A Chance For Happiness

by corvusdraconis

Summary

EWE: AU/AO [HG/SS] After the Second Wizarding War, Hermione Granger apprentices to the surviving Severus Snape. The war has changed her, hardened her, and left her bereft of the happiness she once had had in abundance. She finds in her new Master something she would never have expected while she was still a student at Hogwarts: understanding, trust, and the kind of healing neither of them expected to find in anyone, let alone each other.

Notes

Hello everyone. This was my very first Harry Potter Fanfic that began back in May of 2014. It was the first time I’d tried to share anything that I had written to an audience greater than me, myself, and I. It dragged me though a whirlwind of writing, but also, many many short chapters. I am reposting the story, which was originally done on fanfic dot net, in a somewhat neater (and perhaps more condensed version,) where the chapters are no longer 300 some words long.

Disclaimer: Standard none of these characters are mine, and I don't claim them as mine. I'm just borrowing them for entertainment.
Part One : Rebuilding

Chapter Summary

Hermione has graduated her seventh year at Hogwarts, post-war. She has apprenticed under Severus Snape, and unbeknown to Ronald Weasley, she has never recovered from what happened during the war.

Chapter Notes

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Chapter 1: Graduation

While most of the remainder of the seventh year class did not return to Hogwart's, Hermione remained to finish her official education and take her Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests. Whispers and rumors flew as to why only one of the Golden Trio had stayed, while the famous Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and others had been given a reprieve from the formalities of graduation to go directly into their respective careers. They had survived the final battle. What greater test could any one of them not face after such a feat?

Unlike the years before, Hermione kept to herself, studying until the wee hours, and save the times the younger students saw her speaking with her professors and walking with Hagrid out by his shack, she did not deviate from her studies. It seemed as if she was either studying furiously or impossible to find. It was as if she was driven by some outside force to complete her objective without distraction and without fail. When graduation finally came, everyone knew she had received nothing less than an "O" on everything that mattered as well as things no one really wanted to believe mattered.

As the majority of Hogwart’s packed and left for the summer break, Hermione met with Ron on his break from Auror's training and walked through the swarming construction crews that were starting to trickle in for the construction, or rather repair, of many of the wings of Hogwart's that remained damaged from the war. Such things seemed strangely trivial in comparison to their lives. Buildings could be repaired, shelves restocked, classrooms refurnished, and lollygaggers docked points any time, but the lives that remained were precious.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Hermione apologized as she looked out over the bridge overlooking the damaged
remains of Hogwarts's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. "It's not that I don't love you. I do. I just… cannot think of you that way anymore."

"But 'mione," Ron protested, his eyes filled with emotion. "I thought after all this…"

Hermione turned to look Ron in the eyes. Her brown eyes that had once held the sparkle of light and the possible future had darkened. For a moment, Ron saw something in her gaze that was viscerally familiar. Cold, emotionless tunnels that seemed to take the place of the warmth she once had for everyone. It was the same dark glare that he had seen countless times before in the eyes of the late Master of Potions that caused his legs to shake and his resolve to flee into deep corners of his mind. Even her mouth was a flat line, only slightly curved up in an almost snarl, as if any patience she may have had evaporated from her mind. Behind her piercing gaze was an almost tangible fire.

Ron instinctively back-peddled, reliving every horrible moment under the tutelage of Professor Snape, unable to fight back the wave of gut-twisting fear. He saw his hated Professor like a boggart overlay over his old friend. It didn't matter that the truth about Professor Severus Snape revealed his true allegiance and his role through the war. It didn't matter that Snape had protected them from as much as he could. His memories of the old Potions Professor were so ingrained it was like a deep-rooted phobia.

And suddenly, like a change in the wind, Hermione was looking at him with her normal tolerant smirk. She had her hand out to help him up off his bum where had fallen over himself in the most undignified manner possible. Her eyes were their familiar warm brown as he had always known them to be. "I am sorry, Ron," she said softly. "I think of you as my best friend and my brother. Please, don't let me lose you like that."

Ron took her hand and swung himself up. He searched Hermione's face for some sort of visual tell to a lie. His face softened and he hugged her, noticing how his touch caused her to stiffen slightly but her arm went around him like it always did in a mutual hug.

There was the distinctive crack of sound as someone apparated in nearby and Ron stepped away as if being caught after curfew by a patrolling Professor.

Familiar dark robes billowed behind the distinctive figure of the Potion Master of Hogwart's as he glided towards them with silent footsteps. The dark wizard's appearance had not changed in the decade he had known him. His expression even more so the same, his lip curled in a half sneer as he eyed Ronald Weasley.

"I would have thought you had enough of this place, Mr. Weasley," the Potion Master droned lowly, his voice holding no less scorn than Ron's memories of him.

"Hello… uh… Professor Snape," Ron stumbled over himself. Seeing the Dark Wizard face to face was no less nerve wrecking than his reminder of him only a few minutes before. "I was just… discussing plans for the future with Hermione, that's all." He finished his last gush of justification with the same rushed and nervous tone that came when stammering an excuse to Snape's intimidating inquiry during the past years as his student.

The dark wizard scowled at him silently and then turned his attention to Hermione. "Apologies for the interruption, Ms. Granger, but Minerva insists I fetch you for help moving and transfiguring the debris on the west side. The bungling construction dunderheads do not seem to have the aptitude for following instructions to not touch the glowing debris or stay out of the transfiguration areas." His voice was annoyed, as usual, and it seemed that not even near death had cured him of that.

"Leaving… us… to pick up the pieces." His last words came with his habitual and characteristic sneer.
Ron fidgeted. He had no idea that Professor Snape had survived the Dark Lord's snake attack. Seeing him there had confirmed that he had, but seeing him standing there in his dark robes caused a shiver to go down his spine. How had he missed seeing him at the graduation ceremony? Snape wasn't exactly hard to miss with his characteristic black robes. Harry insisted that Professor Snape was to be regarded as a hero after the war. Somehow Ron didn't think the greasy git of the dungeons would want to be regarded at all. Hold on a tick. Why would Headmistress McGonagall request Hermione to help clear the debris at Hogwarts?

"Have the wards been adjusted for my apparition?" Hermione asked as if commenting on the weather.

"No," Severus replied matter-of-factly. "Minerva has been distracted lately. You will have to suffer me." He raised his arm up, opening his side to her for a side-along.

Hermione made a harrumphing sound and stepped closer to him, placing her hand around Severus' waist and pressing close to him to allow his arm and cloak to curve around her back. "I'll owl you later, Ron," she said in the cheery tone he remembered her for. "Thanks for coming to my graduation."

"Don't gawk, Mr. Weasley" Severus growled lowly, in the same tone he remembered him for. "This is not a zoo."

With a corresponding crack, they were gone.

Ron wasn't sure which part he was more stunned by: Hermione sharing a side-along apparate with the infamous dungeon bat or the fact that the Potions Master had pulled her against him in an almost protective embrace before they had disapparated in front of his eyes.

Chapter 2: Potion Delivery

"Mr. Weasley!" Minerva greeted from the middle of the swirling construction site. "I have not seen you in quite some time."

"Hello, Headmistress McGonagall!" he greeted automatically, dodging a man carrying lumber on his shoulder. "Construction still ongoing?"

"Oh, yes," Minerva huffed, brushing the dust off her robes without even bothering to use a cleansing charm. "We are able to run the school without the damaged wings, but each one we repair gives us more wiggle room for the students and the teachers without tripping over each other. Last I heard you were studying to be an Auror! Are you on break?"

Ron knew the older wizard missed little. "Yes, I took a small break to visit Hermione on her graduation night."

"Oh, I do apologize, Mr. Weasley," Minerva sighed softly. "I had to pull her away to help with the transfiguration of the far hall. She and Severus both know the old layout of how things need to be and all of this mess needs to be completed before she starts her formal apprenticeship. Everything has to be in order by last week, and the graduation celebration planning just put everything on hiatus."

"Formal apprenticeship?" Ron questioned.
"My goodness," Minerva dodged a man carrying buckets. "Yes, she will be apprenticing under myself and Severus after summer. She's been informally apprenticing under Severus since she came back to Hogwart's. She's already passed all of her accreditation exams, so it is just a formality and adjustment period really. You know how she is. Always striving to be better than she thinks she needs to be and ends up being better than anyone ever thought she needed to be. She will make a wonderful teacher here at Hogwart's."

Ron couldn't help but notice the pride in the older wizard's voice despite the frustration of the construction. "Looks like you could use some help around here," Ron noticed amidst the chaos.

"Ha!" McGonagall laughed as she flicked her want to remove one of the larger pieces of debris from the collapsed hallway and piled it to the side to make room for movement. "All of the staff are on mandatory debris management for now. Every wand we can spare to keep the construction crews from stumbling over magically charged flagstones." She stopped a moment and seemed to be lost in thought. "Considering how much we lost during the battles, I am glad that some things did survive it."

Ron nodded. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Minerva's brows furrowed as she contemplated his question. "Well, all the staff could probably use some invigoration potions at this point. Could you take them around and make sure they all get a few before they collapse in exhaustion? Mind the regular construction crews, please, they are on thin ice as it is with Severus, and the last thing we need is them to run into the transfiguration area and bump into him."

Ron considered what his own reaction to bumping into the old Potions Master would be and nodded in agreement. He picked up the crate of invigoration Potions and set off to bring relief to the staff of Hogwart's.

Chapter 3: Debris Becomes Arch

Hermione pointed her wand at the debris and concentrated carefully on what she wanted it to resemble, forming the image in her mind of the old archways she had passed under countless times before. Sending her energy out with a whisper of her intent, flicking her wrist to remake the object she remembered. Concentrating, she whispered again, making the archway feather-light, and moved it into place on the support pillars Severus had already placed.

Just as she set the arch down, a crash caused her to spin around towards the closed doorway. The pillar Severus had been setting in place crashed to the ground as a lost construction worker bumped into him, spouting apologies. Severus Snape towered over the fallen construction worker as though he would turn the man to flames by his very willpower alone. "Do you not know what a closed door means, you thick-headed ignoramus?" snarled Severus' voice in the same tone he used to patronize many a student. "Get. OUT!" he said with the steely tone that implied many horrible things he could and would do if his orders were not followed to the letter, causing the man to do what any self-respecting person facing the wrath of Severus Snape would do: flee with his tail between his legs so quickly that he forgot his tool belt and scattered tools all over the floor.

"And take these useless tools with you, you lazy good-for-nothing dolt!" Severus snarled, clenching his hand in a fist and flicking his hand out in a sharp wave, soundlessly and wandlessly sending a hurricane of tools chasing after their terrified owner.
Hermione Granger let a small smile and a giggle loose as Severus grasped the top of his nose and pointed his head up, closing his eyes. It was so very Severus Snape. She found it strangely calming. His reactions to interruptions and annoyances had not changed. "I think it's time to sit down for a bit anyway, Professor," she said calmly, waving her wand towards the table as a teapot and cups came to her call. "Tea?"

Severus took in a deep breath and sighed, storming towards the table as if he intended to kick it over. He sat, gruffly, sagging into the seat like he would his old teaching desk, wearing the most irritated expression he could. Hermione poured the tea silently, placing a sugar into the cup, stirring it, and handing him the cup and saucer before pouring her own.

"I wish you would teach me how to do that," she said softly as she sipped her tea.

"Yell at idiots? It's quite easy, Ms. Granger," Severus said dryly as sipped his tea. The tension in his expression seemed to fade after a moment, and he eyed her curiously. His depthless black eyes seemed to be searching hers for a subtle tell only he knew to find.

Hermione snorted into her teacup as she sipped. "I meant casting spells without a wand or your voice, Professor Snape."

"Hrmph," he replied in a dismissive tone. He seemed thoughtful. "It takes more energy than using a wand, but usually when you are angry enough, that is hardly an issue." He spoke conversationally, all signs of his earlier hot tempered malice was gone.

"So, you're saying I just have to be angry enough," Hermione replied, raising a brow over her teacup. Severus made a scoffing sound, his eyes glaring at her like a flippant student, but there was strangely no heat to it.

He stood suddenly and faced one of the piles of rubble. "Come here, Ms. Granger."

Hermione set down her teacup and obeyed.

"This may be a little…unorthodox," Severus said softly. "Will you…trust me?"

