick thinking on my part to disillusion us that saved myself, Cissy, and Draco as the Goblins and Muggle terrorists ran inside and the random gunshots told me that they were doing the standard sweep and clear.

"They are executing all of the witches in there!" Draco said in horror as my wife and I pressed on.

"Who goes there?! Finite Incantatem!" The Goblin's spell hit us and we were left visible. Damn you Draco...

Muggles had rifles trained on us as the Goblin attempted a disarming charm. I pocketed my wand as I saw Draco's wand fly through the air to land on the ground uselessly. Narcissa panicked and ripped a button off of her robes as she reached for my hand. I pulled my hand away, knowing that she was using the portkey built into it.

I'm sorry my love, I can't abandon Draco.

I raised my hands and knelt, uncertain how I could fight my way out of this as we were outnumbered five to two. Another two wizards were found and captured as well, screaming in fear as the Muggles yelled at them repeatedly to drop their wands and get on their knees.

"GET ON THE FUCKING GROUND YOU MAGICAL WANKERS!"

"I SAID ON YOUR FUCKING KNEES BEFORE I FUCK YOU WITH THIS RIFLE!"

"GO AHEAD AND STAND, I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL YOU ANYWAYS!"

Draco had his hands up showing he was unarmed as fear made his voice crack. "We're not with the Ministry! Just let us go, we're not your enemy! We're unarmed!"

The goblin Gornuk looked me square in the eyes as he gave the command to the armed Muggles. "No survivors."

A Muggle put his rifle to my sons head, even as he begged for his life. The crack of his rifle exploded thick viscous red all over me as another gunshot killed another wizard on the other side of me. I fell and huddled into a fetal position, focusing my rage and magical reserves as I wandlessly cast an explosion curse directly at Gornuk and the armed Muggles. I didn't care about getting bloody anymore as I rolled away from the blast, crawling before I could get up and staggered away. I couldn't hear anything in my left ear and blinked blood out of my vision as more spell-fire came before me.

Draco is dead. Muggles shot him at point-blank range like they were exterminating vermin. To hell with them all.
My balance was off, telling me that I burst the eardrum and had to visually stabilize myself so that I wouldn't fall over. The sound of gunfire and spell-fire were unceasing and wild, making it extremely dangerous to be outside at this point. More red poured over my eyes and I knew I was bleeding from the head somehow. Head wounds always bled faster than anywhere else.

"MINISTRY AURORS! PUT DOWN YOUR WANDS!" Proudfoot, Harry, and a few Hit Wizards I couldn't recognize were casting Expelliarmus into the area and I dashed to hide behind some refuse for cover, only to find some scared witches shove me away from them in fear that I'd cause spells to come their way. A strange sound like a loud fizzing went by, and I barely had time to recognize it as a shoulder-mounted RPG being fired from behind me. Someone cast a deflecting charm on the rocket-propelled grenade instead of vanishing it, leaving it to fly wild and explode overhead, raining shrapnel all over them.

*These Wizards don't know what they are up against!* I scrambled to the other side of the alley and dove for cover, unsure which direction I should train my wand in. I took the moment and disillusioned myself again, hoping to avoid getting hit by either side. *Ministry wants me chucked into St. Mungo's to disappear, and the Goblins are set on... what? Destroying the Ministry?*

"KILL THEM!" A Goblin yelled in the distance as gunfire rang out and Wizards screamed in horror as they realized they couldn't deflect the bullets in time with a shield charm. The Aurors and Hit-Wizards retaliated with fire hexes, putting up a wall of flame in hopes to apparently contain the invasion. Green bolts shot through the fire wildly, and judging from the sound of it, at least one more Ministry official had been killed.

"Watch out! They have wands!" I heard Harry's amplified voice call out. "Muggles in league with the Goblins, you are commanded to stand down by order of the Ministry of Magic!" More gunshots went off in reply, the bullets slicing through the wall of fire and ricocheting off of whatever shield charms they had up for themselves. Another shoulder-fired RPG sailed through the thick flames, exploding as it hit something.

Behind me, a door opened up and there was almost a dozen witches and wizards, hands up waving a white flag to prove that they weren't hostile. They didn't even get a chance to finish saying "Don't fire!" as they were taken down in a hailstorm of bullets by the Muggles.

I continued up the alley way, blasting a door open as I looked for better cover. *Anti-apparition wards have to be in place by now, and I don't trust making a portkey at this point.* I couldn't recognize where I was as I took in the blood-soaked massacre before me. I cast a terse Hominem Revelio and realized that there was still a survivor buried under the dead bodies in what once was a tea room. A few flicks of my wand and the bodies were removed from the pile and the scared man was huddled, cringing in fear. *He hid under the dead on purpose.*

"Hey, I'm not here to hurt you." I said, checking him over with a diagnostic charm. "What's your name?"

One of the man's eyes was completely blown as his sclera was completely red from a hemorrhage. "Um, Royden. Royden Poke. Hermione, I worked alongside you in the Department for Reg-"

"Yeah, sorry, Royden." I had never met this guy before, yet it makes sense that he would know me if I were working there.

"You lose your memory in St. Mungo's?"

"Something like that. Remind me what happened."
"We were making progress, putting together the Goblin Bill of Rights like you suggested. It seemed like we were getting somewhere... then they demanded the release of Hodrod the Horny-Handed from Azkaban."

"He's serving a life sentence for staging the last Goblin Rebellion!" I exclaimed. At least, that's what I remembered from my reality.

Royden nodded. "That's what I said, and as soon as I told them that, the discussions fell apart. They pulled out wands that they couldn't legally have and it turned into a fight. Killed the others and I just had to play dead as they left to attack the Ministry."

"You just played dead? What fucking good does that do?!"

"Hey not all of us are Gryffindors like you! I was always a pacifist, even during the war."

So you're less than useless. I saw a few cracked ribs and directed him to lay still as I attempted to mend them with episkey. I could tell by the way he winced in pain that it worked.

"Damn! Wish Ford were here."

I nodded, remembering his brother was a Healer. "I'm no Healer, but you've suffered some massive trauma and I don't have any potions on me. Think you could stand on your own?"

Royden shook his head, a little too fast and often. "No. I... I thought I was going to be able to hide until it all blew over... 'till I heard the first explosion."

The sound of a portkey crashing had me on edge as I turned my wand to the doorway and fired a stunning spell. It was easily blocked as the strange wizard tried to soothe us that everything would be alright.

"Hey, I'm not a bad guy, the International Confederation sent me here because the peace treaty-"

"Bastard?" I asked, lowering my wand.

"It's Bertrand!" Bertrand retorted, lowering his wand slightly as he looked at me and then out the doorway. "Yeah, Hermione Granger. Thanks for your help in the last war. Your Ministry is going to have a hard time covering this up as a simple riot. It's not even an ordinary Goblin Rebellion. Does he need medical assistance?"

I shook my head, letting him know that he's going to be okay. "He'll be fine."

"How did you know my name?"

"Sorry, Severus' nickname for you was Bastard. It just kind of rubbed off."

Bertrand raised an eyebrow in suspicion. "He's been dead for a year."

I winced at that. "Yeah, well, what can we do about the battle out there? I have to get out of here and..." I trailed off, uncertain if I could trust him, "I have to find someone."

"Hermione... aren't you supposed to be locked up for your own good? Gone mental or something?"

More gunfire erupted and the sound of what must have been a canon had exploded through the air. A strange hum of machinery was in the distance as I strained to hear it. What in the world? I scrambled to the window and cracked it open slightly, casting an eavesdropping charm as far out there as I dared.
Harry's voice was panicked. "Is that a bloody tank? OI! WE'RE NOT WITH THEM! Everyone back off-"

Another voice overlapped his. It may have been Ron, I wasn't certain. "Blimey! These aren't muggle criminals, I think it's their military!"

"THE SAS HAS BREACHED THE LEAKY CAULDRON, UNDER HEAVY FIRE FROM WAND-WIELDING GOBLINS AND TERRORISTS WITH RPG'S. PLEASE SEND IN AIR SUPPORT."

Air Support? What the fuck has been going on here!?

"Air support? Bertrand, did you know the British Muggles were going to openly attack the magical community?" I gaped at him.

He turned away in disgust. "The higher levels of their government know about the magical world, and they were very unhappy with Shacklebolt's handling of the Goblin's involvement with the muggle terrorist group. The alliance between these two groups has destabilized the very tenuous support that the Muggle government had in the Magical Community."

"Tenuous?" I asked, surprised that this turn of events.

"The damage to the country side from the war, not to mention the economic damage due to the mass migration of muggle-borns? The Death Eaters blowing up the Brockdale Bridge was the final straw. The Muggles blamed the Wizarding World for not dealing with the threat before, and now they are going to handle it."

"Handle it? Looks like they have gone to war with the Wizarding World entirely."

Royden frowned at that. "You're here because the Muggle Prime Minister has treaties with the other European nations." Bertrand pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket, wrote out a reply, and stuffed it back in.

"Yeah, well this has gone entirely tits up. I was supposed to help maintain the peace by stopping the Goblins, but that's impossible now."

"Do we have a Priority One Exemption?" I recalled the situation when the Knight Bus overturned.

"How the bloody hell do you know what that is?"

"Long story."

"No, I think I need an answer now."

"I'm not from this time; this reality. Something changed a key point in the past, and we're all stuck here now."

"Right. And you're the only person who knows this?"

"Yeah, I'm the Harbinger. Look, I need to get to my house to check on a proph-" A piercing whistle went through the air that made me want to look up.

"Oh fuck me." Bertrand created a portkey and put Royden's hand on it and I did the same. As the three of us twisted out of there, I heard the shelling of Knockturn Alley begin.
Our feet landed hard as Bertrand sent off another note to his bosses through his pocket. He gave me a wary glance every few seconds, though.

"Where are we?" Rather than use his wand, Bertrand flipped a switch and lights came on. We appeared to be in a basement of some sort of building.

"Somewhere safe. Now tell me what you know about the Harbinger."

I explained what I understood of the two prophecies and that there was a third one recorded in the Black family spell book.

"So you're married to Narcissa? How does that work with Lucius here?"

"Well, in my reality, I killed him in a duel. And from what I've seen so far, I look forward to killing him again."

Royden looked at me in horror. "You're not the Hermione Granger I know, are you?"

I shook my head. "No, and I need to get back to," I grimaced as I said it, "Malfoy Manor."

Bertrand scratched at his temple, trying to think of a polite way to tell me no. "Listen, Hermione- as much as I would like to see the Elder Wand truly destroyed once and for all- going back to the UK right now is insane." He reached into his pocket and frowned at the news he had just received.

"INTERCON is cutting its losses with the Brits; apparently your Muggle Prime Minister told his allied muggle heads of state where to find the Wizarding Districts in their countries. Paris' Gladrags as well as Madam Borboleta Candies are ablaze even now. It won't be long until Beauxbatons is found and attacked. The Statute of Secrecy is completely gone at this point. I need to go protect the school... I'm sorry I wish I could help you more."

The muggle governments of Europe have declared war on us, because the expected Goblin Rebellion wasn't handled fast enough.

He gave a sad shrug as he Apparated away. I turned to see Royden Poke, pacifist and Goblin Rights Activist.

"Want to go try and save the world?" I ask, shrugging as we made our way up the small stairway to the familiar waiting room of the most eccentric hairstylist I had ever met, complete with his albino peacocks.

"It's safe, David! Just some lost witch and wizard." One of the peacocks called out.

"She looks horrible, though, covered in blood and ratty curls... you use Sleekeazy's, don't you?"

That's more like it. His undead familiars can be right pricks.

The nervous-looking hair stylist peered from around the corner. "Hey, um... as much as I'd like to deal with a customer right now, I'm packing to bugger out of this hell-hole and... You're Hermione Granger. How the hell did you get in?"

"Bertrand made a port-key." I said nervously, keeping my wand pointed at the ground. We made our way into the main room where he was packing away various potion bottles into a magically-expanded case in a very particular fashion.

"Bastard thinks he can just use my place as a way-station because we're both... nevermind. Look, I'm in a rush-" He is trying to brush me off.
"Narcissa is in trouble!"

Rather than showing concern, David Mallett shrugged in resignation. "Told her to divorce him, even if it couldn't be magically binding. She thought she could protect Draco-"

"-he's dead." I interjected, voice cracking with grief. David slumped at that.

"I was his Godfather after Severus... you know." He took a deep breath to steel his nerves. "Fuck, you only die once."

"Um, about that. In my timeline, Bellatrix Lestrange turned into a Lich and I don't know how to kill her. You're the closest thing to a Necromancer that I know... have any ideas?"

"Only the Dead can kill the Dead. But to truly defeat her, you need to secure and destroy her totem."

Mallett turned to look out the window to see the Parisian skyline; there was a pillar of smoke rising down the way and emergency vehicles were being blocked off from responding by what looked like military barriers. Muffled gunfire was echoing as another plume of fire lit up the twilight sky.

"God, I hate England."
My Hiatus as of late...

I'm dealing with some personal issues but wanted to share something anyways.

I'm looking to get published. IRL.

One writers' call asks for a 3K word story of Lesbian BDSM erotica by September. *Hmm... let me see if I can do that...*

Another call for authors is asking for something up to 10K words of speculative fiction by a transgender author by December.