Hermione furrowed her brows in confusion, but nodded silently. Severus had proven he could be trusted time and time again. To mistrust him now would seem petty.

He moved behind her and guided her hand up with his, his pale hand closed around hers and splayed her fingers into the proper position. He placed his ear next to hers and whispered "Imagine what it is to hold that piece in your hand. Think of it as clay. It is yours to command and yours to control. Will it to be what you desire. Think of the power word in your mind and cast it forward through your hand."

Hermione felt a tingle in her head, and for a moment she saw herself as Severus crafting his pillar, molding his will into power and his power into form. He was teaching her by example, right into her head.

"Your will is your wand. Your will is power. Feel it inside and channel it into that piece of stone. Now flick your will with your hand and guide it forward," Severus spoke softly into her ear. His low rumble in his voice reverberated in her mind and she felt what she needed. "Now release it. Be the power word. Be the power. Send it forward. Focus."

She saw the image in her head of what he wanted her to do and felt how it felt. Hermione let her energy cast in front of her like she had a wand in her hand and let it smash into the stone debris she was focusing on. The stone trembled and shuddered for a moment and then solidified as a support
pillar. She beamed brightly, excitement written in every line of her face. "That was brilliant!" She bounced a little on her heels, and turned to face Severus. "Thank you, Professor Snape!"

"Insufferable know-it-all," he scowled at her, dark eyes meeting hers. Hermione looked up to him, chin up and proud. He met her gaze and the corner of his mouth twisted up slightly. "Since we will be working together now, Ms. Granger, you may call me by my name," he said evenly.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. "Thank you… Severus," she replied.

His scowl softened and he nodded silently, turning to return to his tea.

"Severus?" Hermione asked to his back.

"Yes, Ms. Granger?"

"You may call me Hermione."

He stood silently a moment as if mulling over what reply would be best. "As you wish, Hermione," he said before returning to his seat to collect his cooling tea.

She returned to her seat as well and drank the last of the tea in her teacup with one long gulp. Severus had his hand to the bridge of his nose again, eyes closed as he contemplated whatever hidden thoughts came to mind.

"Severus?" Hermione asked again.

"Yes, Ms… Hermione," he corrected himself.

"Thank you. For teaching me."

He dropped his hand from his face and moved to pour more tea into her cup and his. "You are welcome."

Chapter 4: Wrath of a Gryffindor Witch

"Are you completely DAFT?!" roared Hermione's voice from around the corner right after a crashing noise clattered in the ruined hallway. Chaos greeted Ron as he carried the box of invigoration potions around the corner.

Ron started to hurry forward thinking that Hermione was having an argument with the grumpy Potion Master and was going to get herself killed by collateral backlash.

"It isn't enough that you plow into him earlier, you come back to cover me in THIS, you gormless arse-faced muppet!" A young man was sprawled in front of her, his tools scattered around as though it were a game of pick-up sticks. His eyes were wide with fear as the young woman, now dripping in some sort of construction cement, towered over him like an angry Hungarian Horntail. "Get…. OUT!" she hissed, her eyes darkening with a growing tangible malevolence. She put her hand out as if to cast something but had no wand.

"CLEAR OFF!" she raged with a hiss that seemed to come straight out of parseltongue. Her hand shook and the offending construction worker tumbled forward as if shoved by an invisible force along with his tools and his now half-empty buckets. The heavy iron gate into the next area shut with
The frightened young construction worker plowed out of the area in such haste that he bowled over Ron, sprawling them both in a spill of wet construction compound, spilled invigoration potions, and abused tools.

Hermione stood shaking as the construction cement dripped off her entire body, the rage that filled her body refusing to quell itself immediately. The cement was running down her face and into her eyes and it only managed to make her angrier.

"Be still," Severus' voice commanded, expecting obedience.

Hermione froze in place and heard Severus whispering a soft cleaning charm. The cement vanished off her face and her hair and then worked its way down to her feet. The heat from her outburst finally began to diffuse slowly. She took in a deep breath and sighed deeply. "Thank you, Severus." The cold of being drenched, however, was going to be harder to remedy.

Silently, Severus removed his outer robe, and held it out for her. She slipped her arms into it gratefully, gathered it around her, and pulled it against her like a blanket. Shuffling back to the table, she slumped into the chair and sagged as if she were melting into the chair itself. Irritation radiated off her that Severus recognized all too well.

Severus leaned down and picked up Hermione's wand that had flown across the area thanks to the bungler's idiocy. He scowled back in the direction the dolt had been forcibly removed in. A quirk of a smile rose from the corner of his mouth. She learned fast, this witch. He expected no less. He sat back down at the table with her, setting her wand in front of her. She hardly looked human wrapped in the folds of his outer robe. It was as if some dark entity had fallen upon her and swallowed her up. Why had he given her his robe? A warming spell would have provided relief.

As he stared expressionless at the dark mass of cloth that had become Hermione, he knew why. She needed to brood and wrap herself in something that protected her from the outside world. He understood that well enough as well.

A shuffling at the gate caused Severus to clench his teeth. He flicked his wand over his shoulder and the gate opened. "Come in, Mr. Weasley."

Chapter 5: Impatience

"Hello… Professor Snape," Ronald greeted tentatively, seemingly oblivious to the flecks of construction plaster that had splattered over him during his collision with the fleeing construction worker. "Hey, Hermione. I brought you some invigoration potions from the Headmistress." He shuffled up to the table the two were sharing.

Snape's black eyes moved from Ronald to the potions. "Do you plan on setting them down, or are we to simply stare at you until they hop out of that crate by themselves, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron was distracted by the sight of the Potion Master without his normal flowing robe and Hermione slumped at the table wrapped in it.

One of Hermione's hands snaked out of the warmth of the robe and opened, palm up.
Ronald continued to stare in confusion.

"Oh do stop being such a berk," Severus snapped, reaching over to grab a potion out of the crate, unstoppered it, sniffed it to confirm its contents, and placed it in Hermione's open hand. He then took one for himself, took out the cork, sniffed experimentally, and drank it down. He watched with slightly less annoyance as Hermione brought the potion to her nose, sniffed it experimentally, and then drank it down. She remembered his lessons to never drink something before confirming it was what it was supposed to be. Clever girl.

Snape turned his gaze back to Ronald Weasley and stared at him malevolently.

"I uh…" Ron stammered. "Guess I'll talk to you later, 'mione!"

Hermione grunted something unintelligible as Ron carried the rest of the potions off to the rest of the waiting work staff.

Severus took a deep breath as Ronald scrambled back out the gate. Taking his wand out, he began to ward the zone they were in, freezing everything into place, and making sure the gate remained locked to the construction crews. Staring down at the crumbled figure still draped in his robes, he smirked slightly. "Come," he beckoned. "Let us get dinner before we are both covered in construction plaster."

Hermione gave a snort and stretched, standing up. Severus opened his arm for her, and she stepped in without question, allowing his arm to wrap around her and pull her close.

Crack. They vanished.

Chapter 6: Dinner

"Oh, Mr. Weasley," Minerva welcomed him back from his rounds with the potions. "Thank you for getting those potions out to the staff."

"You're welcome, Headmistress," he said automatically. To be honest, he had no clue what to call his former Headmaster. She still called him "Mr. Weasley," so it seemed perfectly normal to lapse into what he would have called her before graduation.

Minerva smiled. "We're having dinner in the Great Hall. The students are gone for the summer, so we opened it for construction folk. You are welcome to join us tonight.

"That would be great, thank you," Ron smiled back at her.

"No thanks necessary, boy," McGonagall tutted. "I'm sure you can remember the way?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Ron replied.

Minerva smiled and excused herself to clap her hands and announce that it was dinner time to the rest of the site.

Ron attempted to clean the rest of the plaster remains off his clothing before heading towards the Great Hall.

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"Honestly, Severus," admonished McGonagall as she sat down with her plate at the High Table. "As if terrorizing the construction boy wasn't bad enough, your temper has been rubbing off on Hermione. I'm not sure if that boy's poor mind will ever be the same."

Severus gave a bored sigh. "Really, Minerva, it's not like the dolt didn't know we were there. Twice."

Minerva shook her head and scoffed. "The boy came running through the ruins like you had plans to kill him, raise him from the dead, and kill him a second time."

Severus picked some fruit off the serving platter, some meat, and a few pieces of cheese. He placed it all on his plate, cut the meat up finely, and slid it in front of Hermione. "Eat," he said simply before pulling another plate to him and filling it up for himself.

Minerva watched as hands and then Hermione's head peeked out from Severus' robes and she ate quietly. "Hermione, dear, what happened that has you bundled up like a Samhain present in Severus' robes?"

"I've been having a really bad day with construction workers, Minerva," she replied softly, eating a strawberry from her plate. ".. and construction cement."

McGonagall shook her head. "Oh, my dear, it will get better. I promise. How is it coming in that area?"

"We should be done within a few days. The arches are almost finished. Severus had all of the pillars in place before I was accosted by a cement carrier," Hermione huffed a puff of air to blow a strand of her hair away from her face. "Tomorrow we'll probably have all of the windows set, provided I'm not attacked by a stained glass carrying wagon."

Severus growled, "I should hope not."

Minerva watched the interaction with some interest. To most, Severus was the same cantankerous, surly, and curmudgeonly man he had always been, but there were strange and subtle deviations since his return. His students would probably say differently, but she noticed a strange softening in Severus in regards to his apprentice. More subtle than the allowance of Hermione to keep warm in his outer robes or even watching him silently prepare a plate of food for her and shove it in front of her with a curt command to "eat," she was noticing smaller tells. His willingness to apparate with her as a side-along, teaching her advanced potion work far into the night even before she technically graduated, and the softer edge to his growls as he called her insufferable seemed to point to something was changing between them. He spoke with Hermione. She called him Severus. That was recent.

Severus slid his eyes to glare at the older woman as she watched Hermione eat her dinner. The woman was always sticking her nose into things that didn't concern her. He would have to teach Hermione occulumency just to keep the old bat from sniffing around in her head if the older witch was dabbling in legilimency. She was always entirely too close to Albus. He couldn't keep his nose out of things either. He poured a glass of juice and put it down in front of his apprentice. "Drink," he said sternly.

Minerva smiled as Hermione clutched the glass a few moments before starting to drink from it. Well this was a curious change indeed. She could tell Hermione was suffering from an extensively taxing day between her graduation and being waylaid by construction materials.

"Severus," Minerva said softly, "Perhaps you can escort Hermione to her new quarters. I had all of her old things moved there after the graduation formalities. Construction woes we can save for
tomorrow morning."

Snape looked at Minerva with a bored expression. "As you wish." He stood with Hermione and she
smiled weakly at the older witch. "Thank you, Minerva."

"You are welcome, dear," she replied. "Get some rest for tomorrow."

Severus and Hermione walked side by side out of the Great Hall with Severus slowing his normally
long strides for his tired apprentice. Minerva watched from afar with a raised eyebrow.

She smirked in amusement as some of the construction workers scurried out of the way of the dark
wizard. His demeanor lost nothing even without his outer robe. A few people looked down the aisle
to stare at the woman with dark flowing robes pass by them. Snape's posture stiffened as he missed
nothing and he shot a glare at them as well without breaking stride, making them turn around and go
back to eating with the same response as an admonished student.

The fall semester was going to be different indeed.

She saw Ron Weasley walking up the aisle as if trying to find a seat, and she waved towards him to
come join her at the long table up front. He sat down awkwardly, as if sitting at the designated staff
table would cause lightning to strike him down.

"Have a seat, Mr. Weasley, and tell me about your Auror training," she welcomed with a grin. "I'm
afraid you just missed Hermione. She was looking exhausted, so I asked Severus to show her to her
new quarters."

Ron smiled sheepishly and began to fill Minerva in with the latest Auror gossip.

**Chapter 7: Gritting Teeth and Bearing It**

Severus stood before the portrait that guarded Hermione's new quarters in the dungeons. It had made
sense to have his apprentice quartered near him for the duration of the apprenticeship and strangely,
he did not feel the same amount of need to drive off the impending interloper like he drove out his
students from class once the class time was up.

He took a deep breath and gathered his resolve. "Gryffindor is the one true house. Huzzah." His last
words came through clenched teeth as though saying the words were painful.

The portrait swung open, and Severus rolled his eyes as he guided Hermione into her new quarters.
Her things were already placed as promised, and it appeared that the older witch had already seen to
gifting Hermione with Gryffindor themed curtains and bed linens. Aggravating witch.

"Welcome home… Hermione," he said quietly.

Hermione smiled as she saw the themed bed linens and curtains. "What would I do without
Minerva?" she chuckled tiredly.

"Use more green, obviously," Snape answered her dryly.

Hermione gave him a genuine smile. "I don't have anything green, Severus."

"Easily remedied, witch," he said deadpan, flicking his hand to turn her bed linens and curtains to
Chapter 8: What Day Is It Today?

Hermione stirred from her sleep in the early morning and groggily slid out from under the covers. She sat on the edge of the bed a moment and tried to gain her mental inventory of her graduation day. "Eugh," she groaned, putting her hands in front of her face and rubbing her eyes. "Who needs fire whiskey when you can have a day like yesterday?"

She stood up and mumbled her way into the bathroom to shower and brush her teeth. As she exited, she flung her bed clothes onto the bed from afar, and opened the wardrobe. She picked out a plain robe in anticipation of the construction work.

She picked up her discarded robe from the night before and hung it in the wardrobe. She smelled his scent upon her robes. The Potion Master's scent of musk and herbs was strong over it. Why had he given her his robe to wear? She had expected at the most a grumbling warming charm after he had cleaned the plaster off her. Instead, he offered her his robe for warmth in a gesture that seemed so simple and mundane. He had allowed her to wallow in it as her irritation and weariness threatened to swallow her whole. It was as if he understood that she had needed that meltdown. Understanding? When had that started?

Attempting to shake of the grogginess that clung to her, she reached out her hand for her wand and felt a tug before it slammed into her open palm as if guided there by opposing magnets. Hermione blinked. Staring at her wand as if it had grown multiple heads of Cerebus, she tucked it into her robes. Brushing her hair and pulling it back, she set it with a clip and walked out of the quarters with a grunt.

A crate of potions sat on the Potion Master's desk with a piece of parchment laid upon it. "Pomfrey" was the only thing on the parchment. Severus' distinctive writing flowed across the parchment. There were no instructions, but Hermione didn't require any. He had obviously been brewing into the night after seeing her to her new quarters and his absence meant only he had other obligations somewhere.

She lifted up the crate and carried it off with her.

Chapter 9: Breakfast
Madam Poppy Pomfrey happily relieved Hermione of her crate as she spewed a chain of thanks and scurried off into the hospital wing to attend her patients. "Do thank Severus for me, will you, Hermione?" she said as she scurried off.

"Yes, ma'am," she answered automatically.

"Call me Poppy, dear," she said over her shoulder.

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione made a face and shook her head as she realized her habitual reply was not doing as the woman had asked. Pomfrey chuckled and disappeared deeper into the hospital wing.

Hermione yawned again and heard her stomach growl to remind her about other obligations in the morning she had to take care of, so she turned on her heels and walked back in the direction of the Great Hall.

The Great Hall was already full of people, giving Hermione the impression that it wasn't as early as she thought it was. As she walked up the aisle to find her expected seat, she couldn't help but crack a smile as she passed the Gryffindor tables. Her smile faded somewhat as she recalled how some of those she sat with for most of a decade didn't get to see what life would be like outside of Hogwarts.

I few of the workers stumbled over themselves to move out of her way as she walked, and when she turned to look at them curiously, they immediately turned around to avoid her gaze. Raising an eyebrow at them, she continued to walk up towards the High Table. What was their problem, anyway?

She was, apparently, later than she had realized. The High Table was almost full of dining people. Hagrid beamed at her when he saw her, waving for her to come have a seat. Minerva smiled and waved her fork at her with a slightly off kilter grin, caught in the middle of devouring a piece of toast. Ronald waved to her from the other side of Hagrid, having obviously stayed over the night. She winced slightly upon remembering how the previous day's conversations had gone.

Hagrid stood up and gave Hermione a hug that almost squeezed the breath out of her. She smiled, leaning against him as his unquestioning warmth chased some of the more painful memories away. Minerva had apparently pulled up a few guest chairs on the opposite side of the table, one of which was occupied by Ron who was stuffing his face with a mouthful of bacon. She rose an eyebrow. Some things definitely did not change.

Hermione sat in her now expected seat next to where Severus normally sat. No one sat in his seat during his absence. Sometimes she wondered if they were afraid that something might rub off on them or if they were more worried what the Potions Master would do to them if they did.

Hagrid passed her a muffin he had filched off the top of a stack for her and grinned at her. She laughed, allowing a hint of her younger and happier self to peak through.

Ron chatted excitedly about his adventures with Harry in Auror training. There were some things he seemed to dance around, as if he was protecting trade secrets or some other such peculiarities. Hermione listened as though it were the most interesting subject in the world while attempting to caffeinate herself. Hagrid mentioned he was running out a particular salve he used when working and asked her about informing Severus about it. She nodded silently in agreement. Flitwick leaned in and asked Ron a series of questions, giving Hermione a moment to stare into her tea in a moment of contemplation.
Quiet hushed over Ron's voice and she blinked. She looked over to him and he was frozen in mid-sentence. Dark flowing robes billowed as Severus stormed into the Great Hall with the presence that caused the random workers to stumble out of the aisle and turn around to stare at their plates as he passed. He walked as if his feet never touched the floor and hidden currents of wind propelled him along. His face was expressionless, his mask firmly set upon him.

Hermione kicked Ron on the foot to turn him around and stop gaping. "Honestly, Ron. We aren't twelve anymore."

The dark wizard came to his place at the High Table and sat with a grunt. Ron averted his eyes as Hagrid greeted him.

"Hagrid," he said evenly. "Flitwick." He inclined his head in a short bow.

"Ah, Severus, good morning," McGonagall welcomed cheerily from down the table.

"Minerva," he said with a rumble, his lips pursed in a line.

Hermione grabbed a plate and filled it with sausage, bacon, an egg, and a half a waffle. She dumped some fruit on top of it, placed a pat of butter in the mix, and set the plate down in front of the Potions Master. "Good morning, Severus," she said softly in greeting.

Snape turned his head and inclined it slightly in greeting. "Good morning, Hermione."

"I delivered the potions to Madam Pomfrey this morning," she commented. "She sends her heartfelt gratitude as it were."

Severus harrumphed and shook his head. His gaze narrowed as he raked it across Ron, who was trying to meld into the table. "Mr. Weasley." His voice rolled the "s" in manner that made him sound as if he were contemplating the taste of a good steak.

Ron didn't reply until Hermione gave him a swift kick under the table. She inclined her head in a jerking motion.

Ron tentatively raised his head. "Professor." He attempted a small smile.

Severus rolled his eyes and focused on his breakfast.

Hermione poured tea in a few cups and distributed to Ron, Hagrid, herself, and Severus. Severus lifted his hand closest to her, palm up, and she placed a sugar cube on it automatically, which he in turn, dropped into his tea and stirred.

Minerva chuckled to herself as she watched Hermione indulge the older Potion Master with his idiosyncrasies. Her apprenticeship had tuned them well to each other, as all successful apprenticeships should. While she hadn't expected it to happen quickly by any means, it seemed that it was working out just fine.

Chapter 10: Insert Foot Into Mouth

Ron realized he had put his foot into it the moment Hermione's eyes went dark. The cheerfulness in her face was replaced by something that seemed to fill her eyes and slide across her face, and then
her entire demeanor shifted.

"Excuse me, my friends, but I need to prepare a batch of potions so we can continue working on the west wing today," she said flatly. Her voice held no warmth. "I will see you all later at the construction site." She tilted her head and bowed it to Minerva, turned on her heels, and walked out of the Great Hall, her robe moving behind her like a flag in the wind.

"What did you say to her, Ron?" Hagrid asked with his eyebrows furrowed.

Ron held up his arms in a shrug. "I just said we should go camping one of these days like we used to."

Severus sipped the tea he was holding, his dark unwavering eyes smoldered within his stoic expression.

Hermione had five cauldrons going at once. She eyed them as her mind slowly counted the time even as she cleaned the silver knife she was using and the cutting board. Stirring one, then another, stirring another counter-clockwise, and dropping a leaf into another, her mind told her which one to stir and which one to wait upon.

The color changed on one, and she lifted it off the fire, letting it cool as the dark emerald color turned clear. Another began to change color, and she did the same, placing a pinch of ground root as it cooled and waved her wand over it. The other cauldron burbled, and she cooled it slowly with her wand until it settled into a pale blue liquid. The other two cauldrons would have to wait, and she whispered the charm over each cauldron to place the timer over them. Pointing her wand at a nearby stool, she turned it into an easy chair and flopped into with sigh, grasping the bridge of her nose as she slumped into the chair. Her mind attempted to wrestle with her about what it refused to let go of.

A pale hand moved in front of her, dangling a small potion. She eyed its crystalline bottle and the sapphire blue liquid inside. "Drink it," Severus said softly. "You will feel better."

She opened the bottle and sniffed it. It didn't smell like anything she had taken before. She looked up into Snape's dark eyes and then quaffed the potion quickly in case it was foul tasting. She swallowed the last of it with a squint and held her hand back up, offering him back his bottle. He took the bottle from her hand, his fingers lightly brushing against hers before he turned and walked towards her simmering cauldrons.

Hermione closed her eyes a moment as her head began to clear. Thoughts that refused to dissipate only a few minutes earlier, were retreating back into the corners of her mind she normally shoved them. She felt herself relax, and the encroaching fury that was threatening to consume her faded.

Inhaling deeply she stood up, waved her wand to restore the lab stool, and walked over to the cauldrons. Severus had already bottled the potions he had completed for her. His hand flicked outward as a dozen or more written labels flew onto the various bottles written in his elegant script.

She approached him from behind, brushing her shoe against the stone floor in the customary and courteous hi-I'm-here-please-don't-blow-up-a-cauldron-on-my-account shuffle. It came instinctively after working in the same laboratory with Severus. Even if he knew you were already there, it was like knocking.

Severus had already removed her cooking potions off the flames and had bottles set out for filling. He handed her a ladle silently as he wrote the rest of the labels with his practiced quill. She carefully measured doses into the waiting bottles, put a stopper onto each one, and cleaned the cauldron and the ladle with a flick of her wand. A flurry of more labels flew by her, wrapping themselves around
the potions with a gesture from Severus' hand.

"Sometimes I think we waste our time labeling them," Hermione said with a small chuckle. "It's not like most of the people out there today are going to read it before they drink it. They will just take our word for it."

"Their funeral," Severus droned, his voice rumbling. "Their laziness will ultimately give them reason to be more careful in the future… if they survive their mistakes."

Hermione smirked as Severus turned around, flicking his wand to vanish the remnants of the cauldron remains and sent all of the bottles they had filled and labeled into a crate. He tucked his wand back into his robe and shook his head.

"Maybe they just have faith in their Potion Master, Professor Snape," Hermione said in return as she watched him pick up the crate into his left arm.

He regarded her with slight upward tilt of his chin and lifted his arm for her to attend. She stepped into his space until his arm folded around her, bringing her close to him as the CRACK of their disapparation filled the laboratory.

Chapter 11: Arches and Quizzes

"I am going to miss being able to do that during the fall when the students trickle back in," Hermione admitted as she leaned into Severus as the disorientation cleared.

Snape gave a small chuckle as he set down the crate of fresh invigoration potions. "It does make things… convenient," Severus admitted as he lifted his arm from around Hermione, and she stepped away from him tentatively.

"I'm feeling a bit whoozy after that one," she admitted. "Not sure why."

Snape's black eyes met hers. "The potion I gave you settles the mind, but can also dull the senses somewhat for a short time after drinking it. Disorientation can happen if you are say… apparated to a different location soon afterwards."

Hermione chuckled. "Serves me right for being so… angry before noon. What I would have given for one of those before final exams," she admitted softly.

The corner of his mouth lifted in amusement. "Which is why it is a private brewing recipe."

Hermione lifted an eye brow. "Thank you, for indulging me."

Snape's stoic expression softened slightly and he nodded. "It seems we have still beaten the masses to the area. Perhaps we can get some work done before the imbeciles start throwing building materials around our heads." He strode forward towards the wing they were working on after giving a flick of his head in the direction he wished to go.