So please, feel free to make comments on my fics listed here to help push me to get these written and submitted.

(This is a cross-post from 50 Flavors Bittersweet, by the way.)
Malfoy Manor, Redux

Chapter Notes

Yes, I'm back. I've had parts of these next few chapters partly written out already, so sit back and enjoy the ride.

At David's insistence, we used a portkey rather than apparate back to Malfoy Manor. The once opulent front gates were overrun with English ivy, and the fact that they were open was pretty ominous.

"I thought the Manor was on lockdown by the Ministry during the trial." Royden said, lighting up his wand as we made our way in. The front doors were blasted open, scorch marks were all over the walls, and a few windows looked broken. Had the place been ransacked?

"His albino peacocks are gone," David added, "They were a good security measure. Probably sold them off."

"The Ministry is at war with the Goblins and the Muggles alike, and this place looks like looters hit it? Something's not right." I mention as I step through the threshold of the entrance to the manor. Blood spatter could be seen in the entryway, but it was dark, almost black instead of red. It wasn't fresh, and it may be back from the original raid when Lucius was arrested.

"Where was Lucius arrested?" I asked, seeing more evidence of a skirmish here. The scorch marks were different than the ones outside; these spells were more for close-quarter combat rather than to take out defenses.

"Here; Potter, Longbottom, and Shacklebolt all were a part of the raid. Narcissa and Draco had surrendered earlier that day since neither of them actively participated in the war and Harry's testimony had ensured her freedom." Royden replied nervously.

"Then why does this place feel so damn creepy?" Mallet asked the question that was on the forefront of my mind.

I cast the Homenum Revelio spell, and my paranoia was relieved to find four life signs beneath the Drawing Room, and I knew the hidden passage near the apparition spot that they would have taken to get there.

"We're not alone." I cautioned, idly wondering where the Malfoy Battle Box would have been stored. Thinking fast, I disillusioned and quieted our approach as I took point and lead them down to where the others were at. As we made our way through the tightly winding hallway, it opened up to a vault-like room where Kingsley, Lucius, Peasegood, and Narcissa were rifling through various magical artifacts.

Kingsley frowned as he put aside a strange metal obelisk. "This alone should give you a life sentence in Azkaban, Malfoy."

Lucius shrugged flippantly at that. "And on any other day, I wouldn't be showing you all of this, Minister."
I dropped the disillusionment spell and made my way over to Narcissa, holding on to her tightly.

Narcissa gasped in surprise, pulling me into an embrace. "You came."

I pulled away from the hug enough to give her a quick kiss as Peasegood and Shacklebolt looked on in horror.

"Cissy, I would rip reality itself apart to find you, my love."

Lucius spoke up, his voice mocking. "Oh, how touching. My whore of a wife loves a mudblood." My eyes went straight to his hand, where I knew he held his cane-sheathed wand. Did the Ministry know about his wand?

Narcissa cowed slightly at his voice, and I instinctively stepped between them to protect her.

Minister Shacklebolt had his wand out, but not pointed at me. "Hermione, what is going -"

"Why does he have his wand? What are you doing here?" I looked between Kingsley and Lucius Malfoy as they were rifling through various dark artifacts in the Battle Box. Shacklebolt reeled at the Hand of Glory as the Slytherin handed Peasegood a dagger that seemed to carry a dark cloud around it. "Is that the Blade of Thanatos?"

Lucius looked down his nose imperiously at me.

"It is, mudblood. Seems like the Minister has finally come to realize what my colleagues and I have been saying for decades. The Muggles aren't to be trusted and the more violent elements among them ought to be exterminated as you would any rabid dog."

"It is necessary for Wizardkind to restore order; hence why I'm releasing the Death Eaters and commuting their sentences to help us survive the Muggle War."

I was aghast at Kingsley. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU ARE RELEASING ALL OF THE DEATH EATERS?!"

His face was etched in regret and resolve. "We're at war, Hermione. We don't have the luxury of having scruples."

"We'd do better allying with the vampires than them!"

"Don't you think I've tried? Dominika's reign in Romania has expressly decreed a non-aggression pact with the Goblins!" Kingsley fumed, obviously upset with the situation he was in.

I look between him and Lucius and glance into the Battle Box and find a small box with a cushioning charm on it. I grab it and pull it out, watching how wary Lucius gets and I confirm that it was indeed erumpet horn.

"Cissy, give me a vial of Instant Darkness and a Conflagration potion." She reaches into the box and find them, handing each to me.

"Are you suicidal, Granger?!" Lucius asked as I shrunk the vials and added them to the box.

I handed the box to my wife carefully. "Cissy, get your owl to send two packages at once; first a howler with this and then a port-key to our Solicitor Helena Harker. They will be in near vicinity of each other, so timing is the key."
Narcissa’s eyes widened in shock at the package she was holding. "This is mad! This will-"

"-it was Bella's idea when she tried to kill my parents. I'm just improving on it. Now, go," I urged, facing off a gobsmacked Kingsley who slowly brought his wand to bear on me.

"You are assassinating a leader of a sovereign country! And kidnapping to boot!"

I rolled my eyes at him. "Well, since you're releasing Death Eaters, I guessed the laws no longer apply, correct?"

"Peasegood, you will assist me in placing her under arrest." The Minister ordered a second too late as David had disarmed the hit-wizard and had him bound with magical rope.

"Sorry, Minister. Paris is burning, and you've cocked this up enough." Mallet replied, leaving Royden looking anxious between the two sides of the fight.

Kingsley, seeing as he was outnumbered, opted to try diplomacy again. "Hermione, I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you’re supposed to be at St. Mungo’s."

I spat at that. "Yeah, Ron wants me out of the way since I'm apparently too much trouble to bother with. Did you know he was cheating on me? With ANDROMEDA?"

He shook his head at that, shocked. "No. I had no idea," he clenched his jaw in thought, "but you were abusing potions."

Damn the other Hermione here being a potion addict. "Well I’m fine now."

"No, you’re not. You wouldn’t have flagrantly broken the law before."

I cackled at that. "I wouldn't have broken the law? You have no idea what I am capable of, Kingsley. You couldn’t even begin to fathom the limits of what I’m willing to do in order to save my wife and my future!"

He jerked back at that, stunned. "Wife? What are you talking about?"

"Cissy. She’s MINE." I turn to stare down Lucius. "Do you understand?"

Lucius shrugged. “I have my freedom now, and I’ve kept a few secret bank accounts across Europe in case I had to flee. You want my wife so bad? You can have her; she’s spoiled goods an-"

My wand was already in his face as the spell slid out of me; from my heart, through my shoulder, down my arm, and green light came from my wandtip as I spat out the curse.

"AVADA KEDAVRA." Lucius was still smirking at his insult to his wife as his body collapsed to the floor, like if a marionette cut the strings to their doll. It was so sudden and abrupt that it almost looked comical.

Kingsley tried to intervene, to no avail. “No! Hermione, we needed that alliance! The muggles and goblins will kill us all! You just committed murder!"

“Alliance?? You’re actually considering an alliance with the Death Eaters?! I thought I was appalled, but I’m actually disgusted at you.” I backed away from Kingsley slowly as David and Royden understood and made their way up to the drawing room.

"You won't get away with this!" Kingsley replied, releasing the Hit-Wizard from his magical bonds.
"Peasegood, are we to cross wands?" My voice was edgy as I was ready for another spell fight.

“No, I always hated that prick. Will you be okay, Mrs. Malfoy?” He called out, and I knew Cissy was right behind me.

“I am, Arnie, thank you. Though I think I’m... Mrs. Granger now.” As I exited the vault-room, I closed and warded the door shut to buy us some time. I tried to remember my mental list as Cissy handed me the Black spellbook.

"Here you go, we have to get out of here." She looked to Royden and David. "Hermione, where's Draco?"

I shook my head solemnly, unable to tell her that our son is dead.

"If you two want to leave, go ahead." I said to David and Royden, doing my best to ignore the quiet gasp of horror from my Cissy.

*Focus on the mission before you, Granger. Figure out how Fate was twisted.*

David shook his head while Royden turned to leave. Cissy gave him a meaningful nod as we made our way out of the Manor.

"I need some time to review the prophecy; think we can risk apparating?" I asked, trying to think of a destination.

Narcissa shook her head furiously. "They have wards up all along the countryside; it's supposed to help fight the goblins but I don't know how."

I shrugged it off. "Port-key it is then." As we made our way out of the now decrepit house, I summoned one of the wrought-iron bars that used to be the gate to the Manor, and thought of my destination as I enchanted it with *Portus.*
I re-cut where the last chapter ends and this one starts. Sorry for the confusion.

I cleaned us all up a bit and transfigured our clothing to look muggle before entering the Starbucks, ordering a Venti Mocha Frap with a shot of raspberry to share with Cissy as David got himself an Oreo cookie Frap instead.

There were already flyers up asking citizens to report strange looking people, suspicious activity, or any suspected wands. The Muggles are out to exterminate us.

I kept staring at the text as it refused to make sense to me.

"Black rebuffs the stains of sin,
light from darkness of the withered tree,
contorted through violence and faith,

the branches amputated and spliced with unnatural means.

"All shall be unbound and unwound as the wingless bird flies,
    Septimus' blood betrays blood,
and poppies bleed their death upon the wedded grass as silence grows deafening.

"The dead will be borne again as the lion and serpent clash in loving misery
    as the black swan lie gutted in a pool of her own blood.

"Dementor, Thestral, and Unicorn wilt weave within the wood of the world
    as the young girl waits to live and rebuff the stains of sin.

    “The Harbinger Approaches.

    A Black redeems with Light.

    The Deathstick shall kill no more.”

"What a charming muggle establishment. Did you notice-"

"-Melusine. Yes. The Muggles don't get it though." I cut Cissy off as I handed her our beverage and re-read the text again.

"Oh, it's cold!" She sipped anxiously at the straw. "But sweet, and... really cold."

"Don't drink it too fast, else your brain will feel like it's freezing." I warn her gently, "Unless you want some some hot Bergamont instead..."
"How did you know?"

"Bonding strengthened between us, now I like it too."

"Fascinating. But I quite enjoy this, too." Cissy thanked me as David watched the interaction between us.

"You two are a married couple, aren't you?" He mused as Narcissa read the prophecy and looked at the silver bracelet my Cissy gave me before she died.

"Dementor, Thesstral, and Unicorn. Narcissa, the Narcissa from the other timeline, gave me this bracelet. Woven in it is a hair from a Thesstral and a thread from a Dementor. She told me that I'd need this, that I'd be the Harbinger to destroy the wand."

Narcissa and David gasped at that. "You're going to make a wand to destroy The Elder Wand?" Mallet asked.

"I suppose. I don't know what the wood of the world means, though." I commented, trying to unravel this puzzle.

"Do you have anyone here you trust implicitly? Perhaps someone with access to the Ministry? We might need their resources to research this." Cissy asked.

"Just Luna. I think her mother was an Unspeakable." I replied, uncertain if it helped.

"She's insane." Cissy dismissed.

"She's misunderstood." I countered angrily.

"You think maybe Cassandra's curse?" David inquired, "That used to be protocol for them."

I shrugged at that, uncertain how to prove it.

"We need someone who can be sneaky. If only Severus were still around..." Narcissa trailed off, planting a horrible idea into my head.

"Slytherin's Mudblood Whore. I think I know exactly who we need. I just need to send her a Patronus without getting detected."

Cissy looked around the cafe and nodded towards the lavatory. "I think it would be best if you do that privately. The mug-people here might be startled if they see a... can you make it fully corporeal?"

"Silver Otter." I replied automatically, excusing myself from the table and making my way into the small single-stall unisex bathroom. I took a full breath and thought of the first time I breastfed Carina.

'Expecto Patronem'. Pansy Parkinson, it's Hermione Granger. I know you owe Severus a Life Debt, and I need your help to twist Fate back to my reality so that he may live again and you can be cleared of the debt. Meet me in your room, where I will play your favorite song by The Cranberries so that you know it's me, and that we're friends from when I'm from.

A massive silver lioness leaped out of my wand, startling me as it ran through the walls and made its way to my former childhood bully. Lioness??

I was so surprised that I hadn't noticed the commotion outside of the doorway as the knocking got louder. I guess I took too long in here?
"I AM CALLING THE POLICE ON YOU, WITCH! I HOPE THEY BURN YOU TO ASH!"

SHIT. MUGGLES CAN SEE A PATRONUS.

All I had was a small deadbolt to protect me from the livid muggle who seems ready to beat down the door on the other side. Okay, Granger, you can do this. You have to survive. I turned the latch to unlock the door and heard a muffled grunt before a body collapsed to the ground. I yanked the door open to see a scared, blood-covered Cissy who was holding a blood-flecked chair that she used to knock out the muggle at my feet. Behind her was David, wand out and having tied up the nearest person who had reached for their cell phone.

"We’re not here to hurt anyone, she just needed to send a message.” David Mallet cautioned as I instantly bent over the crumpled muggle who was screaming in fear. The sharp smell told me that he had peed on himself as I went ahead and cast an overall cleaning charm to take care of both the offending smell and the blood as well as a healing charm on the skull.

"Okay, I just healed the fracture and cleaned you up a bit. You may still need stitches for your scalp, sir.”

"GET AWAY FROM ME YOU EVIL BITCH!” He snapped, trying to cover his face with his forearms.

"I’m trying to heal you!” I attempt to yell over him, but he’s still trying to slap my wand out of my hands while cowering. Bloody muggle doesn’t understand!

Cissy stupefied him without reservation as I finally cleaned up his wounds, wondering if there was a way we could wipe all trace of us being here.

"Granger, leave him be! He’s fine!” Narcissa replied, gesturing to the door. “But we won’t be if we don’t get out of here.”

I knew she was right as I shrugged uselessly. “Fine. Sod it.” I tousled my hair back with my free hand as I looked around the coffee shop. “David, get over here. I’m going to port-”

The front door wrenched open as an emaciated vampire stood there, panting with blood dripping down her chin. Her highwayman jacket was tattered, and there were singe marks around her neck where a thick silver collar must have been. “-sorry for the delay, Cissy, but I had to grab a bite. Now, why has the world gone to hell?”

It was our vampiric solicitor Helena Harker.

"About time you showed up,” Cissy said coolly as the solicitor limped her way over, placing two fingers on the used paper cup as I prepared it to be a portkey to take us to the Parkinson estate.

"You don’t pay me hourly, Cissy.” Helena slung back, not missing a beat, “And I think you owe me a deposit for whatever trouble you’re stirring up now.”

"Rescuing you from Dominika is my payment and you’re free to drink anyone who attacks us, which appears to be the entire Muggle government at this time.” My wife countered. I shot her a nervous glance as I activated the portkey, feeling the jerking sensation behind my navel just before I flexed my knees to take the landing as we arrived at the Parkinson estate.

“Okay, we’re here.” I huffed as the air was nearly knocked out of me. We must have been near a wizarding community, judging from the smoke nearby. “David, secure the perimeter. Cissy, can you
cut through your exes’ wards?”

“You knew about... yeah, I know her style.” she replied as she looked over the outer gates.

“Okay Granger, what about me?” Solicitor Harker smirked as she ran her tongue over her pointed fangs.

“Can you sniff out anyone?”

“Bloodhound work. Sure.” She scented the air, chin pointed up in surprise. “Incoming.”

A voice came out of nowhere from the other side of the gate. “Using a vampire to counter my disillusionment charm. Not bad, Granger.” The charm ended and I was facing Pansy Parkinson, Severus’ protégé.

“I need your help.” I stated plainly, unwilling to go through the layers of cats paws.

“Direct and honest. Okay. Why?”

“Severus should have survived the bite from Nagini, sparing you from taking his place as the Double agent for the Order.”

“Nobody was supposed to know about- wait, if he survived... Yeah, I'm in. Whatever time you’re from has to be better than open war with the muggles.” Pansy opened the gate and we followed her into her estate, Helena waiting until the Slytherin cautiously invited her as long as she promised no violence.

As we made our way into her library, her various House Elves poked in to see us only to quickly disappear again.

“Forgive the mess, but I had a stray cat break in and nobody seems able to find him.” Pansy apologized, eyebrows furrowed in contemplation. “Slytherin’s Whore, it's yours, isn't it?”

Before I could respond, Crookshanks bounded into my arms, holding a copy of the Daily Prophet in his mouth.

“Hey, get that out of his mouth!” Pansy chided me.

“Crooks, let go...” At my urging, he lets me have the paper. “I'm sorry, Pansy, I don't know what got into-”

“Thanks, it's a special issue to me.” She replied, taking it in hand and inspecting it for damage. I look at the photo and see Pansy with Madam Sprout holding a cutting of Yggdrasil.

“I've been inside Yggdrasil with you and Pomona. You taught me how to handle the Dark Magic within me.”

“I had? Well, the World Tree is good for soaking up the Dark. That’s why we got a cutting for Hogwarts.”

“Wait, World Tree?” That sounds familiar.

“Yeah, that's another name for it.”

*Wood of the World.* This is the wood that makes the wand I need.
“We need to go back to Hogwarts.” I stated, wondering if I would have to break in or not.

David perked up in caution. “My perimeter was just breached. Where’s Odette?”

The Parkinson Matriarch came around the corner, shame etched on her face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you didn’t mean any harm. The Wireless stated that you’re a dangerous fugitive and that you threatened the Minister and attacked one of his best Hit Wizards.”

“Who is coming?” I asked in a panic.

“Augustus Rookwood and Molly Weasley.” He paled at that.

Narcissa looked as if she could spit venom. “Looks like the Death Eaters got their deal after all.”

Pansy looked to the front gates where the House Elves were reinforcing the wards to keep them out. “This doesn’t make sense from a tactical standpoint. We can see them coming…”

Our heads turned to the fireplace, eyes widening as the fire turned green and three ginger Weasleys came through with wands drawn.

Arthur, Ginny, and George were here to kill me.
Breaking into Hogwarts

The three Weasleys hesitated with wands on me as I had Crookshanks in my arms, and I couldn’t get the drop on them. Pansy, however, threw a small glass ampule to the ground and the room was swallowed in complete and utter darkness. I moved to the side to avoid being hit by any blindly-slung spells and pulled out my wand, trying to remember where they were standing.

“Darkness Powder!” Arthur called out, giving away his position as my silent stunner hit him. Another body in front of me sounded like it keeled over, and Ginny uttered the incantation to her bat-bogey hex as I retaliated with another stunner.

When the fire-fight was over, I heard Pansy call out ‘clear’ as I was trying to make my way towards them. “How are you sure?”

“Hominem Revelio. They are unconscious.”

“That spell doesn’t distinguish-” I began to retort.

“-if you know what you’re looking for, it does.” She replied, her hand finding my arm and guiding me away from them. “Kerley, begin the evacuation process! Misty, get my mother to the safe house I prepared. Mother, I’m sorry, it’s time to go. Granger, this better be worth it.”

“Evacuate? Cissy, David, come to me! Grab hold!” I called out as I felt my wife’s hand find my shoulder. I knew Helena could track us using her vampire senses, so I wasn’t worried about her.

“Okay. David’s holding me. Lead the way, Pansy.” Cissy replied as we made our way through the darkness.

A creaky, old voice called out in the home. “Misty and Mistress Parkinson have been safely relocated over her protestations. The Estate is primed and here are the supplies you requested should we have to do this.”

“Thank you Kerley.” Pansy replied as the sound of a door opened and we made our way outside, the range of the Darkness Powder dissipating. “Go join them.”

“Miss Parkinson, Kerley would rather protect you. If you owe a life debt, then Kerley will help you repay it.” Kerley spoke with a finality that was not to be tested as Helena joined us, blinking rapidly as she adjusted her eyes to the evening light.

Pansy looked at me with a look I had not expected from the double-agent in training. She had been ready to risk her life for the Greater Good, and even had planned on a way to protect her family, but wasn’t ready to risk the life of her own house elf. She looked genuinely afraid for his well-being, something I would have never expected from a Slytherin.

“He can help us get into Hogwarts,” I suggest, knowing how tight security would be now that I’m a fugitive. She nodded at that, concern still in her face.

Purple flames began to engulf the Estate as the roof exploded with a blast, shattering windows in all directions. Pansy grimaced as she worked a glamour charm and turned herself into a copy of me.

“Kerley, take them to Greenhouse Seven at Hogwarts. Then you can come back to me.” Pansy ordered, handing me a small potion vial. It took less than a second for me to recognize it. “Granger, Headmaster Snape said that I shouldn’t use this unless-”
“It’s Brimstone. I know it.” *It eats away your longevity.*

“You’re going to have to break into the Ministry, I bet. You’ll need this.” Pansy replied, turning to see wand-fire from inside the burning home. “That must be Rookwood, the reckless bastard. Go!”

Kerley popped us out of existence and the last thing I saw was Pansy lobbing an explosion curse into what once was her great room.

*She’s sacrificing herself to make sure we get away.*

As solid ground was under my feet again, Kerley was gone and the wards of Hogwarts went off, indicating a breach.

David pointed to the warded greenhouse door before us and began to break the wards as Helena sniffed out someone in the distance and ran after them.

Cissy looked to me amidst the panic and her eyes searched out the Forbidden Forest behind us. “Unicorn hair. I got it.”

It felt surreal as I was technically trespassing and robbing Hogwarts, my home away from home. We didn’t have long as David gave up on the wards and just started blasting the door off of its hinges. In the distance I could hear spellfire come to an abrupt halt as someone screamed in pain.

*Helena was feeding, and I didn’t know if I wanted to stop her or not.*

“RELASHIO!” The crisp, Scottish voice alerted me that it was Professor McGonagall coming to aid whomever my lawyer was exsanguinating. “You will not kill him!”

“You’re defending Selwyn? He’s a Death Eater!” She replied, startling me. Yeah, slurp him down ’till he dies.

“I have a duty to work with him during the Muggle Uprising. Now, vampire, you didn’t get in here by yourself. How many are with you?”

“Just me.” She lied like it was breathing. I made my way around the Greenhouse, wand at the ready and trained it on my former Head of House.

“And me.” I added as Helena looked visibly dismayed.

“It’s my job to protect you.” The solicitor chided quietly as magical ropes bound her.

Minerva tried polite concern, even as her wand stayed pointed towards me. “Miss Granger! Kingsley says you’ve had some sort of episode and require medical-”

“Lower your wand; I mean you no harm.” I do my best to seem calm as David finally ripped the door and most of the wall apart on Greenhouse Seven. Minerva arched an eyebrow up in challenge.

"What are you doing to my school?!!"

"Trying to save the world, but I need a wand made from Yggdrasil."

Professor Sprout came out of the semi destroyed Greenhouse, dusting herself off just as she had before when traveling inside the World Tree. "She can have it, Headmistress."

"Pomona, what are you going on about? Miss Granger is undoubtedly mad and I have a vampire attacking the protective detail-"
"Selwyn should be *rotting away* in Azkaban, and you **know** it!" Her wand was trained on McGonagall with a shaky hand. "Let her pass, Minerva."

"Pomona?"

"The roots are withering, and Arithmancy has collapsed. Magic itself is ailing."

"All the more reason to study this rationally and not-"

Spellfire came from behind Minerva as Flitwick, Hagrid, and Slughorn ran from the castle, confusing the Headmistress as she started to understand the gravity of the situation.

"If you hex me, Pomona, we duel to kill." Minerva’s voice was flinty.

"I just have to buy them enough time to get away." The Hufflepuff Head of House’s voice was filled with grim determination.

Spellfire came from behind us as Narcissa rode in from the Forbidden Forest atop a Unicorn, forcing the two witches in their stand-off to begin their magical duel.

"Why are you helping me?" I called out, diving for cover as the Dueling Champion shot a hailstorm of stunners my way.

"Ratatoskr told me to. I trust the big squirrel."

Hagrid stood there in surprise at the two professors dueling to kill as Flitwick instinctively trained his wand and fired at Narcissa, only to get punched by Hagrid for threatening the life of the Unicorn.

Horace Slughorn instantly went after the bound vampire, leaving David Mallett to go after him. I was transfixed as civil war was unfolding as green light exploded out of Filius’ wand, dropping Hagrid to the ground, dead.

Minerva’s concentration was divided as she took in the lifeless form of Hagrid as the Herbology Professor’s strongest cutting charm quite literally disarmed her. The Headmistress screamed in pain as blood flowed from the end of her arm where her hand once was.

"Hermione, go!" Pomona ordered as Horace and Filius both turned into her, hexes flying at her with lethal intent. I ran into the greenhouse and found a low lying branch that seemed to be offering itself to me. As I pulled the branch down, one glass side of the greenhouse was coated in an explosion of dark red and I knew that Professor Sprout was no more. My insides were icy with dread as I realized how bad this was going. *Don’t dwell, just run. Just go.*

"Must have been the Imperious Curse!" Horace surmised as Flitwick sent off a patronus message to Kingsley. *I was definitely a fugitive of the Ministry and the Order now.*

David was with Helena as Cissy raced by and pulled me onto the Unicorn, making me grab hold of her as the four of us stole away into the Forbidden Forest.
Once we felt certain that they weren't following us, Cissy and I got off of the Unicorn and found Helena carrying David through the deeply shaded forest.

"Glad you two kept up." Cissy told them as she handed me the Unicorn hair.

Helena shrugged him off of her back as he did his best to compose himself. "Selwyn, Sprout, and Hagrid are dead. Minerva lives but she's livid that she lost her spelling hand. Never underestimate a Hufflepuff."

"The Head of Hufflepuff House is killed by her Slytherin counterpart, while the Ravenclaw one killed the beloved Gryffindor Head?" Narcissa shook her head at that.

“And the Headmistress lost her hand as Sprout was defending one third of the Golden Trio?” I added, “Hogwarts is a powder keg ready to go off.”

“This is the First Wizarding War all over again.” My wife replied in warning.

I understood what she meant by that. We need to get this finished, fast.

David looked around the shaded clearing in the forest. "Why did we stop here?"

Luna and 'Bob' the Unspeakable disillusioned themselves in front of us.

"She brought you here to us, of course." Luna smiled as she saw how Narcissa and I looked at each other in surprise. “You two make a great couple. Powerful… but great.”

The Unspeakable broke the anonymity glamour and I was finally able to recognize him.

"Hello Hermione. I'm Croaker, the last Unspeakable loyal to maintaining the Fates. Rookwood's defection to the Death Eaters nearly destroyed us all."