"If only," Hermione smirked as she walked beside Severus to their work area.

Without the random interruptions, placement of the replacement archways and pillars went quickly. The rubble started to clear enough that the area started looking familiar again. Severus began to lay
the foundations of the window casements, and Hermione set in the frames. Together they rose up the buttresses and settled in the support walls, readying the structure for the future floors and work for the construction crews.

As they set one of the keystones in place with their wands, Hermione wobbled on her feet slightly. "Just in time for a break, I think," she confessed, accio'ing the chair and table to them. She flopped into the chair with a relieved sigh and lay her arms in front of herself and placed her head down.

Severus sat down in the opposite chair and had leaned back in it with a book he pulled out of his pocket. "List the ingredients of an antidote to common poisons."

"Two mistletoe berries, a pinch of unicorn horn, one bezoar, and two measures of standard ingredient mixture," Hermione mumbled into her arms.

"How many times do you stir the potion after adding asphodel to a draught of living death," he asked, flipping a page in his book.


"And how many times after you add sopophorous bean juice?"

"Seven times," she replied with a yawn. "Anti-clockwise, then once clockwise."

Severus smiled as he read his book. "Good."

Chapter 12: Painful Recollections

Ronald had left her.

He left her as she cried after him, begging him to come back.

He accused her of being with Harry Potter and turned his back on her, leaving his two best friends to fend for themselves in the wilderness.

It didn't matter that it was the Horcrux that had influenced him. It didn't even matter that he came back to redeem himself. The damage was done. The pain of that particular betrayal curled around her heart and crushed it.

Even once the war was done, and Ron had kissed her in celebration, her heart was no longer filled with unconditional warmth. She had celebrated with everyone, flashing smiles to the survivors and her friends, but in reality she felt betrayed. She would never truly trust him again. She would never trust him to stand by her when his insecurities wrapped around him. She could never trust him because he could not fully trust her when it had mattered the most to her tortured heart. And just like the scars left by her physical torture, the wounds on her heart had left scars.

So when Ronald had stood there on the bridge overlooking Hogwarts asking to be in a real relationship now that she had graduated, her warmth had run out. What remained was emptiness and the coldness that came every time she looked upon the face of Ronald Weasley.

She no longer had what he wanted her to give.

He could be her brother. He could be her friend. He would never be anything else.
Hermione woke from her dreams unsettled. She lifted her head from the table and saw Severus looking at her curiously with his dark unfathomable eyes. He inclined his head to the table where a cup of tea waited for her. Smiling slightly, she claimed the tea and cradled it in her hands before sipping it.

"We seem to be ahead of schedule on our end," Snape commented as he flipped a page in his book. "Miracles. Can. Happen." He made the last words extend as if no one was more surprised that he was.

"Such a relief," Hermione confessed. "I haven't really had time to think with all the tests, potion orders, and … whatever all this is we're doing."

"Organized chaos," Severus responded wryly.

Hermione snickered into her teacup. "Quite." Something flickered across her eyes that hovered between cold and warmth. "I didn't even tell him about the apprenticeships. I think I was too hard on Ron the past few days."

Snape met her eyes with his own, his face somber. "He is a Weasley. He will rebound as oblivious as ever; of this I am certain. I think Minerva has been running interference for you in her own way."

"She is so good to me," Hermione let out her breath in a sigh. "He's still terrified of you."

The corner of his mouth twitched upward, "Mission accomplished."

Hermione almost choked on the last of her tea and then vanished the cup and saucer.

Severus closed his book and tucked it into his robes. "You are due for a fitting for your teaching robes anytime this week. If you wish, you can mix business with seeing off your," he paused as if pondering which word would either be more insulting or less, "friend."

Hermione cracked a small smile, impressed with Snape's control over himself to not use yet one more opening to reinforce his true opinion of Ronald Weasley. "Thank you. I think I will do that."

"Hermione," Severus called to her as she had turned to leave.

Hermione turned back and looked at him expectantly.

"Your apprenticeship sigils," he said, holding out his hand to her. Two ornate medallions made of goblin silver shone in his hand. One had the form of a snake wrapped around Severus' personal mark. One had the form of a lion curled around Minerva's mark. The snake had deep emerald eyes. The lion had deep red rubies for eyes.

Hermione closed her hand around them. A warmth seemed to pass into her from Severus' palm. "Thank you, Severus."

"You are welcome," the Potion Master said as he closed her hand over the medallions with his. He stared into her face a moment before he turned from her and walked out of the hall towards the rest of the construction crews, his black robes swished behind him to mark his silent passage.

Chapter 13: Fittings and Farewells
"Don't fidget, dear," the shopkeeper tsked as she waved her wand. Measuring tapes, scissors, pins, needles, and thread swirled around her in a cloud of activity.

Hermione stood still as instructed, pulling on the patience she called on to watch over a simmering potion cauldron. Cloth swirled around her, twisting, tightening, and moving into place. "Patience," she remembered Severus admonishing her. "Clear your mind."

She closed her eyes and let her thoughts blank.

"Think of nothing," he had told her. "Slow your mind until nothing is the only thing that remains."

Gradually, the sound of the scissors and the feel of the fabric swirling around her faded. The chatter around the store faded into the back of her mind and then disappeared. The sound of the door opening and closing disappeared. Footsteps disappeared. The sound of screaming socks disappeared. There was nothing left to distract her.

"Ah, there we are!" the shopkeeper exclaimed, snapping the two sigils onto her collar. "Perfect."

Hermione opened her eyes suddenly and blinked.

"Blimey, Hermione," Ron stared at her. "You stood perfectly still there for over an hour."

"I must say, Professor Granger," the shopkeeper addressed her. "I rarely have someone who can literally stop fidgeting so completely when I ask them to. I've made the patterns and will have duplicates made in the standard assortment of colors sent back up to Hogwart's for you. You can wear that one out with you today."

"Thank you, Seamstress," she replied softly.

"Oh, love," the seamstress chuckled, "You can call me Anna. It was no trouble at all. I've made a few variant patterns off you since you were so still, so you will have some ability to mix and match for colors and seasons. I do say, you look striking in that shade of emerald. Have a look, dear." The seamstress conjured tall mirrors around her.

"Wow, 'mione," Ron said as he took in her full robes.

Dark fabric made up her corset down to her ankles. Satin emerald brocade formed a colored vest that buttoned up the front. A crisp black collar rimmed in silver encircled her neck, each end adorned with the two sigils of her mentors. A black outer robe hung from her shoulders, flowing off her arms with a graceful fall of fabric with the inner edges trimmed in emerald and burgundy.

Hermione touched the silver medallions at her neck and gave a small smile.

"I have all your measurements, dear, so if you need anything else, don't be afraid to owl me special requests in case you need something formal for those crazy events up there at Hogwart's." Anna clapped her hands together. "I'll also send you some better fitting working robes for all that construction up there, my dear. Do give Minerva a hug for me, please. I haven't seen her in over a month."

Hermione nodded her head in agreement and smiled, taking her wand from her old robes and pocketing it in her new one.

"Good, good," Anna cooed. "Off with you now. I'll send your old robe up with the new ones."
Hermione stepped off the platform Anna had her standing on for measuring and eyed Ron who was staring at her wide-eyed. "Ron, it's a robe."

"Well yeah…" he began a response. "You look like a Professor."

Hermione slapped him upside the head as she channeled her inner Molly. "Come on, let's go get a drink before you go." She spun around towards the door and walked out, her robes fluttering behind her.

Ron rubbed his head where it smarted and followed behind her with a lop-sided grin on his face.

-O-o-oo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

"How long have you been apprenticed under Professor Snape?" Ron asked as he took a sip of his drink.

"About a year now," Hermione replied, "not officially until now."

"So you were studying for your N.E.W.T.s and apprenticing at the same time?" Ron's eyes widened.

"Not for teaching, just potions," Hermione clarified. "Teaching starts in the fall because of all the construction drama. Minerva and Severus get to dump on me at the same time once the students return."

"That sounds awful," Ron confessed. "I can't even imagine working under Snape for any length of time. They couldn't even pay me to do that."

"You two do have a well-documented history of disagreeableness," Hermione poked fun at her friend.

Ron shook his head to clear the rush of horrible memories. "How'd you do it, 'mione? I mean… he wasn't exactly kind to you… ever."

"I believe Minerva said 'You will work with Severus until we get you situated the fall semester after you graduate. Severus, stop scowling at me. It's rude, and stop scowling at her, too,'" Hermione quoted humorously.

"That sounds more surreal."

"To be honest," Hermione began. "I think I was so glad to see a familiar face that survived the war that a lot of the old misconceptions I held onto as a child didn't mean anything anymore. Harry called him a hero. I really didn't know him at all. None of us did. At some point it just didn't matter to me. I was there to learn. He was there to teach. He does know his potions. You have to admit that at the very least, Ron."

Ron gulped down the last of his beer. "Yeah. The old bat knows his stuff. He just scares the ever living shit out of me."

"Dumbledore trusted him, Ron" Hermione reminded him. "You have to trust that Dumbledore was no fool, either. Neither is Harry."

"Yeah," Ron said, shaking his head. "I'm going to take a while to digest that though." He stood up and smiled. "Time for me to go back to work before Harry gets me canned."
Hermione stood and gave him a hug. "Take care of yourself, Ron. Thank you for coming to my graduation."

Ron wandered over to the register to pay for their drinks. As he walked out the door, he saw Hermione standing under one of the streetlights with Severus Snape. The snowflakes were falling thickly in the light, covering their dark robes. Hermione brushed flakes off his head and shoulders with a laugh as more fell to take their place. Snape scowled at her, shaking his hair and covering her with more flakes.

Ron couldn't help but watch them as Snape showed her a cauldron he had stored under his arm. He could see the cauldron was filled with countless smaller cauldrons, knives, beakers, measuring spoons, and cutting boards - undoubtedly replacements for the ones blown up and abused by the students of the previous year. Hermione picked up one of the smaller cauldrons and laughed, pretending to chuck it at someone's head. She placed it back in the larger cauldron and giggled. The sound of her laughter reminded him of nights long past sitting at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall.

They looked eerily similar as they stood under the lamplight. Their black robes fell off their shoulders in a smooth cascade of symmetry. Ron had to admit that they did match the mental image he had of how similar a Master and their Apprentice would look.

Snape reached over to Hermione's neck, fingering the two medallions at her throat. He stared down at her with calm expression. Lifting his arm for her, she stepped closer to his body, allowing his free arm to fold around her.

Severus' dark eyes met Weasley's from across the street, boring into him. His eyes were cold and his face was expressionless.

There was a crack, and they were gone.

Chapter 14 : Letters

Harry Potter lifted his head as an owl flew over him with a brush of wings so close that he practically felt them touch his head. Another owl flew by on its way to someone else before one dropped an envelope on his desk with a rustle of parchment. The owl rocked back and forth on its talons, wings half folded, slightly ruffled from its landing. He was reminded of a certain owl that liked to crash land into the Gryffindor table not so very long ago.

He opened a tin on his desk that held suspended tidbits meant to thank the owls for their service, holding it out gingerly for the owl's sharp beak to clasp onto it. The piece of frog leg disappeared within a few seconds, and the owl hooted softly in appreciation. Harry smiled, missing Hedwig fiercely. The owl spread its wings and flew off, wing drafts scattering the papers on his desk in an owl-induced hurricane.

He touched the wax seal on the envelope with curiosity. The outer edge was the snake of Slytherin house coiled around the lion rampant of the Gryffindor house. There was something he didn't see every day... if ever. He flipped over the envelope to see the handwriting that was as familiar as his own. Hermione's.

Quickly breaking the seal, he pulled out the parchment and smiled at the finely penned script.
Dear Harry,

It's been such a horrendously busy last semester here at Hogwart's, and I scarcely have the time to breathe let alone write. I am so sorry about that. I know I promised to update you on how things were going.

Ron showed up unexpectedly during my graduation. I hadn't expected him at all. I know you two are practically buried like a tick into Auror's training and duties, so I didn't expect a visit from either of you. Ron jabbered on about it in a flurry of excitement during dinner, but can I admit to you that my eyes kind of went cross-eyed, and I stopped paying attention halfway through?

Minerva and Filius kept him busy answering questions most of the night. I was just so overwhelmingly exhausted. N.E.W.T. concerns aside, we've been trying to rebuild here at Hogwart's.

I've been taken as an apprentice under Minerva and Severus officially starting during the fall return. Minerva has the utmost confidence in me, even if I don't. I'm not sure where all that faith comes from, but I really love that woman for everything she's done to make me feel at home here. It's not that I've never lived here before, but the feel of Hogwart's is a bit different after the war. So many things remind me of our adventures as children, which leads me to remember some of our friends who never made it. The melancholy is hard to resist wallowing in at times.

Minerva gave me my new quarters down near the potions classroom, so I'll be near Severus for my official apprenticeship. I'll be splitting my time between him and Minerva, technically, but she knows that most of my work will be with him as it's been since I came back to finish my studies here.

You should have seen Severus' face when he had to say the temporary password to my quarters the first time. "Gryffindor is the one true house. Huzzah." If I hadn't been so exhausted, I'm sure I would have died laughing. He would have hexed me into next month, I'm fairly certain. He got back at Minerva for setting the password, though. She had given me Gryffindor bed linens and curtains for my new quarters. He turned them all into Slytherin colors before taking his leave for the evening. Minerva is going to make his life miserable if she ever finds out.

Ron wanted to get back together after my graduation. I tried to let him down easily, but I have a feeling he'll never understand the real reason. The war changed something in me. I just can't be there for him like he wants me to be. It's not fair to him to be stuck on me. He needs to find someone who can be there for him unconditionally... something I can no longer do.

Severus tells me that he'll bounce back like he always does in that tone of voice that reminds me that some things will never change. You should have seen Ron's face when he realized the Potion Master was still alive. I think his entire history at Hogwart's flashed before his eyes.

I've missed you and Ginny a lot as well. It just wasn't the same around here without you guys in the Common Room with me. I think a lot of the newer students thought I was a recluse, hiding myself away from everyone. Hagrid sends his regards, by the way. He's managed to get his hands on an egg. I have no idea what it is, because hides it away when he realizes I'm there. I can't get close enough to it to identify the markings. It can only mean trouble later, I'm sure, but for now I'll just let Minerva deal with it when she's ready to.

I made Ginny some lip balm in the lab the other night. Severus was showing me how to mix herbs and sweet oil with salve for various purposes. I owled it to her the other night with a brief note. I know you don't give a flying fig about lip balm, so no lip balm for you, Harry. I'm sorry, I couldn't help it! Please send my apologies to her for such a short and formal message. This has been such an exhausting time for me.
I was fitted for my teaching robes the other night, Harry! Can you believe it? Minerva sneaked a photo of me standing with Severus in the hallway. I swear she’s figured out a way to hold a camera as a cat, because I never saw her until she gave me the picture with that laugh of hers. Oh Severus gave her that glare of disgust that just made it all the better. I was so embarrassed. I'm enclosing one of the pictures she gave me. Don't make fun of me, Harry. I was set up!

Well, I need to go and brew up the next batch of invigoration potions before I start taking inventory of how many cauldrons were melted last semester. Severus picked up a bunch of replacements down in Hogsmeade the other night, but I'm starting to suspect we'll need more cauldrons than we previous thought. No wonder he's so grumpy when we melted a cauldron! I think I'm really starting to understand the frustration.

Please hug Ginny for me! She needs to come and visit sometime. Well, you too, but I don't expect it until all your training is completed. I know you're working hard!

All my love,
Hermione

p.s. Please make sure Ron isn't wallowing in self-pity somewhere in a pub. He left a few days ago, so I am presuming he went back to work. If he's not back at work, slap him upside the head for me. You might want to kick him in the shins too.

Harry grinned as he finished reading the letter. It had been too long since his old friend had written, and he truly missed her. Ginny had missed her too. He should let her know to go visit her before the fall semester started up.

He frowned when he realized Ron had left Hogwart's already. He had planned for an entire week off, so he didn't expect him to be back until next week. Where had he gone off to? He vaguely recalled Ron mentioning he was going home to visit his family as well, but maybe he should check, just in case.

He picked up the envelope and saw the photo stuck inside. He pulled it out and examined it. His eyes widened. Severus Snape stood beside his best friend as they stood in the hallway. Snape's lips were pursed together in a thin line as he made some sort of silent commentary, and Hermione clutched the book she was carrying close to her as she laughed. Her dark robes, accented with a splash of color down the front, gave her a look similar to her colleague's. She seemed more at ease than he remembered her as being before she had left to return to Hogwart's.

Harry laughed, imagining Professor McGonagall stalking the pair as a cat with a camera. He wasn't sure if it was possible, but he wouldn't put it past the wiley old animagus to find a way.

Harry tucked the photo and the letter back into the envelope and stuffed it into his pocket before continuing to read through the scattered papers on his desk.

Chapter 15: Dueling For Hysteria

Ginny bounced excitedly as she zoomed over the bridge leading to Hogwart's. She ran her hand down the stone railings with fondness, recalling all the happier times running with her classmates to Hogsmeade. A part of her regretted not returning to Hogwart's to finish her course studies with Hermione, but after the war, she didn't have the drive to return. Embracing life playing Quidditch
with the Holyhead Harpies was exciting enough. She was perfectly happy to settle with Harry in a life outside memories of the war.

The sight of Hogwarts took her breath away as usual, even with the signs of reconstruction swirling around the ancient castle. It was like coming home again. Hermione had owled letting her know she would be waiting for her in one of the outer courtyards away from the hustle and bustle of the construction workers.

She caught flashes of magic down in the courtyard and quickened her step to investigate. The familiar crackle in the air indicated the spells even without the visual signs of energy and light being flung back and forth from the two duellers.

Duels? It was summer. No students would be flinging spells at each other yet.

Swirling black robes moved in the familiar dance of give and take. Hexes flew from one to the counters of the other.

"Do you call that a hex, Ms. Granger?" Snape's voice taunted her.

"I'll show you a hex, Professor Snape, and you will LIKE it!" Hermione snarled back.


A chair appeared out of thin air and flung itself at the woman draped in dark robes. She started to say "Aresto Mome..." and interrupted herself in preparation to dodge. She hissed, "Aqua Eructo." Water spewed forth from her wand in the direction of attacker, breaking his concentration long enough that the conjured chair crashed to the ground with a clatter.

"Colloshoo!" Snape yelled back at her, sticking Hermione's shoes to the ground, tripping her.

Falling over, but not about to be undone, she coughed out a string of words in rapid succession. Random silverware appeared over Snape's head and fell on him.

Both of them glared at each other, pointing their wands at each other. "Expelliarmus!" and the dark wizard and his opponent went flying backwards from each other, wands flying in opposite directions. Snape slammed into the far wall with a thud and his apprentice against the other.

Ginny squeaked as Hermione crumpled in a heap next to her, her body shaking in what could only have been rage.

Hermione's shoulders shook and she cleared the hair out of her face with one hand, reaching her hand out for her wand, which slammed into her palm without a word from her. She stared up at Ginny and busted out laughing uncontrollably. "Hi Ginny!" she cackled, doubling over again with laughter.

Ginny gaped at her, dumbfounded, and then gasped as the Potion Master stood up from where he had been flung, called his wand to him, and stormed over to where his cackling apprentice was losing her marbles. His face was half covered in his dark hair, swirled in disarray around his face, framing his trademark scowl and pale skin. There was a swath of something sliding down one side of his face. Swallowing her instinctive need to back pedal, she took a few steps backwards to make room for the intimidating dark wizard.

Severus used a finger to wipe a part of whatever was sliding down one side of his face. "Lemon Meringue, Ms. Granger? If you are going to fling pies at me, you should at least throw something more palatable."
He vanished the remains of the pie on his face and tucked his wand away. Reaching down towards her, he offered his hand, palm up.

Hermione giggled as she placed her hand in his, allowing his fingers to close around hers and pull her up. "Yes, Professor Snape," she said, closing her eyes in a bad attempt to keep from laughing.

The Potions Master scowled down at her, eyes dark and unreadable as usual. "Be still," he commanded in a tone that did not accept refusal. It was the tone that caused Ginny to stand still herself.

Ginny saw Hermione freeze instantly as she engaged her controls over her mind and body to respond to his command. She was strangely calm, accepting his command without offense.

Severus waved his wand over her, vanishing pieces of leaves, stone, debris, pie filling, and ectoplasm from her hair and robes. He smirked at Hermione with a slightly upturned lip. "Hello, Ms. Weasley," his low voice rumbled in the quiet pause.

Ginny tried to respond and found herself tongue-tied. "…Hello.. uh, Sir.. Professor Snape… Sir."

Hermione grinned in good spirits while Severus fussed over her, straightening her robes and turning her collar back out to expose her apprentice sigils.

Severus grunted. "Far be it for me to let my apprentice be seen in public looking like you went rolling around in the kitchen with the elves." He straightened her robe over her shoulders in a brushing movement, giving her back some of her dignity. He stared down at her, face unreadable but calm.

"Thank you, Severus," she said softly, a genuine grin creeping back into her expression.

Snape harrumphed, waving his hand over her in a dismissive gesture. "Go. Remove your gleeful giggling from my presence at once." He eyed Ginny with a deadpan expression, "and take Ms. Weasley with you."

Hermione stared up into his black eyes, silently meeting his gaze for a few heartbeats. "Yes, Professor," she replied, grabbing Ginny by the arm and dragging her back out of the courtyard.

Severus conjured a chair, sat down, and pulled a book out to read.

Chapter 16: Lemonade on the Lawn

"Merlin, Hermione," Ginny hissed at her friend as Hermione sat down with her on the lawn. "I was sure he was going to hex you into next year! And you just… glared right back at him!"

Hermione chuckled and waved her wand, making a cold pitcher of lemonade and some glasses appear. She poured Ginny a glass, gave it to her, and then poured herself one. "It was just a duel, Gin," her voice had a drone to it that seemed terribly familiar.

"A duel with …P…Professor Snape!" Ginny managed to get out in a flood of emotion.

"We were just letting off steam, Gin," Hermione replied, her face losing some of its mirth. It's been pretty frustrating with the construction and preparation for the students coming back."
"Guaah," Ginny breathed. "I didn't even recognize you at first. Look at you! You're looking so... intimidating!"

Hermione quirked one brow and turned her head to eyeball Ginny. "Wha?"

"You know... teacherly!" Ginny squeaked.

"I'm not sure being 'teacherly' is always connected in the same breath as 'intimidating,' Ginny." Hermione drank the last of her lemonade and vanished the glass.

"No, but," Ginny attempted to express what she was tripping over. She stared into her lemonade for a moment. "You just seemed so focused. Scary focused. Like you really wanted to do something horrible to him. Until you started laughing, I thought you were angry!"

"I wasn't trying to do anything horrible to Severus, Ginny," Hermione watched the clouds pass by over their heads.

Ginny's train of thought promptly derailed at the use of Snape's first name. "When did you start calling him that?"

Hermione closed her eyes and counted slowly backwards from ten. "By his actual name?"

"Well... yeah," Ginevra replied.

"After he gave me permission to."

"Oh," Ginny shook her head. "I guess I thought since you were calling each other 'Professor Snape' and 'Ms. Granger' that it was still awkward between you two. I mean I'd be really awkward for me! I don't think I could ever..." She shuddered.

"Ginny, you goof," Hermione poked at her friend. "You're as bad as your brother. He couldn't even look Severus in the eye the entire time he was here."

"Ron was here?" Ginny perked up. "He didn't tell me!"

"He was here for my graduation, stayed a couple days, and went back to his Auror's training from what I understand," Hermione detailed.

"Huh," Ginny replied. "He came to visit us a few weeks ago, but he didn't say anything about your graduation. I'm sorry I didn't get to make it to your official graduation, 'mione. We had a really big game that night. Harry told me the date a while back, but it totally slipped my mind with the game."

"Naw, it's okay, Gin," Hermione comforted. "You didn't miss anything. I ended up on transfiguration duty the entire evening after we graduated. Minerva was a bundle of nerves. I wasn't much better. I blew up on this poor bloke on the construction crew. I think I scared the life out of him."

"Well you definitely learned Professor Snape's presence, from what I saw today," Ginny giggled, shoving her friend in the arm.