"He killed my mother when they were trying to rescue Quirrell before he came to teach at Hogwarts. I knew she didn't die by a cauldron accident."

“Same thing happened to Broderick Bode, didn’t it? Devil’s Snare doesn’t just accidentally show up in a hospital.” I surmised as he nodded gravely.

“That’s when glamoured myself and lived as anonymous as possible. The Unspeakable Office in the Department of Mysteries is one of the few places where you can disappear in plain sight and nobody thinks twice about it.”

Narcissa knitted her eyebrows in concentration. “What did you mean about being loyal to maintaining the Fates?”

“To understand The Fates, you have to understand Fate. You can live your entire life in the Hall of Prophecy and still never fathom how Fate works.”

“You speak like it’s a living, breathing thing.” My wife replied curiously.

“In a way, it is. There are two types of prophecies; the immutable and the escapable. Some were optional: ‘…neither can live while the other survives…’ While others were eventual: ‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies…’” do you see the
"But that last prophecy could have also meant Neville Longbottom." I added, recalling when Harry explained it to Ron and myself. *How did things change so much here, that in this timeline I’m abusing potions and my husband Ronald is cheating on me with Andromeda Tonks?*

"True, but the prophecy itself was immutable. Elder’s Bane is another such prophecy, which the Department of Mysteries had records of because they were based on Fate. The entire field of Arithmancy was built on trying to understand and replicate what the Unspeakables got to study as the Fates were protected within the Ministry and their ever-locked room."

"The Locked Room is… Fate?" I asked, puzzled.

Croaker smiled at that. "Yes, and every few decades a bit of chronosilicate spills out through under the door and we collect the time-sand for our turners."

*I did wonder where they got the sand for that…*

Silver wand-fire shot over our heads and we turned as one to bear our wands in the direction where it came from, deep inside the dense brush. David Mallet was taking point as Luna and Croaker took cover behind the vampire solicitor.

"I knew I’d find you out here, blood traitor!" It was the Death Eather Travers, and he was coming after my Cissy. I put myself in front of her and threw up a shield as an explosion curse shook the ground around us, nearly forcing me onto my knees.

"SECTUMSEMPRA!" The stern yet unmistakable voice of Professor Septima Vector came through the foliage as Travers was sliced apart just like I did to Lucius. "Hermione? You here?" The sickly sweet smell of blood hit my nose and I knew he was already dead.

"Are you here to attack me or help me?" I called out as she made her way past the dense brush. Time had aged her harsher than I recalled, but I had no idea what she did during the war. *Perhaps the loss of Arithmancy has kept her up many nights and exhaustion was seeping in."

"Goodness, help you, I daresay. Hogwarts has turned into a warzone ever since Kingsley instituted martial law."

"How bad has it become?"

"I left as soon as I saw Minerva lost her wand-hand and news of Hagrid’s death hit the common rooms. Ravenclaw tower is engulfed in Fiendfyre by some 6th year Gryffindor while Slytherins are protecting the Hufflepuffs in the dungeons."

"Merlin, the kids are out for blood." Narcissa’s voice constricted as she said it.

"The past few days have been unsettling as the Muggles have essentially declared war on all wizardkind. But that’s not what I came out here to tell you. You’re on the Wireless." Professor Vector pulled out a wireless and turned it on, raising the volume so we could all hear it.

"...reports are coming in that Beauxbatons Academy has been overrun by the muggle military and has been torched. Headmistress Maxine fell alongside INTERCON agents who bought time to allow the students to evacuate on their flying carriage. Wizarding Paris has also suffered a similar fate."
“The Durmstrang Institute remains standing as Headmaster Viktor Krum has employed the cannons on their ship to shell the countryside where the Muggle tanks are encroaching. The former Quidditch star has an aerial team establishing what he is calling a ‘no-fly zone’ and has already destroyed a few of the flying muggle contraptions that have attempted to attack the school.

“At this time, there has been no similar attacks to Ilvermorny in the Americas nor to Mahoutokoro in Japan. The media blackout in Russia continues and our thoughts and prayers go out to the students at Koldovstretz.”

“Hermione Granger is considered armed and dangerous, and has taken up with Death Eater sympathizer and recent widow Narcissa Malfoy. It appears that they have colluded together to execute Lucius and Draco Malfoy as some sort of scheme to swindle the massive Malfoy fortune. Kingsley Shacklebolt has put a ten-thousand Galleon price on Narcissa’s head, and hopes that the brains behind the Golden Trio will surrender to the Ministry. Do not approach Hermione Granger at any cost as the Ministry has deemed her too dangerous to confront...”

Septima turned off the Wireless in anger. “You two are the Ministry’s Most Wanted. I don’t know what Kingsley is thinking.”

Cissy had her hands up in mock surrender, making a passable imitation of the Minister’s voice. “...’Please don’t kill me, Hermione.’ Not like we were going to, we just had to neutralize his bodyguard so we could escape. He’s facing extinction by the hands of the muggles and is grasping at some level of control.”

I nodded sadly at that, remembering how out of control the Ministry was when Ogden took over with Emergency Powers Act. “Professor Vector, what’s your opinion on what happened to Arithmancy here?”

“It could no longer replicate the Tapestry because something unraveled it. The Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos constants quite literally cannot remain constant.” She looked at the branch in my hand and the Unicorn hair wrapped around it. “What are you up to with that?”

“There are three inter-related prophecies about destroying the Elder Wand, which is the only thing that I think had the power to kill the Moirai.” I recalled a line from Elladora’s prophecy as I wrapped the silver bracelet around the bit of wood.

‘Dementor, Thestral, and Unicorn wilt weave within the wood of the world as the young girl waits to live and rebuff the stains of sin.’

I thought about my daughter Carina and how much I wanted to hold her again.

As they came in contact with each other, the wood grew warm and glowed as it seemed to transmute itself into a wand, one more intricate than I had ever seen. The handle was twisted threefold in an elegant and complex pattern, reminding me of the three prophecies all over again, and the mythology behind the Fates being three women.

The end of the handle was inscribed with the image of a raven, and it choked me up as I realized it was a symbol of the Morrigan.
“Immutable prophecy. Okay.” I held the wand up in my hand and it felt… powerful. It was designed for one and only one reason. To destroy the Elder Wand. The power nearly choked me as I forced myself to breathe and I stowed the wand away, opting for my regular wand instead. Narcissa’s lips were parted in astonishment before she came to her senses and licked them in a subconscious way to get back on task.

“Okay, so we need to get into the Ministry, but portkeys and apparition is completely blocked. And I’m certain that all regular modes of access will be closed.” Narcissa looked around in hopes for idea.

“Anyone?”

Septima perked up at that. “All except for the phone booth in London. That’s the last I heard from Minerva when we all spoke about plans should the school be overrun and we have to fall back to the Ministry.” She frowned at the last part there, hopelessness visible in her eyes.

“I think we’re going to London, then.” I replied, taking control of the group, “And I think I know who else we need to make this work.” I fired off my Patronus to Pansy Parkinson, reassured by the new Lioness form that it has taken.

It was odd to see my doppelganger with Crookshanks beside her while David Mallett placed multiple glamour charms on me to disguise me as Pansy Parkinson. Apparently Kerley jumped in front of a Killing Curse from Molly Weasley, and it said a lot to see how Sev’s protege buried herself into the mission so she couldn’t let herself grieve.

“Hope you know what you’re doing, Granger.” Pansy said as Narcissa and Helena mapped out muggle London. “The last time the Ministry and Death Eaters worked together like this, The Dark Lord was running things to kill Harry. Now even Harry and Ronald are coming for you.”

That hit me like a punch to the gut. They didn’t know better, and wouldn’t listen.

“I hope I know what I’m doing, too. Apparently there’s a massive muggle protest going on today, seems that their Prime Minister is in Berlin for some sort of international trade agreement called the G8.”

“If it’s happening in Germany, why are they protesting here? That makes little sense…” Pansy wondered out loud.

“They want their opposition noticed so change can happen. It’s how Cissy and I fought a corrupt Ministry that tried to undo our Bonding and force people into marriages.” I shrugged as I skimmed the Daily Mail newspaper.

“We- I mean, she and you- did?” Cissy’s voice went soft in amazement.

I nodded.

“The wife of a Death Eater becomes a Civil Rights Activist.” She shook her head incredulously at that. “Brilliant.”

“Well, everyone did first believe we were evil because you, me, and Draco killed The Dark Lord on our own and, you know, we’re gay. Even though we helped save the Wizarding World from a Goblin-created Inferi infestation with the Resurrection Stone.” My voice wavered as I remembered the memories.

“The Stone is real, and the Goblins had it?” She arched an eyebrow in horror. “Only a Gryffindor could make that kind of disaster happen. Not you, of course.” I bit my tongue from responding since
she was technically right.

The eight of us (nine if we included Crookshanks) apparated into King’s Cross and found it busier than normal. Apparently a large march closed off many streets already and some muggles were staging a ‘die-in’ at Lloyds Bank.

The telephone booth we wanted to get to was near the Liverpool Street train station, and it was mayhem all the way west at the Finsbury Square Garden. The overall mood in London was excited and angry as bands played and food was being handed out by a group called Food Not Bombs outside of the station, trying to direct people to join the protest.

“Welcome to the revolution, mate!” One protester said as they handed out carnival masks to David and Septima, “So the police can’t track you down and arrest you later.” Not everyone was wearing a mask in the station, but enough of them suggesting that they were all heading to the protest.

Narcissa and I shared a smile as we conjured our own masks and made our way into the crowd, glad to have the added anonymity here. From what we could gather, there were supposed to be four different marches going in various directions as to confuse the police so that they couldn’t guess the true destination for the rally being the London International Financial Futures Exchange.

“That’s a kilometer in the wrong direction that we want to be,” Pansy huffed, “So we better make our break for it now.”

“You’ll need a distraction for the Ministry… there’s a muggle ‘die-in’ at Lloyds Bank.” Septima pointed out on the map that Helena had created.

“What’s that?” I asked, confused at the term.

“They take over the area and lay down as if dead. Police have to arrest everyone and they resist by, well, playing dead.” David answered for her. “Sticking charms on the people and the police footwear so they can’t respond?”

Pansy liked that idea. “And we can set off some of the Weasley fireworks if that’s too subtle.” She pulled one out of her robes and handed it to Septima, who accepted it eagerly.

“Always liked their ingenuity.” She commented as she pocketed it.

Pansy pointed to the public toilet entrance to the Ministry of Magic. “Crookshanks and I can raise havoc there to buy you time to get down into the Department of Mysteries.”

Narcissa cut in. “It will be more believable if I join her, Hermione. Solicitor Harker, will you help my wife break into the Ministry?” Cissy paused and gave a slight smile at that. “Hmm. ‘My wife’… I like the sound of that.”

I liked the plan, even though it separated us. “Alright; Luna and Croaker can help me once I’m inside…” I looked to a visibly panicked Saul Croaker.

The Unspeakable put on a familiar looking pair of charmed spectacles, looked into the distance, and cursed Merlin’s name under his breath. “Ministry put up anti-disapparition and portkey charms here. Aurors are coming.” He took them off and handed the eyewear to me. “Something tells me you’re going to need this more than I will.”

Luna had her own spectrespecs on and pulled out her wand immediately. “Harry is here with Kingsley, Cormac, and the Lestrange brothers. Croaker, I think we’re going to have buy them time to escape.”
“Crap, this is happening too soon! I need a moment to strategize!” I cursed quietly.

“We have to fight!” Cissy retorted, looking into the crowd of people hustling to make their departure time. “Which direction are they coming?”

Helena’s voice went to a deep growl. “No, you have to run. All of you. Wolves are coming.”

Luna’s head spun to face the direction the vampire solicitor was looking and went pale.

“Greyback.”

The overhead speakers crackled to life as a familiar baritone voice filled the train station.

“May I have your attention please,” Kingsley Shacklebolt began, “due to the protests occurring, all ground transportation has been temporarily halted. We apologize for the inconvenience and request everyone leave the station at this time so that the muggles can do routine maintenance-”

Cormac McLaggen’s voice cut in a harsh whisper. “They don’t know the word ‘muggle’, Minister-”

The muggles in the station laughed at the supposed joke announcement as others began to exit the station, complaining about the public transportation grinding to a halt.

Pansy did a modified casting of the *Hominem Revelio* spell and instantly reported back the results. “Three wizards coming from the south, five werewolves from the west. Kingsley and Cormac are up in the Mezzanine.”

I craned my head to look up. “How could you tell?” As I asked, the loudspeakers broadcasted the sound of a very angry cat.

“That’s her cat! HERMIONE, TURN YOURSELF IN NOW!” Minister Shacklebolt ordered as Crookshanks apparently did his best to claw at him.

“Stupefy!” Cormac’s verbal spell apparently missed its mark as the loud clatter was followed by his apology to a knocked-out Kingsley. “Hey, that’s my wand!”

*Good going, Crooks.* The muggles in the train station were still amused, though a few of them began scurrying out of the way at the west entrance and a few actually pulled out their cell phones to take pictures. *Brilliant, take photos of the werewolves coming...*

Luna locked all of the turnstiles in the station, halting the progress of the werewolves while Croaker fired off a wide-yield tripping jinx that knocked over all of the muggles at once and left him free to lob an explosion curse at the Lestrange brothers.

That was when utter pandemonium broke out and the muggles began running for their lives.

“GO!” The Unspeakable yelled as Luna made quick work of conjuring silver chains to restrain Fenrir.

“But…” I can’t apparate. I can’t portkey. I have to get to the Ministry. I reached into my pocket and drank the Brimstone potion, sacrificing an unknown amount of my future to get through this. *It would last for a few hours, if I was lucky.*

As the potion took effect, I felt my magical core compressing and concentrating as my entire body started to vibrate with what felt like limitless power. The capillaries in my eyes dilated, and I knew they were turning blood red as the world around me slurried itself into slow motion.
It was disorienting; I felt drunk as Septima launched the Weasley firework inside the station while Pansy and Cissy were dueling against Harry Potter. I saw the look of betrayal as Harry thought he was having to attack me while Cormac began throwing down hexes from above using Kingsley’s wand.

I was able to dodge the slow-moving hexes as everything seemed deliberately way too slow, yet I was unable to save David Mallet from being taken down by a strange jet of blue light that I couldn’t determine what kind of spell or hex it was. More wand-fire came towards me from Rabastan and I had a shield up, deflecting the spell-fire as it went astray and sliced through the panicked muggles.

“You can’t help him now, ‘Mione!” Narcissa slurred as I fought myself to understand her words.

A hand grabbed my arm and I realized it was Helena Harker, the only one fast enough to keep up with me. “Get to the bridge, then run down the length of Platform 6. Run with the tracks!” I nodded in understanding as she vampéd out and tore into the muggle armed police approaching us with a submachine gun at the ready.

The armed police were firing at the transformed werewolves as the Lestrange brothers and Harry Potter focused on my wife and Pansy, while Kingsley and Cormac were casting from the mezzanine.

*No time to think, even as the rest of the world is in slow motion.*

I ran my way up the foot bridge, looked down at the train below me on platform six, and jumped.
The gunshots and spellfire behind me faded as my entire focus was to land on top of the train and not fall and hit the ground. I was never into athletics much and actually surprised myself as I landed on all fours and was still able to scramble to my feet and keep running atop the length of the train, making it to the locomotive in the front and had to trust the Brimstone fueling me as I jumped yet again and landed on my feet mid-stride. I vaguely became aware of heat behind me as I just kept running forward and followed the tracks out of Kings Cross Station.

Turning east on Goods Way, I glanced back at the train station to realize it was ablaze with fiendfyre. I only hoped that my friends and the muggles got out of there in time as I turned south on York Way and saw people running out the nearby exit doors.

Everything around me was still sluggish and in slow motion, so I wasn’t able to see if any of the masked people had wands in the crowd as I made my way past Pentonville and against the traffic on Gray’s Inn Road.

The sidewalks were too crowded so I took to the street, weaving around the oncoming vehicles as they were practically standing still in my perspective. I realized it was inefficient to keep moving around them, so I jumped onto the bonnet of a silver coupe and in six steps, I was jumping off of the boot and onto the next car and increased my speed and stride.

I continued this way, running over and leaping across the tops of vehicles on Gray’s Inn Road until it ended and I abruptly headed east on Holborn, surprised to see so many protestors out here at Chancery Lane Station.

They, however, didn’t focus on me running superhumanly fast. Instead, they were looking up into the sky and pointing at someone flying on a broomstick.

“DROP YOUR WAND AND SURRENDER!” Ronald’s voice boomed overhead and I wasn’t certain if I could outrun him while he was on a broom. How is it that they are finding me?! Is there a tracking spell on all magical signatures? Are they patrolling the skies under disillusionment charms?

A hailstorm of stunners rained down and my shield spell was up barely in time to deflect them, knocking out muggles who were hit in the ricochet. I let out a quick sigh of relief as the spell wasn’t lethal. I don’t want to hurt them, but I can’t stop him from doing something stupid. The yelling from the Muggles was a cacophony of noise that my brain parsed apart all at once.

"Terrorists!"
"We’re under attack!"
"I don’t want to die!"

Ron tried a disarming spell that I easily dodged, considering the incantation is six syllables long. Ron followed it up by misaligning a banishing charm that sent one muggle through the windshield of a car that stopped in the road. The ginger git is still going to get innocent people hurt! I flicked my wand upward at him and cast Lumos Maxima in hopes to blind him momentarily as I went for cover.

Pandemonium reigned as some people huddled for cover while others rushed wildly in every direction. A few police officers came to see what was going on and were confused at the sight of a ginger kid flying overhead riding a broom. The muggles who hadn’t run for cover decided to start grabbing rocks and rubbish to throw at Ronald, but that didn’t do much good as they missed and hit other people further down the street. One ingenious muggle tried to take pictures with their cell
phone, but the phone magically stopped working.

The police officers in the distance, however, had radios that worked just fine as they called for backup. I tucked and rolled as Ron switched to blasting hexes and chunks of concrete flew through the air and killed a muggle on impact.

“You’re killing innocent muggles, Ronald!” I screamed back, huddled behind a red post box.

“Why do you care? They are trying to kill us, Parkinson!” Ronald roared back, firing a spell that made my cover explode into flying shrapnel. I was barely spared due to my Brimstone-fast reaction time as I threw a banishing charm to reflect the damage towards him.

Ronald swerved to barely avoid getting hit as I aimed my wand, ready to hex him out of the air as something struck me hard on the back of the head, slamming me to the ground, face-first. I was stunned and trying to figure out what hit me as red smoke began to fill the air and I cast a bubble-head charm while others began coughing and gasping.

Muggle tear gas? I looked to find Ronald only to see a flurry of stunners shoot across the sky and knock him off of his broom as a blond-and-black-haired witch circled around and began casting Aguamenti into the red cloud in order to neutralize the gas.

“You okay my love?” Narcissa asked, pivoting sharply and landing gracefully beside me as I got back to my feet. She gasped in shock, undoubtedly from my blood-red eyes as the Brimstone was still in effect.

“Yeah, thanks for the assist. Muggle police are-”

“-using their version of garotting gas, I reckon.” Cissy replied, looking me over and casting a healing charm to the back of my head before taking a defensive dueling stance behind me.

“ARMED POLICE! VACATE THE AREA, MAGIC-USERS HAVE BEEN DETECTED!”

Rather than the expected riot police, militant police arrived who looked to be hunting down witches and wizards on sight. Thinking quickly, I used Wingardium Leviosa on a nearby police cruiser and set it down for cover between us and the police getting into position.

“Hermione, we have to go!” Narcissa screamed, pulling me onto her broom as she took off and stayed low and weaved through the crowd. I heard a faint popping sound become louder as the panicked masses went from random running to all moving in the same direction. Riot police arrived and used their batons on the unarmed citizens who were beginning to fight back. Muggles screamed and panicked as gunshots from the Armed Police tore through the crowd as they tried to shoot us. Even the riot police shields failed as the officers were cut down by the semi-automatics.

The muggle police and the Aurors were equally okay with innocent civilian casualties.

“Cissy, they are firing into the crowd! They are killing their own!”

The Riot police retaliated against the Armed police with tear gas, slowing them down as they were thrown into a violent fit of coughing. A few near the rear of the military formation simply pulled on gas masks and moved to the front, changing their clips as panic had them shooting blindly into the red-gassed crowd.

“Can you create a protective blood circle?” I yelled over the noise, firing off Stupefy whenever I could let down my shield. I realized that the Brimstone was wearing off as the bullets were flying faster towards me from my perspective.
“How do you know Dark Magic?” Cissy’s words no longer sounded slurred, but that was possibly more from the fact she was running on adrenaline. Ronald was facing off the armed police as well, throwing _Sectumsempra_ at them as their armor exploded with arterial spurts of blood.

“Not now! Can you do it!?” The remaining police aimed at Ronald and I threw another empty car between them to give him cover, but it was too late. A barrage of bullets tore through the Weasley, leaving a red spray of death through him and even killing the muggles caught in the crossfire.

“What are they firing?” Narcissa asked in horror.

“Bullets! Slytherin’s Snake, the Muggle Studies class should have taught you that!” I yelled back as I lobbed an explosion curse at the Armed police, knocking them down from the blast.

“Hermione they are trying to surround us!” Cissy took a sharp turn and I barely had time to lean into it as a gas canister flew past my face.

“Can you do it, yes or no?”

“I don’t have enough time!” She was panicked and I understood that she hadn’t fought in a warzone in over a decade. Just like the muggles who were scared and reacting on instinct, Cissy was having to kill or be killed. I remembered that feeling when I was in St. Mungo’s and made the decision to use Unforgivable Curses in order to survive this madness.

_Damn it, I have to live!_

“IMPERIO!”

The armed officer shuddered for half a second before turning his weapon onto the other policemen and shot four of them in the head before another one took him out. I cast the Imperious Curse again and again, making the armed police kill each other as I turned to see how the riot police were doing.

Muggle protesters had taken advantage of the panic and had assaulted and disarmed them of the tear gas canisters and were looting them of their gas masks, shields, and clubs.

“FUCK THE SYSTEM!” One of them shouted in glee, wearing a silver mask as he led a group of rioters against a huddled group of riot police that seemed ready to run away.

A siren was growing louder as more police were coming, and I had no idea if they were armed with tear gas or guns. There was a malevolent gleam in Cissy’s eye as she tracked the incoming SWAT vehicle and had her wand trained on it.

“They might have bullets, but I have magic. CONFRINGO!” The red jet of light hit the engine and it was like a fireball slammed into it. The vehicle lurched to a quick stop and armed police filed out in quick succession as if nothing had happened. Overhead the loud sound of a helicopter rotor made me look up only to see a double decker bus get thrown into it.

“CISSY? WAS THAT YOU?” I turned to look at her equally shocked face.

“No… it came from back there…”

A pair of wizards landed with their brooms behind us and I got to see Harry Potter’s face go from shock to rage as he saw his childhood friend riddled with bullets on the street. There was something in his expression that just seemed... wrong … on a fundamental level.

“Cissy, what’s wrong with Harry?” I deflected more bullets as she turned to see him.
“You don’t know… he’s been poisoned by Dark Magic. The three of you were carrying around The Dark Lord’s Locket Horcrux… that’s why you, well, the Hermione here, abused potions. Harry threw himself into work and started using more Dark Spells, while Ronald…”

“…shacked up with your sister. We all had our addictions, it seems. Wait, did Pansy…?”

Narcissa shook her head sadly. “Gave me her broom to escape. Luna might make it, but the rest of them got caught in the fire.”

As the pair of Aurors faced off with the Armed Police, some were being banished and flying into the crowd behind them while others crumbled and screamed in pain. Even Kingsley looked horrified as Harry Potter was sadistically using the Cruciatius Curse on them.

I didn’t want to hurt Harry, yet I wasn’t certain how I could end the torture on the muggles. More armed police came and it felt less like a police action and more like we were fighting a war here. Narcissa put up a shield and deflected a hailstorm of bullets as I cast the Imperious Curse and had the oncoming officers look down and shoot themselves in the foot, hopefully removing them from the fight. See, you don’t have to kill them like before, Granger… just think this through.

One of the men writing in pain unclipped something from their belt and as they pulled the pin I was too scared to find out what it was.

“Cissy, we gotta go!” I shouted, pulling my wife’s attention from a different part of the mayhem we were immersed in. We flew away from them as I put up a shield charm as the grenade went off. The loud blast shook me as shrapnel bounced off my shield while my toes scraped the concrete below.

My ears rang as I was temporarily deafened and I couldn’t be certain if the gunfire had ceased or not. I wasn’t about to turn around and check as we crashed onto the floor haphazardly and I scraped my wrist and knee as I slid to a stop. Without even looking, I lobbed an explosion curse, hoping that it would arc far enough away from hurting us yet dissuade anyone from attacking.

“Cissy, we need to…” I turned slightly and saw red pouring out of her stomach and my world was upheaved. I threw up a shield as bile burned in my throat as Narcissa lay sprawled out on the ground.

“No, I can heal you. Accio bullet!” The small piece of metal ripped its way back out of her and into my hand and I threw it away in anger as my mind raced to remember how to do first aid.

Clean. Seal. Heal.

My mind couldn’t remember the proper spell to clean a wound from the mediwizard book I read while on the run but I knew I couldn’t just use Episkey and let it get infected.

"Bloody muggles… I'll take care of this. Go." Narcissa grunted, trying to sit up but failed, gasping in pain. "Get to the Fate Chamber."

"What, and abandon you here?!” I shook my head as I siphoned the blood away with the wand and tried to remember how Severus sang the skin back together.

"Vulnera Sanentur. Carnem... Corrigendum….” I choked back a sob as I forgot the next part and repeated the spell, tears streaming down my face.

“Hermione…” Narcissa looked up at me with pleading eyes, “are we happy there? Is Draco?”

I nod my head, knowing what my heart tells me. Sure we have fought sometimes but we always worked it out and were about to renew our vows. “Yeah, we’re all happy and Carina is beautiful.
She has your smile. Draco runs the company and is very happy.”

Cissy gasped in pain, blood flowing out of her mouth even as she fought to smile. “Then go fix fate.”

“I love you, Narcissa!”

She nodded and saw the look in my eyes. “I love you too. Now go!”

I got up and took the broom with me, deciding that the underground was my best bet and doubled back to the Chancery Lane Station and ran down the escalators only to see the train pull out of the station.