"Psh," Hermione replied. "Talk to me later when I can part crowds with a look."

"You'll get there!" Gin encouraged. "Practice makes perfect, right?"

Hermione scowled at Gin.
"See! You've got that down perfect!" Gin giggled and shoulder bumped her friend. "You'll be teaching Potions class in no time!"

Hermione rolled her eyes, which just set Gin off into another giggling fit.

"What's with those?" Ginny poked the medallions on Hermione's collar. "They're beautiful."

"Apprenticeship sigils," Hermione explained. "So everyone knows whose apprentice I am."

"Wow, I didn't realize they still did that kind of thing," Gin admitted. "Seems so formal. They're so beautiful too."

"Most students probably won't even notice them or know what they mean if they do," Hermione chuckled. "I don't even remember there being any teaching apprentices while we were in school together." Hermione's eyes cast down as she attempted to search her memories for apprentices.

"I don't remember anyone," Ginny said with a pondering tone. "I mean, we changed around some professors, but they just showed up the next year with no explanation. I'm still wrapping my mind around you apprenticing with Professor Snape. He's so… Professor Snape."

"How eloquent," Hermione commented dryly.

"See!" Ginny squeaked. "We NEED to get you out of here for a few days. You're even sounding like that old dungeon bat! It's creepy."

"Ginny," Hermione sighed. "I love you, but you need to shut up."

Ginevra giggled uncontrollably for a few moments.

"We might as well go to dinner," Hermione said as she stood up. "You can catch up with Hagrid and Minerva. I need to go check some things in the lab before dinner, but I'll come meet you in the Great Hall in a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay," Ginny agreed with a nod.

Hermione's expression was strangely subdued. She inclined her head in agreement, turned on her heels, and walked in the direction of the dungeons, her robes wafting behind her.
a notation notebook. She grabbed the quill off a nearby desk and scribbled a few notes into it on what she was working on and handed it back to him.

He tucked it away in his robe for later, knowing from experience that she would have written down all the information he needed on which potion was which and what step she was on for later. "Minerva tells me that Ms. Weasley wishes to stay and watch us raise the arches up tomorrow," he rumbled.

Hermione lifted a brow. "I had no idea she was interested, to be honest."

"She probably wishes to rescue you from your duties afterwards so you do not transform into a vile dungeon bat upon the next full moon," Severus speculated with a deadpan expression.

"Severus!" Hermione couldn't help but chuckle, her mood lightening.

His lips curved up into an amused smirk. "We should probably make an appearance for dinner before she sends the Auror's after me for abusing you as slave labor."

Hermione met his gaze and nodded. "We can't have that. Who would drill the proper use of aconite into the helpless masses?"

"Apparently, you," Severus said with a bow of his head. "Shall we?" He inclined his head and held his arm out in front of him in a forwarding gesture.

Hermione did a small curtsy and went ahead of him with a bemused expression on her face.

Chapter 18: What Was That All About?

"I've always wanted to know what it would be like to sit up here!" Ginny laughed as she swiped a dinner roll off the stack. "Oh how I've missed meals in the Great Hall."

"Whatever have you been doing, Ms. Weasley?" Minerva asked over her drink.

"I play Quidditch with the Holyhead Harpies," Ginny said, trying to see Minerva over the pile of grapes.

"Oh! That sounds exciting, dear," Minerva commented with enthusiasm. "I'm glad you found something you love to do in life. I remember you being very passionate about Quidditch."

Ginny smiled broadly. "So many people here in the summer!"

"Well the staff is the same mostly, but the construction folk need to be fed too, so it only made sense to allow them in to dine with us," Minerva nibbled on a cookie and chuckled. "The hard part is getting the construction folk to stay out of the transfiguration areas. We had a poor boy go and bump into Severus the other afternoon. It did not go well."

"Really? What happened?" Ginny leaned in to hear the story.

"Boy went running through the construction site screaming like a banshee, with all his tools chasing him!" Minerva shook her head and then closed her eyes a moment.

"At least he learned his lesson!" Ginny exclaimed with a laugh.

"Ah… no," Minerva made a face. "He ended up running into Hermione shortly after and covered
her in construction cement."

Ginny's eyes grew wide. "Did she... uh.. help him up?"

Minerva laughed silently. "Let's just say the apprentice learns from the Master."

Ginny chewed on McGonagall's comment, trying to figure out what she meant. Hermione had told her that she had scared some poor construction bloke. Oh dear. "Are you sure it's okay for me to stay the night, Headmistress?"

Minerva tutted. "It's not a problem, dear. We have plenty of guestrooms, but I have a feeling you'd probably be more comfortable on a guest bed in Hermione's quarters." The old witch's eyes twinkled. "Just don't giggle too long into the night. We unfortunately have much work to do tomorrow."

"Yes, Headmistress," Ginny replied automatically, winning a chuckle from the older witch.

A tremor of hushed voices fell across one side of the room, and Ginny turned around to see Hermione and Severus entering the room side-by-side. Severus was talking to Hermione and she was nodding and gesturing. The effect was like the coming of a storm front. People scrambled out of the way of the dark wizard and his apprentice as if proximity alone would condemn them to some horrible fate. Much like the students of Hogwart's, many kept their heads down to avoid eye contact, praying perhaps that the cold eyes of the Potion Master or his apprentice did not have reason to seek their gaze.

"Really, Severus," Pomona Sprout tsked as the two sat down at the table. "You should give the poor girl some time with Minerva so she doesn't end up stuck with your reputation as well as your dreary fashion sense."

Snape's dark eyebrow lifted into his hair as he poured a drink and placed it down for Hermione. "And that would be?"

"Striking the fear of Merlin into everyone you pass," Sprout chided.

Severus's countenance was completely expressionless. "I don't see how this is a problem." He took a sip of his own drink and raised his eyebrow at her again.

Sprout made an exasperated noise. "You wouldn't."

"Oh leave him alone, Pomona," Septima scoffed from down the table. "He's as likely to change as you are to wear hot pink."

Pomona mumbled to herself and she ate a slice of pineapple. "He may be too old to change, but she still can," she added after a pause.

"I'm here you know," Hermione said with a wave. "Listening to you talk about me like I'm not really here."

Pomona shook her head. "Brightest young witch in every class and she goes off apprenticing to Severus," she muttered under her breath.

Hermione bashed her head against her palm and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Ignore her," Severus said to Hermione softly. "She's just a jealous old hag."
Hermione laughed silently, her shoulders quaking. Ginny made faces at her and widened her eyes. *What was that all about?* She gestured crazily.

Hermione leaned towards Severus a moment and whispered, "Ginny needs some moral support, Severus. Do you mind if I sit with her tonight?"

Severus nodded to her and inclined his head in a shooing motion.

Hermione grabbed her plate and moved to the opposite side of the table and sat next to Ginny with an amused grin on her face. The conversations began again in earnest.

**Chapter 19: Unspoken Words**

Hermione woke with a start, panic causing her entire body to shake. She breathed in deeply, attempting to steady herself, but the feeling of unease did not leave her. Flashes of Bellatrix's face flashed into her mind and unsettled her. She couldn't even remember all of the nightmare that had jolted her awake, but remembering anything about Bellatrix was traumatic enough.

Ginny snored softly on the guest bed on the far side of the room. She let her breath out a little slower as she remembered where she was.

Grabbed her outer robe and threw it over her shoulders and exited, automatically feeling for her wand in the inner pocket as she slipped on a pair of slippers and exited, waving her hand as she left to close the door and reset the wards.

She had no destination, but her feet carried her swiftly through the corridors of Hogwarts. She kept walking until she ended up looking at the moon partially hiding behind the clouds. A ring shown around the moon like a rainbow adding some ephemeral extra beauty to the area. She shivered despite it not being cold, still feeling the pounding of her own heart.

Her hands went under her robes to finger the scar lines formed after Bellatrix's torture. She clutched her head, the memories came back to her with a flood of phantom pain. She heard her mocking voice, the pressure of the knife at her neck, and the memory of pain as her body twisted under every cut by Lestrange's merciless hand. She winced, sinking to the ground as her back slid down the retaining wall. She clutched her knees and curled into a ball, her body shaking as she recollected everything Lestrange had done to her in an unending stream of agonizing mental and physical pain.

"Clear your mind," she said into the air, starting the mantra of Severus' instruction... She forced the blackness to swirl inside her mind and cover everything; it filled in the cracks and drove back the waves of pain.

"Think of nothing," she said through gritted death. She focused on the space that existed beyond her pain. She ground her teeth as she struggled to wrestle herself and her mind under control. She forced her breathing into controlled inhales and exhales with sheer strength of her own will.

"Slow your mind until nothing is the only thing that remains."

She pulled herself up off the ground and stood again. "Focus."

Hermione closed her eyes as she pointed her head up as if to look at the stars. She stood completely still, her lips pursed into a flat line. Her face lost all trace of expression. Her shivers disappeared and her eyes opened. Her brown eyes had darkened into a shade so deep they could have been black. They stared out into the night reflecting everything and revealing nothing.
Hermione pulled her robe around her shoulders and closer to her chest and walked back towards Hogwarts, her robe swirling behind her like a flag in the wind as her feet glided across the flagstones.

As she walked back towards the dungeon corridors, she saw Severus standing in the candle light of the upper hallway, looking out the hall window. He turned towards her as the sound of her footsteps neared.

His black eyes met hers and she looked into them with her own. He breathed in sharply as he saw her and stood up straighter; his controls snapped into place in an instant, obscuring his face with its accustomed impassive countenance.

She approached him, standing in front of him, with her head tilted to look him directly in the eyes. In that moment, they were the same. Their eyes were impenetrable and emotionless.

They stood utterly still with not a word being said between them.

No words were needed anymore.

Chapter 20 Awakenings of the Snape Kind

Hermione stirred awake with a yawn. She pulled the dark green sheets around her as she sat up, rubbing her eyes in an attempt to shake the last of her sleep off. She stood and shuffled towards the bathroom.

Ginny was sitting up in the guest bed as she came out. Her hair was spiked in multiple directions as if she had rubbed up against a bearskin rug in her sleep. Hermione smiled smugly, pulling on one of the working robes Anna had sent up from Hogsmeade. The cloth was thicker, yet it remained light against her skin. While there was none of the ornate trimmings her teaching robes had, she noticed the seamstress had added splashes of darker earth tones on the inner robe. She slipped into the layers with a shrug of her shoulders and pulled on her outer robe, hand automatically checking the inner pocket for her wand.

Ginny was still looking disheveled when Hermione was preparing to walk to the laboratory. "I'll be in the laboratory, Ginny. You can come get me when you are ready for breakfast, ok?"

Ginny mumbled something that was only half coherent.

Hermione's lip curved up slightly before she turned and walked out the door, waving her hand back towards the door and portrait, closing them both behind her.

Ginny stared off into space and sagged back against the bed with a thud.

"I think Ms. Weasley may require more motivation in order to liberate herself from the confines of your guest bed," Severus commented acerbically as he sipped his tea. With the potions for the morning done, each of them had time to relax.

"You are probably correct," Hermione conceded, sipping her own tea. "Somehow I don't think she's ever had to get up this early for Quidditch practice. She always half asleep during morning classes..."
"I remember," Severus shook his head. "She dipped her hair into her half brewed potion and turned it purple."

"That is how her hair changed colors?" Hermione stared at Severus in disbelief. "She told me it was a wand accident! I spent 2 hours trying to change it back before Harry and Ron saw her. I couldn't figure out why none of my counter-charms were working on it."

Snape's black eyes met her. "There must have been quite a few wand accidents that semester you helped her deal with."

Hermione thought a moment, trying to recall all of the strange hair emergencies that came after Potions class. "Crackers… you're right." She chortled into her hand with an amused expression. "How did I not see that?"

Severus waved his hand dismissively as if to explain it all. His eyes went to the adjoining hall. "Perhaps I may assist you in motivating your friend in joining us for breakfast before it becomes lunch."

Hermione caught a slight sparkle in his eyes. "Oh? What do you have in mind?"

Severus leaned in towards her. "What is your password, Ms. Granger?"

Hermione told him with a curious look upon her face. Snape stood up, walking out of the laboratory and down the hall towards their separate quarters. She was itching with inquisitiveness and was about to stand up when Severus' voice boomed down from the hallway.

"Get UP, Ms. Weasley!" his voice snarled. "We have a long day planned and a hundred more things to do than sit around and miss breakfast waiting for you to coagulate yourself into a representable form!"

Hermione's eyes widened as Ginny's screech of terror pierced the air as the sound of rustling and thumping came shortly after.

"Y..y…..yes, SIR!" Ginny's voice stammered.

There was the sound of a door closing a bit harder than usual as Severus glided back into the laboratory, his robe twirling behind him. He sat back down, raised his teacup to his mouth, and sipped. His expression was completely calm.

Hermione felt her shoulders shaking, and she tried to hold back the laughter. She placed her head on the table, covering her head with her fingers. Her bubbling chortle into her robes rose and fell like the babbling of a brook. She raised her head after a moment, a tear running down her cheek. She wiped it away with a sniff and burst into laughter again. After a minute or so, she managed to compose herself, cradling her forehead against her palm as she asserted some semblance of control over her mirth. "Severus," she began, her voice broken up by a half laugh.

"Yes, Ms. Granger," he replied smugly.

"Thank you." Hermione looked into his dark eyes with a genuine grin on her face, light dancing across her eyes.

His eyes met hers as they heard the frantic shuffling coming from the direction of the living quarters. "You are welcome."
Chapter 21 Breakfast and Blueprints

The remainder of Ginny's stay went much smoother than her Snape-induced wake up call. The results of it, however, had Hermione stifling a giggle often throughout the day. Ginny spent the rest of the morning staring down every time the Potion Master breathed in her direction. Minerva questioned Ginny's muggle shirt being on backwards, which caused her to blush furiously, stammering something about being in a hurry to get to breakfast with the others. Minerva arched her brow and shot a glance at Hermione, who in turn pointed at Severus, who arched a brow back at the older witch with his impassive expression.

Rolanda Hooch broke up the blushing session by interrogating Ginny about Quidditch, thus distracting her for the rest of the breakfast. Hermione, who never really developed a passion for Quidditch save to root for her friends, took the opportunity to enjoy her breakfast without interruption.

Minerva broke her contemplation with a nudge. "Hermione, dear, may we speak in my office before you start working on that archway project?"

Hermione shook her head as if to clear it. "Of course, Minerva."

Minerva walked out of the Great Hall. Hermione nodded to Severus, smiled at Ginny, and nodded again to the remaining staff at the High Table. She turned and trailed after the exiting Headmaster.

Severus's gaze followed them as they left, but refocused on his eggs and toast shortly afterwards.

"How have you been settling in, dear?" McGonagall asked as she fussed with a pile of scrolls in her office.

"Not much time to breathe in between everything, to be honest," Hermione admitted. "Thank you for the wonderful quarters, by the way. I haven't had much time to enjoy them save to fall flat into bed at night, but I plan to enjoy them much more when I have time for it."

The older witch chuckled. "It is no problem at all, Hermione. I'm sure it will be strange for you sleeping somewhere other than in the Gryffindor tower for a change."

"I did wake up wondering where I was, I admit," Hermione confessed.

"Oh, here it is. I'm not sure where my head is these days. However did you keep this all straight, Albus?" she muttered into the air.

"I just made it look like I did, Minerva," the portrait replied to her.

Minerva scoffed and handed Hermione the scroll. "Here is what the archways in that area are supposed to look like. I'm not sure how much time you spent on that side of the castle, but hopefully between you and Severus they will go in without a hitch, so we can bring in the construction folks to do their parts."

"Thank you," Hermione said, taking the scroll. "I think Severus is more familiar with the structure there than I am. I'll be glad to have a crib sheet." She grinned at the older witch.
Minerva laughed, some of the stress lining her face faded. "It's really good to have you here, Hermione. Albus would have been so proud. I know I am."

Hermione smiled sadly, feeling the familiar sting of remembrance of the old Headmaster.

"Hopefully once we can leave the majority of the shuffling to the craftsman, I will have time to officially take you under wing and show you the things I should be teaching you," Minerva said, shaking her head. "I am glad Severus is not shirking his duties in that department."

"I don't think Severus has ever shirked in his life, Minerva," Hermione laughed softly.

The old woman's eyes sparkled. "You are probably right." Her face became serious. "I am glad you are both more in tune with each other, Hermione. I know we had our doubts last year who would survive the apprenticeship."

Hermione laughed, her hand going to the sigils on her neck, fingering them as she remembered her return to Hogwart's.

"We haven't had a true apprenticeship here at Hogwart's in... I can't even remember how long. I think Pomona wishes you'd chosen herbology. She sees how in sync you both are now-a-days," Minerva pondered. "Well, all of us do."

"She makes it sound like I've caught a fatal disease, Minerva," Hermione added. "When I go to her greenhouse to pick up herbs, she hands them to me like touching me will confer the magic wasting disease."

The Headmaster laughed wholeheartedly. "I think she's just a little jealous, dear. She wants someone to take her place that is as passionate as you."

"She could always chase after Neville," Hermione said dryly.

Minerva looked at Hermione with amusement. "Perhaps she should, but I do not want to think of what may happen if Severus and Neville have to work together, even from a distance. And with the way you two have been teaming up, Neville will have to watch out for both Severus and you at the same time."

Hermione laughed silently. "I cannot help it. It just happens."

Minerva shushed her. "It's a natural thing, dear. It means you are working together the way you should be. I doesn't mean you won't disagree at whatever time. It's just a very close thing."

Hermione smiled, realizing something. "You apprenticed under Albus?"

Minerva smiled at her warmly in reply. "Well you should go and meet Severus with the plans. Hopefully you can get the arches up and have some time to spend with Miss Weasley before she leaves tonight."

Hermione nodded and bowed her head, turning to go.

"Oh, Hermione?" McGonagall said to her back.

"Yes?" Hermione turned around to face the Headmaster.

"Why did Miss Weasley have her shirt on backwards?"

Hermione grinned widely. "Severus had to go wake her up."
Chapter 22 Ribbed Vaulting & Clerestories

Hermione growled as the ribbed vaulting she transfigured looked complete, but was undoubtedly missing something. She snatched up the drawing Minerva gave her and tried to remember the old ceilings correctly. The arches between the aisles and naves had come more easily. She remembered staring up at them as she passed this hall many times. She remembered the windows and even the small chip in the stone near one window where she had found a coin hidden in the crack. But the vaulting was set high above the clerestory, which she couldn't quite remember.

She tried to remember how many columns made up the triforium windows and pressed her fingertips together as her digits arched in front of her face in a steeple formation. She looked up, hoping to be reminded of what she needed to make the framework. The artisans would do the placing of the glass in the windows, but she still had to create the spaces for them. The rubble around her was practically up to her waist and was in no condition to offer clues as to their original shape or purpose.

Severus watched her growing frustration from afar as he picked through a pile of shattered colored glass. The old window panes that had depicted glorious dragons, magical creatures, and grandiose wizards and witches were nothing more than small fragments of indistinct glass. Shriveled plants, no longer tended with either magic or care, scattered the floor with browned leaves, vines, and withered flower petals. He had once studied here in this corridor, back against the wall as he absorbed every book he could get his hands on. His memories of this corridor were laced with the people of the time, but not all of them were neutral.

He watched Hermione attempt to form a workable image in her mind using the scroll Minerva had given them. She hadn't burned the image of this corridor into her mind as he had

"Hermione," Severus called to her with a rumble in this voice.

She turned and met his gaze and let out a frustrated sigh.

He beckoned to her wordlessly, and she closed the distance between them, letting the scroll she was clutching in a death grip fall onto the rubble pile near her.

His dark eyes met hers, transferring some of his calm to her. "Are you willing to learn?" his dark hair fell about his face as he looked down at her.

Hermione took in a deep breath and lifted her chin. "Yes."

Severus offered his hand, his pale palm face up. She placed her hand in it until his long fingers curled around them. With his other hand he pressed their hands together in position, placing their wands side by side between them. "Clear your mind."

Hermione called upon the place inside her that was deathly still. Think of nothing. Slow your mind until nothing is the only thing that remains. Her expression relaxed and became devoid of emotion.

Severus placed his forehead against hers and she felt a warmth rise up around them like a wind. She saw his memories of the wing in vivid detail. She saw a younger Dumbledore walking the halls. James Potter and Lily Evans walking arm and arm as James pointed and laughed in her direction.
She saw the etched detail of every stone on the floor as his memory of looking down became stronger. Then, he looked up, and she saw the hanging plants on the clerestory, the color of the pillars, the facets of the stained glass, and the high vaults above. She saw the bricks, one brick missing on the far left.

Power flowed between them, swirling around them like a personal tornado. Light danced out from their combined wands and swirled around them. Rubble rose from the ground, moving, changing, and falling into the places only their combined will understood. Pillars moved and set in place, Window sets formed up the sides, plants hung from the window settings. Metal scraps merged together into liquid, moving to the command of their combined will, filling the window frames and solidifying.

Countless pieces of colored glass spun around them and then flew the next moment towards the towering triforium and clerestory, setting themselves into place as metal filled in the cracks to make the stained glass panes complete. Bricks collided in midair, swirling around them, then flung upwards, forming the ribbed vaulting high above them. The flagstones below them rippled like water, shuddering, and changed in a wave of movement, becoming the shiny polished floor tiles that had been tread upon by many an aspiring witch and wizard. Vines grew up the arches as tiny aged cracks formed along the pillars. And as the last of the remaining debris lifted off the ground and swirled around them, they flew outward, forming the buttress and the flying buttress above, connecting to the ribs of the vaults above.

As the magical vortex around them calmed, their robes settled to the floor once more, yet Severus and Hermione remained perfectly still, bound together by a magic would only release them when it was ready.

Suddenly, they both took in a ragged breath and straightened. Severus released her hands and moved his head away from hers. Hermione looked up and around her with wonder. Her eyes widened in amazement. Her face, no longer emotionless, began to grin broadly. Joy was written across her face as the wonder of what they had done settled in. Everything was in place, down to the crooked potted plant in the corner.

"Severus, this is amazing!" she gasped. With a genuine smile, she embraced the Potion Master, wrapping her arms around his waist with a wave of heartfelt gratitude. "Thank you!" she murmured into his chest.

Severus staggered a moment, shock passing across his face as though he had just been struck by lightning. He seemed to wobble a moment before he decided on the best plan of action to the unexpected embrace. He took in a ragged breath and slowly, like a rusty gear being forced to move again, his pale hand moved to press her head against his chest. His chin pressed against her wavy hair as his eyes slowly closed. "You are welcome," he whispered.

--- Chapter 23: Hangover ---

Hermione groaned as she sagged into the chair, feeling the backlash of the combined effort of transfiguring an entire corridor of Hogwarts in one fell swoop. Now that the adrenaline of the situation was tapering off, she felt the weariness that came with overtaxing her magic for a prolonged period of time.

Severus was rubbing the area between his eyes with his fingertips, obviously feeling just as drained as she was.
"Eugh," Hermione groaned. "My kingdom for an invigoration potion or eight."

"I will admit to having not quite thought that part through," Severus said dryly. His pale face seemed even paler now that the backlash was settling in.

"Just leave me here," Hermione mumbled into the table. "I don't even have the strength to think about what walking will do to me, let alone apparating."

"What makes you think I'm in any better condition, witch?" Severus grumbled, sagging deeper into the chair.

"We could just sit here and grumble together until Minerva realizes we've missed lunch, dinner, breakfast, and lunch tomorrow," Hermione said as she rolled her forehead against her crossed arms.

"Forced to bear your company, you insufferable know-it-all," Severus hissed.

"Bloody dungeon bat," Hermione mumbled into her arms.

Severus made a soft groan as he attempted to sit up and decided better of it.

"Severus?" Hermione said softly.

"Yes, Hermione?" he answered in a quiet voice.

"It was worth it," she said, going limp in the chair as the exhaustion claimed her.

Severus' eyes closed slowly. "Yes."

--- Chapter 24: Minerva Intervention ---

"Severus," Minerva's voice broke the silence in the newly remade hall. "Hermione!"

"Eaughhh," Severus moaned sourly. "Leave us to die in peace, Minerva."

Hermione groaned, raising her head from her arms. Minerva thrust a potion bottle into her hand. She prodded Severus with one until he had to take it just to stop the swaying motion.