_Sod it, you’re a witch, Granger._ I climbed onto the broom and jumped down onto the tracks of the subway.

One goth-looking punk that looked like they should have been in Camden Town tried to stop me.

“Oi, trying to get yourself killed?”

Before thinking too long about it, I hit him with a _Confundus_ and propelled myself forward to chase after the subway cars that were making its way to the Liverpool Station. The tunnel was dimly lit and I had the lights on the rail car to guide me as I flew forward, leaning to the right slightly as the tunnel turned slightly.

That’s when instinct told me to stop as the air seemed to shift and I landed on my feet in time to feel another subway car go in the opposite direction. The subway cars before me stopped at Chancery Lane and I got back on the broom to go around them and continue on to get to Liverpool, taking a hard left turn at the station before pulling up and startling the muggles as I continued to fly past them and go up the escalator to reach the street level.

_Exit, where’s the exit?_

I looked around and saw where the exit was as I got off of the broom, ending the levitation charm on it. _Sod the Statute of Secrecy; the world’s gone to hell._

Knowing that this would be the only entrance to the Ministry, I went ahead and disillusioned myself at the intersection of Old Broad and Liverpool, using the simple ‘point me’ spell to get my bearings and figure out where the phone booth was at.

The wand just spun in my hands uselessly, suggesting that the phone booth had been rendered unplottable when they moved it here. I looked down the sidewalk in hopes to see the bright red phone booth, but to no avail. As I crossed over to the other side of the road, I made my way north and noticed a familiar brown trenchcoat that Aurors tried to use in order to blend into the muggle world.

_Well there’s a clue._

I decided to not call attention to myself and did my best to walk among a huddled group of muggles making their way down the sidewalk even as I didn’t see the phone booth yet. This block went all the way down the length of the Liverpool station, so it would take time if I wanted to stay disillusioned and blend in with the muggles here.

It was maddeningly frustrating; having to force myself to stay at a normal speed so that I didn’t knock people over nor give away my position since disillusionment charms aren’t perfect invisibility. The trenchcoat turned and I didn’t recognize the Auror as they turned and raised an arm as a signal
for something.

_Have I been spotted? Is he calling for reinforcements?_

I keep my head down and decide to risk it, stepping around the cluster of muggles who are dragging their feet as I make my way towards him. I have to shuffle around someone who is just standing still and see the man is climbing into the bus.

_Okay Granger, you’re going paranoid. This might be a side-effect of the potion._

I keep heading north-east on Sun Street Passage, finally realizing that no vehicles are allowed here except for busses. The adrenaline must be affecting my concentration as I stop and force myself to look around again for the red telephone box. I don’t find it until I’m facing a Toni & Guy salon and there is a sign on the door saying that the booth is out of service.

I look around to see if anyone will notice as I open the door and step into the booth and pick up the phone.

There’s no dial tone.

_This has to work, Granger. There’s still magic here._

The thought sparks an idea in my mind as I put on the charmed spectacles and confirm that there is indeed a thread of magic pulsing through the phone, along with a latent charm alerting the Ministry below that someone is coming down.

I square my shoulders, dial 62442, and drop the receiver and pull out both wands as the floor beneath my feet shudders and starts to lower me into the Ministry of Magic.
Invading the Ministry

Chapter Notes

Shorter than my usual 3K words, but this was the perfect cut-off point.

FYI, my original draft included more humor and the entire team of David Mallet, Narcissa, Helena Harker, Luna Lovegood, and Hermione Granger. But I liked the idea of moving their big fight to Kings' Cross once I realized how buggered the world would be as Muggles began to fight the Wizarding World in the middle of the G8 riots in London.

Original Moment of Snark:

Mallett: So we're invading the British Ministry of Magic with a Hairdresser, a Lawyer, a crazy girl, a housewife, and a potion addict.
Hermione: Actually, I put together a team of the best necromancer I know, a vampire for muscle, the daughter of an Unspeakable who has a score to settle for the death of her mother, and the most proficient person who has survived around Dark Magic. As for me, I'm the Harbinger that will destroy the Elder Wand.
Mallett: Necromancer?! Nobody is supposed to know about-
Hermione: Yeah, yeah. Big secret, pretending the draught of living death works on familiars... I asked Severus and he was happy to say that you were full of shit.
Mallett: Wait, he survived the war? Did I ever-
Hermione: Full makeover, you didn't get to fix his nose.
Mallett: Really? Bugger this; I'm going to change Fate!

The floor shuddered momentarily as I was being lowered, leaving my pulse pounding in my throat as I was assaulting the Ministry, alone, through the only access port.

They will know I'm coming.

The floor jerked to a full stop and I tried to look through the crack between the bottom of the phone booth and the walls around me but couldn’t see anything. It was unnerving, to be left in limbo here in what essentially was a giant stone tomb if I couldn’t get this thing to resume.

Was there another number to use other than 62442? I reached for the phone, wondering if there would be someone on the other end of the line. What would I say, though? ‘I’m here to break into the Department of Mysteries and re-write reality’?

Before I touched the receiver, ice-cold water poured down upon me. All I could think of was that they were going to drown me if I didn’t enact a bubble-head charm immediately.

As the water cascaded off of me, I noticed my hair color and texture changed as an alarm blared beneath me and the phone booth continued on its way down.

The Thief’s Downfall.

Voices started to filter in as I descended further, the distance between me and solid ground rapidly
shortening as I realized that they knew exactly who I was.

“IT’S GRANGER! CALL THE AURORS AND ST. MUNGO’S!” Bill Weasley shouted. “McNair, Yaxley, get the Carrow’s here too! We’re to take her ALIVE if possible!”

My blood ran colder than the water that was poured on me as I realized that not only Death Eaters were working as Ministry Security, but that the man who scarred my chest in fifth year was here.

The walls went away as I finally barely cleared the ceiling and I resorted to the modified spell I used to survive in Gringotts.

“ADUROMENTI!” Hot lava spewed from my wand tips as I turned and aimed for full coverage. I didn't care about innocent anymore; I needed my wife and daughter back.

The bottom of the telephone booth kept descending and I crouched down as a hailstorm of hexes came my way and I ceased my spells as I tried to locate them without looking.

“Hermione Granger, I always knew you weren’t good enough for my son!” Molly’s voice was, in one word, scary. I had never heard her voice drip with that much hatred and cruelty for anyone. “You killed my grandson!”

“It was a miscarriage!” I wasn’t certain why I was trying to defend the other Hermione from this timeline. “Your son cheated with Andromeda!”

“Well at least us Purebloods know how not to kill our unborn!” She screamed back, and it was enough for me to lob an explosion curse her way. As pro-muggle as the Weasleys were, they will fall back to Pureblood ideals when it suits them.

Spellfire from her ceased as I holstered the Harbinger Wand and leapt off of the descending platform, broom between my legs and firing stunners where I expected Molly Weasley to be.

It was pure luck that I had hit her since my eyes tracked movement to see a familiar ginger running away with the Carrows following him. Where was he going?

“GRANGER!” Walden McNair spat in rage as he tried to hit me with Sectumsempra. I weaved through the air in order to avoid the curse, feeling my stomach lurch from the momentum shift. I let instinct guide me as I flung out a Bombarda Maxima charm with as much force as I could put behind it. Red bolts of stunners were coming at me from the left and I flipped myself under the broom with the sloth grip roll as I focused on Yaxley and tapped into a well of anger and hatred within me that was begging to be released.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” The green bolt of light dropped him instantly, and it seemed too merciful for the Death Eater. I struggled to right myself and crashed onto the ground, broom snapping in two as I kept my wand pointed at an unconscious Molly Weasley a few meters away from me. Smooth, Granger.

My stomach roiled with the anger and hatred as I remembered what she did to my Cissy back in 1976.

How she accused Cissy of trying to ‘convert’ Ginny into being gay when treating the injured after the Battle of Hogwarts.

She lay there, stunned and vulnerable, and my mind went back to when I was nearly broken and immobile after the attack on St. Mungo’s.
This isn’t the woman who made your life hell, Granger.

I had been willing to trade bits of my soul to stop the extinction of wizard kind, and to protect my family. I remembered how the Deathstick was pushing me towards Darkness, and how I embraced it to slay the current villain.

My wand shook as I didn’t know what I would do next. I knew I should make my way down to the Department of Mysteries, but I couldn’t help but feel like there was unfinished business here.

Who else would have said this? Grindelwald, Voldemort, Ragnok?

Except it was the Goblin Hodrod instead of Ragnok in this timeline. The scars on my soul have been adding up ‘for the greater good’ for some time now. Would the next villain be Hermione Granger?

Explosions came from above where the phone booth access point was and I instantly knew that it was Harry and Kingsley catching up with me.

The Ministry sure seemed to think I would be.

I grimaced at the lack of time and summoned Molly’s wand, incinerating it at wand-tip before making my way to the lifts to hopefully make my way down to the Fate Chamber.

The doors to the lift opened for me as I approached and I hit the button for the lowest floor. The metal hinges closed with a creak, making me realize exactly how old and rickety these could be. There were no cables making the lift go up and down like there was in the muggle version, and I could look through the grill in the ceiling and see up to the top of the shaft.

Tactically, I’m at a huge disadvantage. Paranoia had me putting up a shield charm as I went down the floors towards the Department of Mysteries. The Ministry seemed eerily empty, reminding me of when the D.A. invaded to get to the Hall of Prophecy.

The Death Eaters cleared the way so we could walk right in and collect the Prophecy for them.

My paranoia was well-founded as spells slammed into my shield and I returned fire with the Harbinger Wand. The Alectos were in the lifts on either side of me, somehow having overridden the automatic controls.

If they have overridden their lifts...

Dread hit my stomach as my lift came to a complete stop between the third and fourth floor, the automated voice sounding distorted and garbled.

Oh, shit.

Amycus and Alecto’s lift cars were coming towards me from both above and below. I would have to fight my way out of here.

I gulped hard as I vanished the floor beneath me and dropped into a free-fall, mind racing to decide between a momentum-arresting charm or using levicorpus on myself.

Two wands, Granger! Do them both!

I reacted just in time as I saw the bottom of the lift shaft come at me. As I found myself dangling by an ankle due to one wand, I cackled and sent Fiendfyre to immolate the siblings with the other.
I might be Dark and vicious, but I would survive this.

I righted myself on the ground and blasted open the gate before me. I was on level nine, and I knew exactly where I had to go.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I went down the long hallway to enter the Department of Mysteries, stopped short as a stunner hit the wall in front of me as a type of warning shot.

“Miss Granger,” Kingsley’s voice came from another lift with a furious Harry Potter by his side, “I am going to have to ask you to stop.” Harry’s wand was aimed right at me in a white-knuckle grip.

“NO!” Harry spat, “She killed all of our friends!” Kingsley’s eyes flicked between him and myself as I had thrown up a shield charm already.

“Actually, Harry, I’ve exercised quite a bit of restraint which is more than I can say for you.” I snapped back, fury in my voice as I looked at Kingsley. “Working with the Death Eaters?! Are you mental?!”

He looked disgusted at himself as I said that. “The world has gone mental, Hermione. We just want to survive.”

“Let me guess, you decided against using Grindelwald’s Cauldron even though the Goblins found the Resurrection Stone?” I spat at him. “You could have protected the Statute of Secrecy!”

Harry’s enraged eyes looked to Kingsley in disbelief. “What’s she talking about?”

Minister Shacklebolt grimaced as he ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth in frustration. “Something that I told Unspeakable Bode we wouldn’t use and that he shouldn’t divulge to anyone.”

I shrugged at that. “Sorry, I’m from a different timeline. We used it and avoided open warfare with the muggles.”

Harry turned back to face me, face red in rage. “LIAR!” Before he could cast a spell at me, Kingsley hit him with a stunner and let him collapse rag-doll to the ground.

“What do you mean, ‘different timeline’, Hermione?” Kingsley asked carefully.

“Will Harry be okay?” I ask, careful to not point with either wand in my hands.

“He’s just out for a bit. Whereas you are nothing like the Hermione Granger I’ve gotten to know in the past few months. Dual-wielding wands, not looking strung out on potions… but being merciful to Molly, after everything she and Ronald have put you through?”

“Roasting the Carrows alive with fiendfyre isn’t unusual?” My eyebrow was raised in mild surprise.

“The Golden Trio has seemed cursed as of late. Harry here was about to have his Auror’s badge revoked before the war started.”

I remembered something and put on the charmed spectacles that Luna had given me. Harry’s aura was black and green, and it appeared that the black was actually devouring the little bit of green that was left.

“He’s been using the Elder Wand.”

“He told me he snapped it in two.”
I shook my head. “No, it’s a cursed wand and only…” I decided to hold onto that bit of information for now. “He needs to learn how to ground himself and let go of the anger.”

“Sounds like you have first-hand knowledge, Hermione.” His deep tones were still soothing after all this time.

“So you believe me then?” I try to change the subject.

“What are you here to do?” Shacklebolt was unflappable.

“I need to get into the ever-locked room, repair this twisted Fate, and destroy the Deathstick once and for all.” His eyes went distant at that, and I wasn’t certain if I should repeat myself or not.

“Kingsley?” The Minister fell over much like Harry Potter had, and I was able to see a rippled distortion in the place where he had been standing. The distortion wavered as a jet of green light hit Shacklebolt in the back, and the tip of a wand moved up to face me.

*Disillusionment!*

“SECTUMSEMPRA!” I bellowed, slashing my wand to the right and seeing crimson blood erupt through the spell, knocking the assailant over.

“Expelliarmus! Finite Incantatem! Relashio!” I looked to see a dazed, tied up Augustus Rookwood bleeding onto the floor.

“Croaker!” I called out, hoping that the Unspeakable would just magically turn up.

_Rookwood was the Unspeakable among the Death Eaters, who is responsible for killing Unspeakables Bode and Lovegood._

“He’s dead.” He gasped as red bubbles came out his mouth and chest, indicating that I sliced through one of his lungs.

“You will be too if you don’t start talking.” My voice was unusually calm as I stood over him, both wands pointed directly at him.

“Doesn’t matter. I still win!” Rookwood said angrily, and there was something in his eyes that indicated either madness or being under the Imperious Curse. Cursing silently, I begin to heal his wounds as I kneel down on him, pressing my knee into his solar plexus to rob him of enough air to put up a fight.

“Legimens.”
Rookwood's Tale

Chapter Summary

Now we see how the other reality unraveled. This whole "writing a whole new timeline" idea goes back to an abandoned story of mine that I'll be resuming in the fall after I finish 50 Flavors Fulfilled:

Hermione Granger and the Time-Turned War

Flashes of memories went past me as I settled on one in the Department of Mysteries, where I followed Rookwood scratching at his freshly-made Dark Mark, breaking into Pandora Lovegood’s workroom the lifeless witch’s body disillusioned in his arms, staging the area to look like she died from a cauldron explosion.

“No hard feelings, Pandora, but The Dark Lord needs Quirrell’s body to latch upon. And you turned into a loose end.”

The memory ended and I found myself drifting through memories again until I stopped myself inside of St. Mungo’s, watching Rookwood lower the window shades to darken the private room before leaving Devil’s Snare next to an unconscious Unspeakable Bode, grinning malevolently.

“Croaker is in hiding; the Department of Mysteries is now neutralized in the coming war.”

The memory fizzled away as we were now pacing inside a cell in Azkaban with Minister Shacklebolt, Percy Weasley, and a frazzled-looking Professor Vector.

“Augustus Rookwood, the Ministry… the Wizarding World needs your help.”

“Piss off. I’m just going to rot away in here while you lot get destroyed by the Muggles and Mudbloods.” The defiance radiating from him was unusual; the Dementors should have been ripping his psyche apart by draining him of all happiness.

“Please… you’re the only Unspeakable left,” Septima Vector pled, “…my calculations are falling apart on a very specific day. Arithmancy… Fate herself… is dying.”

Rookwood laughed at that, causing him to cough violently and wheeze. “The Moirai cannot die; they are a force of their own.” His grin fell instantly as his eyes widened in sudden realization. “Unless the Wand of Destiny has been truly found. The Dark Lord was searching for it, believed that Albus Dumbledore…” He rubbed at his face in consternation.

“We had the Obliviators work overtime at hiding the truth; Harry Potter is the rightful Heir to the Elder Wand.” Kingsley admitted.

Percy’s eyes flicked between the pair of them as a dark look went over his face. “The Deathstick can kill anything short of Death himself.”

Septima’s fearful eyes looked to the Death Eater in hopes that he knew the answer. “But how can they be killed? They don’t actually exist!”
Kingsley pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. “Lucius Malfoy has proposed a… Faustian Bargain of sorts. The situation with the Goblins has deteriorated into total war, and we’re in need of… radical countermeasures… to stop them before the Statute of Secrecy is completely blown.”

“You white-hats finally realize you can’t win a war?” Rookwood sneered, “Serves you all right to die, then.”

Percy looked at the Death Eater in disgust. “No need for self-preservation?”

“My world is dead. If the future is more polluted blood, then it should all die! I wish I weren’t alive for this.” Augustus spat back. A beat. “Does the Potter boy still wield the wand?”

“He broke it in two so that nobody would try to kill him for it.” Percy said flatly.

“Lies. It cannot be destroyed so easily.”

The vision around me blurred as the jail bars melted away and Rookwood was back in the Department of Mysteries, looking at a modified muggle M-16 and the magazine clip held paintball rounds. Percy seemed different and Rookwood seemed genuinely scared of him now. I stepped around to see Rookwood, and though he was no longer in Azkaban robes, he looked wan and frail as there were cuts and bruises on him that could have only been done through torture.

“How do I make this work?!” Percy’s voice was different, too. Rookwood could have sworn that his new boss was under the Imperious Curse as he had already ruled out a disguise or Polyjuice.

“I don’t know, it’s MUGGLE technology!” Rookwood’s hand smashed down to the table, breaking one of the capsules, squirting out paint in all directions.

“I’ve seen this in action, and it worked just fine around magic!” Percy spat in anger. “We replace the paint with potions and it can work against Inferi and Goblins without worry of getting our wands stolen!”

Unspeakable Croaker entered the room, glassy-eyed as he was still trying to fight the Imperious Curse that he was under. “Percy, I cannot open the Fate Chamber, it is sealed against the living-”

Percy screamed in rage, forcing Croaker to take his dagger and punish Rookwood again as his own personal whipping boy, leaving blood to drip onto the ground as Augustus took the cuts stoically so as to not give the twisted Weasley any satisfaction.

“You’re going to figure this out.” The ginger said darkly to the Death Eater before turning to Croaker. “My Dark Mistress figured it out before; so it’s not impossible!”

The Percy in the memory looked up and directly at me. He grinned in a malevolent way that sent chills down my spine. This is a memory, right?

“Agnostus, we have a visitor. Kill yourself.”

The memory flashed red and went black as I realized that I was in a dying mind. Percy had possessed Rookwood’s body in part, as if he-

HELP

I struggled to end the connection, but something held onto me with a vice-like grip that left me falling into a void of nothingness.
Percy made Rookwood into a Horcrux to possess him.

HE IS ALWAYS HERE

If he dies while I’m inside his mind, does that kill me too? I didn’t have time to think as I kept fighting and trying to sever the Legilimantic bond I formed with him.

Let me go!

I DO NOT WANT TO DIE

Then don’t!

I CANNOT DISOBEY

I felt a tickle under my nose and I was able to see again as a large fluff of Orange pouncing the face of Augustus Rookwood, knocking the now dead body onto the ground as I found my bearings all over again.

I’m alive. I’m back in my own head. And Crookshanks is here.

“Crooks! Where have you been?” I asked incredulously.

“Rowr.” He replied grumpily, as if annoyed that it took me this long. He started to run off, leaving me to have to follow him.

“Where are you going now?!” As I followed my familiar, I realized that he was leading me past the room with the Archway and to what was supposed to be the permanently-locked room.

The stone door was nothing but rubble now. Crookshanks stood by the rubble of the doorway and looked to my hands and chirped a warning.

Right, I need my wand.

I took a deep breath to strengthen my resolve, put the Harbinger Wand into my right hand, and made my way in.

Once I passed the threshold, I was surrounded by complete darkness. It was so dark and silent that I couldn’t keep my balance and felt as if I were about to crash down hard upon the ground.

Come on, focus!

A raspy breath gasped and I tried to turn to face it. “Hello?”

“INCENDIO!” The blast of light from the spell immediately extinguished and I didn’t know if I dodged the spell or not. Does magic not work here?

“Lumos!” I enchanted with the Harbinger wand, and the flicker of light lasted for only a fraction of a second. Knowing that someone else was in the room, I searched my pockets and put on Luna’s charmed spectacles to see if it would help.

“LUMOS MAXIMA!” I shouted, forcing my will into the wand.

The room lit up with a blaze of light, and I was able to see less-than-human Percy Weasley scrambling and searching the body of a dead woman sitting at a loom. He was covered in disturbing, magical tattoos that I couldn’t see before. He was no longer technically alive, and I could only
assume the markings were to cloak himself to gain access to this chamber.

_The Moirai are - were - real._

“It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this! I need my Dark Mistress back!” Percy gave up on the first woman and went over to the next.

“Percy?” I asked, wand drawn upon him. _He definitely wasn’t from this reality._ “It’s no use, Granger. Magic doesn’t work here.” He kept crawling around as if he couldn’t see the light that I was making. _Maybe this place exists out of space and time, and my mark is keeping me anchored?_

I realized right then that I could cut him down, but then what?

“You used Rookwood. You’re from the other reality. Why have you done this?!?” I exclaimed, horrified.

“You can’t understand, [Mudblood](#) ! It was better! I was going to make things better! ”

“Our kind face extermination by the Muggles and Goblins here! How is this better?”

“Ogden tried to access the Fate Chamber and failed. I’m in here now, so I have the power to change Fate!” He threw the second dead body down in frustration. “I SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO THIS!”

As he scrambled around, I stepped out of his way as he found his way to the third Fate and started to loot her remains as well. “Well you can’t. The Fates are dead.”

_If this is the Fate Chamber, and they are the Moirai, where’s the Tapestry?_ I raised my wand-hand in order to light up the ceiling, and the Ouroboros tattoo on my wrist began to rotate as a complex Arithmantic formula began to glow. Each line and Eigenvalue looked like a different thread as they all interwove into a complex work of utter beauty.

“Oh. My. Gods.” I whispered as I reached out with my left hand, opening and analyzing the various threads in the Tapestry of Life. It seemed to recognize me and brought forward and focused on the end, where all of the threads looked frayed and broken.

_This is when Arithmancy ‘died’._

I was awestruck and momentarily forgot about Percy as I heard him throw the third body aside in rage.

"I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT! AND GOT NOTHING FOR IT!"

I turned to face Percy, who was angrily staring off into a corner, blind to the world around himself.

“Charlie works with [dragons](#) while Bill got to be the [cool curse-breaker](#), grew his [hair](#) out and wore [little fangs](#) in his ears and [married a bloody Veela](#)! The twins [slacked off](#) and joked their way out of Hogwarts as [drop-outs](#), and Ron got to be [Harry’s](#) best friend while Ginny was the [precious little girl](#) of the family.

“What about me? I [followed](#) the rules, I wanted to shine like my older brothers as I made Prefect and Head Boy. But what did I get out of it? ’Oh, that's nice’ from mum and ’Pinhead’ and ’Bighead Boy’ from my brothers!

“I had to work TWICE AS HARD to make it in the Ministry and not get dismissed as a Muggle-fetishizing [freak](#) like my father! They couldn't even get my NAME RIGHT! I just smiled and
swallowed the shame of being called 'Weatherby' by the only people who noticed and approved of me!"

_He’s not crazy after all; he’s willfully chosen this path._ I shuddered as I realized he willfully followed the Lich Trixymort.

“After I _finally_ got noticed by the Minister, _where was my family then?_ I was treated like dirt, and accused of being a spy for the Ministry to find out what Albus’ stupid order was up to!”

“You didn’t have to sell out your family.” I spat back, furious at the amount of death and destruction that has happened from just one person.

“I didn't give up on my family. _They gave up on me._ And _I HATED_ the world you made, the one that was okay with your... _perversion!_ The Dark Lord respected tradition, family, and blood purity! You wish to destroy all of that, you want my kind forced to breed ourselves into pollution and _filth!_ You and Narcissa Malfoy making that _abomination_ is against nature and worse than _anything_ the Death Eaters did. They never violated the natural order!”

“Carina is not an abomination!” Fury ran through my veins as I had the wand leveled and ready to kill him right on the spot for that, but I knew better than that. He was less than a man here, possibly stuck forever in the darkness.

“You ruined _everything!_ The Dark Lord brought back peace and order! I helped target and eliminate the Blood-Traitors from within the Ministry! But you and that whore Narcissa had to destroy all the good we’ve done!”

“Good? You think what you were doing was good?!” The knot of glowing lines pulled apart as my left hand pointed towards the oscillating Eigenfunction, and a familiar dark line glowed darkly as I pressed on it to expand, making me try to invoke the constants to normalize the equation.

*If Arithmancy is based on this, can I repair the Tapestry of Life?*

“It doesn’t matter now, we’re stuck here, mudblood! We can’t get back!”

I tried to ignore him as I invoked Clotho, thinking of Carina and how to get back to her. My mind’s eye, however, focused right on the traitorous grandchild of Septimus Weasley.

“You’re a part of the Unmarked.” The Dark Lord’s unmarked followers, the fail-safe should he lose again... and somehow TrixyMort usurped control over them when she became a Lich.

Clotho worked into the equation, stabilizing the ends of the lines slightly. *Was I the dark line? Am I dark?*

“I _lead_ them! And now they are nothing!” I invoked Lachesis and it immediately flew into place, reforming the tapestry at the point where Narcissa gave birth to our daughter. Other frayed lines were starting to re-form as the dark line faded slightly.

Emboldened by this, I automatically invoked Atropos. Rather than see a memory that symbolized the Crone, I saw myself in my old age, holding my wife in a loving embrace as our grandchildren made their way onto the Hogwarts Express.

_Gods please let this fate play out..._

“You’re nothing, Percy. A sad little has-been seeking glory amid the Dark.” The Tapestry of Life opened up to me and my wand was drawn into it, pulling me into Fate itself and I realized why I
could see and do magic here and he couldn’t.

I had faced Darkness and found balance. I was wielding the Harbinger Wand, and I was going back to my reality in order to face down TrixyMort and destroy the Deathstick.
We come to the end of this story. My wife believes that I may have dragged this on too long, but I am glad that I hit so many great ideas in a very full plotline. (Perhaps this should have been broken up into separate stories, like book 8/9 of a Harry Potter AU)

Final song correlations, and my favorite ones:

Hermione (end): we're in this together
Narcissa (end): with teeth!

I find myself in the apparition spot deep within Malfoy Manor, wondering why Fate brought me back here and what point of time it was.

Soon enough, I overheard Dobby in the dungeons talking to Harry and Ronald, which was quickly drowned out by my own blood-curdling screams.

Bellatrix is torturing me upstairs.

I have seen this moment in two perspectives now; both in my own and in Narcissa’s.

This makes the third perspective... Three again.

I disillusion myself and make my way up to the imminent fight, knowing that Dobby, Harry, and Ronald were going to quickly rush the Malfoys and Fenrir and get the drop on them.

Did they have any wands? How did they succeed when they were outnumbered?

I knew Harry had to disarm Draco, so I left that to him. Fenrir could get confused, and I would be the one to kill Lucius once I’m left behind.

That’s what changed; I left with Harry and Ron last time because Dobby didn’t take a step to the left.

I shook the temporal paradox out of my head, remembering how Harry knew he could cast the perfect Patronus Charm because he saw himself do it already.

As I entered the room full of chaos, I had my wands drawn on Fenrir and Lucius and confused the pair of them as the massive duel unfolded before me.

The chandelier came crashing down as I remembered, and Bellatrix was her usual unhinged (but very much still alive) self.

Just kill her now… you know you could do it…

I had the Harbinger Wand pointed at her as I cast the Killing Curse, and… nothing happened.
Damn it.

As I thought to use my regular wand, the silver dagger was already flying towards Dobby and it became painfully clear what my role was here.

I made a silent plea of mercy as I threw a weak banishing charm at the House Elf, shoving Dobby to the left and making the dagger not hit him in the center of his chest as Trixy had been aiming for.

I cringed as the knife hit with such force that the shoulder was hit, and the weight pulling Dobby in different directions made him splinch, leaving his arm behind with a scared, hysterical Hermione Granger.

Narcissa took the moment as Lucius and Fenrir were still recovering from the confundus as Bellatrix cheered gleefully at hitting Dobby to shoving Draco’s wand under the crumpled form of Hermione. Cissy protected her son the best she could and hoped that Hermione would realize what just happened.

“She is MINE!” Lucius proclaimed, nearly strutting in place as Hermione’s hands whipped out a raw Sectumsempra curse across the room, bisecting the Malfoy Patriarch in one swish.

Magic flowed through the room, from Lucius to Hermione and she gasped in painful pleasure as the Bonding transferred onto her.

I couldn’t help but grin as my wife intervened.

“Stop! We must respect tradition!” Narcissa said, shocked as she felt the Compulsion demand that she protect her new spouse.

Bellatrix cocked her head and looked like a sad puppy who didn’t understand why they couldn’t torture and kill the muggle-born. “What are you talking about, Cissy dear?”

Narcissa regained her composure ever so slightly. “The mudblood… defeated my husband… in a legal duel, on his own property.” She looked to Bella. “She wins his estate by default.”

Feeling reassured that the timeline was restored, I made my way back down to the apparition spot and twisted into nothingness, my destination firmly planted in my mind: The Department of Mysteries.

As I make my way to the lowest floor of the Ministry, ‘Bob’ was there, looking at me with utter confusion.

"Miss Granger… why are you here?"

"No time to explain, Croaker... I'm the Harbinger."

"How did you know I am… ? Harbin...? Okay, I know that prophecy, Miss Granger. But, um, I haven't seen anything to indicate that-"

"In my timeline, before the Fates were killed, magic quit working. Also, it's Mrs. Granger-Black now. I won Narcissa in a deal with Lucius."

His eyes widened as he instantly became a believer. "...becomes a wife by ending life... Okay. What do you need?"

I pulled out the charmed spectacles that belonged to Luna’s mother.
"Get these to Severus. And don’t tell me that you saw me, is that clear?" As I handed it over, I realized that I was fulfilling a temporal paradox. Those glasses will exist twice in the same point of time.

"Temporal Paradoxes are mandatory course material here. Understood. Should I know anything… without revealing too much?"

"Trust Harry, and trust whom he chooses to trust."

"Why wouldn’t I trust Ron- oh.” I couldn’t keep my face neutral at the mention of his name. “I’m sorry. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

I took a breath to steel my nerves. “I need the Resurrection Stone and access to the Fate Chamber.”

That surprised him. “I can get you that, but the chamber is always locked!” He looked down at my wand and saw the symbol at the end of the handle. “Though I guess that would work as a key.” We went and got the stone from his office vault, and wished me well as I was going to twist back Fate.

The Fates were in a suspended animation; they weren’t alive nor dead, but neither could they move or talk. The spinning wheel was also in a state of flux, both spinning and stationary as the loom seemed to ‘stutter’ at making the Tapestry of Life.

“Merlin’s Whore.” I swore as I looked up and saw the full length of the Tapestry of Life spiral above me. It was all of recorded history, and I could pick any point in time and travel there.

I could assassinate Salazar Slytherin before he puts the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets.

I could kill Tom Riddle when he was yet a baby in the orphanage.

I could end Bellatrix before she ever became a Lich.

As I looked at how the Tapestry was woven, I knew that undoing any of those moments would have disastrous results.

I would lose Narcissa and Carina.

I wondered then if TrixyMort had changed the timeline at all, as she would have not chosen to stabilize Dobby to stab him square in the chest when she could have undone Harry reflecting the Killing Curse onto The Dark Lord.

If she didn’t unwind Fate, what did she do?

I didn’t see as much as feel the presence behind me, and I turned to see a violently livid TrixyMort, equally frozen still and ‘stuttering’ as if a millisecond was replaying itself on a continual loop.

She’s been trapped here, so this reality was caused by my inaction?

This wasn’t the first temporal paradox I faced, but it did confuse me. I had to live through this reality in order to change it and make Dobby take one step left.

I looked back up to the Tapestry of Life, found my wedding day, and pulled myself through the thread to return to that point in time.

I found myself in Narcissa’s quarters, leaning over the crib to see my daughter Carina.
“I’m home, Carina. Mama’s home.”

Crookshanks trotted past me and gave my ankle a quick face-rub as he turned the corner and hunched down, as if preparing to attack. I knew something was up, so I disillusioned myself and followed my familiar and saw him hissing at my doppelganger in the room.

“Surly, get Carina out of here!” I whispered, raising my wand to strike them down.

As Surly popped in and rescued carina, Crookshanks leapt into action.

"Crookshanks! What are you doing to Hermione?!" Narcissa asked as I shot the killing curse and struck the imposter down.

Cissy turned, wand ready and panicking as I put up a shield and disillusioned myself.

“Wife, it’s me! Look at the body!” As the Polyjuice potion wore off at death, we saw my features morph back into Percy Weasley. “Surly took Carina someplace safe.”

Startled, or at least just confused, she lowered her wand as she looked over Percy. “You know it’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

I smiled, grateful to be back. “We’ve been married since the day I set foot in Malfoy Manor, my love. Now, will you trust me?”

Cissy summoned a vial out of Percy’s pocket and inspected it. “Exploding potion. Not much to do any real damage.”

My mind raced to think of the wedding we were about to have. “It’s not the only one… Protean Charm.”

Narcissa nodded in understanding. “We need to evacuate the area.”

“Actually, your sister is coming to slaughter us all right now. Collect all the potion vials; we’re going to need it.”

“Bellatrix is coming? But she can’t be killed-”

“I know, only the dead can kill the dead.” The feeling of the resurrection stone was heavy in my pocket. The Goblins used this to start an apocalypse, now I’m going to use it to end one.

I pulled out the stone and flipped it over three times, thinking of all those who have died due to TrixyMort’s reign of terror.

The ghostly apparitions of Neville, Mad-Eye, Tonks, Fred, Bill, Remus, Dean, Nigel, Collin, Leanne, Romilda, Lavender, Sirius, and Pandora Lovegood appeared before me.

“I need your help. Bellatrix is a Lich, and only the dead…”

“Say no more, Hermione.” Neville replied. “I’ve been waiting for this day.” His voice was darker than I had ever remembered. Even I was more aligned with the Dark than during the War.

Mad-Eye looked off into the distance. “She’s raising an Inferi Army.”

Narcissa looked at the exploding potion. “I think I can handle that… where’s the Elder Wand?”

I frowned at that. “She probably has it, and I’m wielding the Harbinger.” As I look out the window,
the sky begins to get blotted out with unnatural darkness. The temperature plummets and it’s apparent as to what just happened.

“Now I know where all the Dementors that she ‘ate’ went…” My mind went back to the prophecy and how my Patronus had changed.

Raising my own wand, I cast the spell and watched a giant lioness bound out of the castle and go after the Dementors. Outside I could hear others begin to do the same as we realized we were being ambushed.

“Accio Broom!” Cissy called out, and within seconds, we were flying out of the castle and over the battlements to face off TrixyMort one last time.

I had never seen a Patronus fight another Patronus before, but my lioness was fighting a splintered-looking serpent that must have been hers.

Bellatrix still wore the face of Voldemort’s skull like a mask, and it terrified me. "How are you here? I thought Percy said he got Ron to steal you away!"

“He’s dead, and so are you, lich!” I shouted back, reveling in my rage and anger.

"I am the Lord of Death! I am a GOD! I squibbed the world so I had enough power to destroy the Elder Wand, and now I control it!"

"That’s nice. I stopped you."

She seemed to spit venom at that, too enraged to reply. I took the moment and fired off another patronus to deliver a message to Kingsley Shacklebolt. ‘Rookwood is the last traitor in the Ministry, be careful: he’s an Unspeakable. Best to send a howler laced with Erumpent Horn.’

TrixyMort’s dead, red eyes locked back onto me. "You cannot kill me for I am already dead. Death Himself will not touch me."

The Dementors swarming overhead were chased away by the multitude of Patronuses and Narcissa flew overhead, throwing all of the exploding vials onto the Inferi Army all at once.

The massive explosion distracted her enough that my lioness patronus got her jaws around the serpent and snapped its neck, and I cackled with glee.

The remnants of the Inferi Army were still trying to crawl their way to attack the school and the wedding, but I felt Yggdrasil’s roots go through the earth and sprout out fine vines to grasp and bind down the remnants of the undead to the ground, immobilizing the army in one fell swoop.

“But I have the Deathstick!” She shrieked. I knew there was some kind of malevolent grin as I felt the spirits of my friends take the field and begin to rip her apart, piece by piece. It was almost too easy as I shattered the Wand of Destiny with the Harbinger Wand. Once I vanished the pieces to nothingness, the Harbinger Wand itself dissolved into thin air.

It was finally over. Bellatrix the Lich was finally dead, and I reveled in the sounds of her soul being ripped apart by the spirits I had summoned with the stone.

“Hermione?” Narcissa asked, her voice quivering.

I found myself kneeling over her sister’s remains, fingers trailing the mask that once was
Voldemort’s skull.

There was a type of morbid beauty there, and power. It called out to my hand as I caressed it.

"What are you doing with that?"

"I won it, it’s mine." I replied simply. *I couldn’t understand why she didn’t get that.*

"Hermione, you have to destroy it!" There was panic and fear in her voice, and I wanted to console her. I wanted her to know that it would be alright.

"But I won it. By rights, it belongs to me." I lift the mask, inhaling the sweet sickness of decay as I bring it to my face. Cissy’s hands have my wrists in a vice-like grip.

"Belongs to you… just like I do?" Her question struck me as odd. *Of course she belongs to me!*

"Yes." I shook that away. *That was how Lucius treated her. “...no... I mean, I love you.”*

Her eyes met mine, her beautiful blue eyes, and I saw the depths of her soul as we connected on that fundamental level we have.

"I love you too. Please, for the sake of the world, and for us, destroy it."

I understood where she was coming from. *Yet I could feel the power that this had, and what I could do with it.*

"But I can do so much good with it! I’d be *unstoppable* with this much power; I could call up every corpse and destroy *every* Dark Wizard that exists! Can't you imagine it? A hundred years of peace!"

"No, Hermione. You can't control that power. Nobody should."

She pulled one of my hands off the mask and held my hand. The contact seemed to strengthen our connection.

"Think of us, think of Carina. She wouldn't want you to become a Lich. Please. I'll help you destroy the mask."

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**Afterword**

Narcissa and I went to going to Kings Cross with Carina in tow to watch Teddy get onto the Hogwarts Express for the first time, waving to Harry and Andi.

"We are right bastards, you know." Cissy says as I laugh.

"Oh, let him have his surprise." Draco says, waving to the new students from the platform.

A pregnant Ginny is held in and embrace by Harry while Draco’s other hand is holding hers. "Do you think he'll face much bullying for having two dads and a mom?" Ginny asked.

Fleur smiled at that. "Not when people realize how many of his family members are teaching there."

Severus and Fleur stood side by side, getting special attention when Teddy pointed out 'Uncle Severus' and the other students gasped in amazement. "Staff meeting in one hour; we have a
retirement party to organize for Minerva."

It would be a few more years before I taught Carina in Transfiguration, but I would savor every day with my wife and daughter as if it were my last.
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