Like two choreographed dancers, they popped the cork, sniffed, quaffed the potion in one motion, winced, and set the potion down on the table.

For a minute or two, the dark wizard and his apprentice did not move. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, they both exhaled deeply and straightened up in their seats.

"Thank you, Minerva," Hermione said softly.

Severus mumbled something unintelligible.

"You did this all this morning?" Minerva's voice echoed in the empty hall.

Hermione stretched in the chair, trying to unkink herself from the pretzel her spine was trying to twist into. "Yes."

"You even… replaced the plants," Minerva said in a surprised voice. "I always loved that plant in the window there."

"How are the other wings coming along?" Hermione asked with a yawn.
"Not as well as this, I can tell you that, dear," Minerva chuckled. "But I didn't have to force invigorating potions down their throats either."

Hermione grinned, rustling her own hair to pull it back away from her face. "I'm fairly certain it will not happen again anytime soon."

"It will be so much like it was with this corridor open again," Minerva reminisced. "I guess I will inform the gardeners instead of the stone workers that they can work on the gardens now that this corridor is done." She smiled. "Well done."

Severus made a motion like shooing a fly.

Hermione beamed and twirled around, looking up towards the ceiling vaults. "Oh," she said suddenly. "Is Ginny still waiting for me?"

McGonagall made a shooing motion. "Go. Go. You have the rest of the day off."

Hermione beamed and turned to look at Severus, their eyes meeting. They kept the contact for a few heartbeats before he inclined his head toward the door. "Remove yourself from my sight."

Hermione turned and excitedly ran down the corridor towards where Ginny waited for her.

"No running in the hallways, Ms. Granger," Severus snapped.

Hermione slowed down to a fast walk, her robes falling about her as she forced herself to walk. "Yes, Professor Snape!" She disappeared down the corridor and out of sight.

"How did you do this, Severus?" McGonagall asked as she sat down across from him.

"We did it together, Minerva," Snape said candidly.

"This is the result of something more than just the drawings I gave you," Minerva said knowingly.

Severus straightened his chair and locked gazes with the older witch. "I shared with her my memories of this place. We built it together."

This face was expressionless, but there was a flicker or something that flitted across his dark eyes. Minerva saw it like a cloud moving across the sun.

Minerva waved her wand, making a tea set appear. She poured tea out for herself and Severus. She sipped her tea quietly for a few minutes before speaking. "Without a pensieve?"

Severus looked upward towards the ceiling vaults. "Without a pensieve, Minerva." He grasped the teacup close to him and drank it down.

Minerva said nothing more as the two of them finished their tea.

--- Chapter 25: The Return Home ---

Hermione yawned and waved goodbye to Ginny as she took the train out. She had made sure her friend had a good send-off, though she made a mental note to bring a detox potion or something similar just in case Ginny got inebriated again. Once Ginny was out of sight, Hermione let her face return to a more stoical expression. The social chatter from the pub had been like flies buzzing around her head. Being social was becoming more wearisome. It had been good seeing her, but there was a part of her that would have preferred to sit out on a bench somewhere and talk with her friend than surrounded by a crowded tavern. Realizing that once the fall term started again, she would be surrounded by hundreds more chattering bodies than the tavern, she sighed.
Turning back towards Hogwarts, she started her walk home, amusing herself by admiring the patterns in the larger snowflakes. Why Hogsmeade had snow in the middle of summer used to baffle her, but she accepted it now. You could blame it on geography, but that took a little of the mystery out of guessing.

Movement under a light ahead of her caught her attention. Severus's robes flickered back and forth in the wind as he waited for her. How he always seemed to know just when to appear was a little mysterious as well, but like the snow… knowing the real reason just took the enjoyment out of pondering it.

"I must be better at lying now," Hermione said softly as she stood next to Severus. His dark eyes met hers. "She never saw anything but a happy face."

Snape nodded silently, opening his arm for her.

Hermione stepped in close to him, leaning on him slightly as his arm folded around her and the crack of his disapparate signaled their departure.
Chapter Summary

Hermione learns the ropes as a formal apprentice and Professor at Hogwarts.
A new DADA professor enters the ring.

-- Chapter 26: Unexpected Comatose State --

Minerva, as promised, began to take Hermione under wing a little more with the stress of the reconstruction simmering down to a manageable stress level. She drilled the rules into the young witch, or rather insured she knew which ones she was obligated to be strict in reprimanding and which she could turn a blind eye to as long as it wasn’t hurting someone. Minerva’s list of acceptable blindness was terribly small, but Hermione expected nothing less from the witch who was a known disciplinarian.

Minerva showed Hermione the places to patrol for loitering often missed by the prefects and Head Boys and Girls as well as when it perfectly acceptable to step in as an intervention. By the time she was done doing a mock patrol with her, Hermione’s head was full of rules, what-ifs, and things to look out for that she began to understand why being caught by a patrolling professor was more apt to bring more stern punishment than by a patrolling prefect. It wasn’t that Hermione hadn’t been aware of the rules, but there were subtleties that ebbed and flowed in the life of a professor that she was expected to follow when the students swarmed the walls of Hogwart’s.

When Hermione wandered back into the lab after a long day with Minerva, she saw Severus sitting down on a comfortably transfigured couch in the middle the lab. He nodded to her soundlessly upon her entry, inclining his head towards a waiting teacup and the empty space beside him.

“Minerva filling your head with rules, regulations, and subtle interrogation techniques?” Severus questioned as she sank into the couch with a sigh of relief.

“I used to think you made up most of the things you docked house points for,” Hermione replied, sipping her tea and leaning back into the couch.

Snape’s mouth curved upward slightly in amusement. “It becomes even more complicated when you are Head of House.”

“Oh I don’t even want to go there,” she said as she shook her adamantly, closing her eyes. “We always thought we were so clever sneaking into places unseen, but you knew the places all along.”

Severus snorted. “You cannot be everywhere at once, but it helps to make everyone think you can.” He met her gaze with his impenetrable black eyes. “When we patrol together, I’ll be sure to show you some quality places to check for errant rule-breakers.”

Hermione sniggered, setting down her teacup and leaning back against the couch. She closed her eyes for the moment to relax, but within a few moments was fast asleep, her body wilted in the couch until she leaned against Severus. Severus’ brows furrowed for a moment before he pulled a blanket out of thin air and cast it over her as she slept on obliviously.
Severus had finished his tea and a few more chapters in the book he was reading when Minerva came wandering in looking for either him or Hermione. Snape’s eyes glared at her as she started to say something, his eyes flicking downward to his sleeping apprentice.

“That will be quite enough abuse of our apprentice, Minerva,” Severus admonished quietly. “There is nothing so important that cannot wait until tomorrow.”

McGonagall seemed torn as to what to say or do at the sight of Hermione passed out against the Potion Master. Her face softened and she whispered, “The poor dear. I overtaxed her.”

“You are dreadfully talented in that area of expertise,” Severus rumbled, his eyes going back to his book.

McGonagall rolled her eyes and shook her head. She turned and left the dungeons to find other duties to attend to.

Severus flipped a page of the book he was reading, unfazed.

--- Chapter 27: Sorting Issues ---

The re-opening came like a shift in the weather. A flood of excitement filled the hallways and the Great Hall, replacing the accustomed construction workers and artisans that had filled it during the summer. Hermione stood at the entrance of the Great Hall as if stopped by an invisible barrier. She saw some familiar faces mixed in with the wave of newly accepted Hogwarts students. A tremor of trepidation shivered through her as the significance of her first walk down the aisles in front of the new student body.

Severus came up behind her. “You have faced far more intimidating things than this, Professor Granger,” he rumbled, placing her formal hat on her head in a smooth movement, moving it so the point dipped downward more gracefully. “Surely that Gryffindor backbone hasn’t hidden itself away somewhere unseen.”

Hermione took in a long breath and met his eyes, her chin lifted in challenge to the Potion Master. “Ah, there you are,” he rumbled with a quirk of his mouth. “We should take our seats before the Sorting begins.” He inclined his head in the direction of the High Table and walked across the threshold.

Hermione followed at his side, shoulders squared, and chin slightly lifted, her eyes only briefly scanning the faces of those she passed. They walked together in synchronization as their strides carried them towards the Head Table. Previous students quickly hushed and turned around to face the table, casting their head down as the Potion Master passed. The unsorted students stumbled out of the way jerkily and froze with wide eyes as they passed, looking as though they were about to salute or turn to stone at any given moment.

As the pair swished by, the tables started to chatter again.

As the Sorting Hat finished spouting the random House poems, Hermione smirked as Severus grunted at the hat’s description of the Gryffindor House. Minerva called up each new child to the High Table as the Sorting began in earnest.

“Hufflepuff,” Severus said quietly as the Sorting Hat mumbled on top of a child’s head.

“Hufflepuff!” proclaimed the Sorting Hat and the boy scampered off to the Hufflepuff tables.
Another child came up and Hermione narrowed her eyes as she sized up the young witch. “Ravenclaw,” she said to Severus.

“Ravenclaw!” came the voice of the Sorting Hat as the new Ravenclaw scurried to the correct tables.

A boy came up next. His head was held high in manner that seemed to proclaim self-assuredness. Hermione gritted her teeth, remembering that look upon Draco Malfoy well enough to know where that arrogance had come from. “Slytherin,” she murmured.

The boy walked over to the Slytherin tables, getting pats on the back and cheers from the other students there.

A girl approached the hat next. Her hair was pulled back into a straight braid that swished behind her as she bounced up to the platform.

“Gryffindor,” Severus sighed, his voice rasped as if the name itself was distasteful to pronounce.

Sure enough, the girl skipped towards the Gryffindor table as Hermione covered her mouth in a small giggle.

It continued like this for an hour, with Severus and Hermione attempting to predict the sorting hat’s decision. They were not alone in this, however, as many of the other professors seemed to be engaging in the same game amongst themselves. Pomona pumped her fist a little each time someone was sorted into Hufflepuff. Filius gave a small wink when someone went into Ravenclaw. Minerva shot Hermione a smile each time Gryffindor gained a member, causing Severus to scoff derisively into his hand.

Minerva grinned mischievously as she introduced all the professors to the incoming students. Hermione blushed furiously as the old witch singled her out before moving on to introduce a professor Hermione didn’t recognize at all.

“Who is that?” Hermione whispered.

Severus scowled, his eyes narrowing as he focused on the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. “I do not know,” he answered sourly. “I do not like not knowing.”

Hermione nodded, staring at the new professor with a combination of curiosity and suspicion. When had she become so suspicious of new faces? She shook her head.

When it was over, Minerva waved her wand to decorate the Great Hall as the welcoming feast began.

As the people began to file out of the Great Hall, Severus and Hermione stood to make their way to the dungeons. The classroom had to be prepared for its first wave of incoming students in the morning, and Hermione could sense the growing growl in Severus’ voice when he spoke of it.

As the two excused themselves from the table. The new DADA professor was eagerly handshaking with a number of the faculty, talking excitedly about his anticipation of the upcoming year. He turned
towards Severus and Hermione whose faces had become simultaneously unreadable.

“Hello!” the man greeted happily. “Brody, Nicolas Brody. So happy to be here. I’ve heard great things about Hogwart’s.” He thrust his hand out expectantly.

Severus curled his lip and didn’t move, but Hermione extended her hand slowly for him to take. She curtsied a few centimeters, but her eyes never left the new DADA professor’s face. Brody extended his hand for Severus, and Snape glowered down at him with his impassive face and fathomless eyes. “Charmed,” he said, lips pursed in a thin line.

Severus turned, exiting the Great Hall without a further look back. Hermione broke the scrutinizing stare she had upon him, turned on her heels, and shadowed Snape’s exit.

The new DADA professor frowned slightly at the space where the Potion Master and his apprentice had been standing, then turned back to the other faculty wearing a disarming smile.

“Don’t fret over those two, Nicolas,” Pomona comforted the new professor. “She’ll come around eventually. Severus… well… you might as well try and give dental work to a Hungarian Horntail.”

“I felt like I was a boy of twelve again,” Nicolas admitted, scratching his short brown hair with a laugh, “and having to recant all of my sins by date and degree of severity.”

Pomona laughed and waved him closer.

--- Chapter 28: Untrust vs Trust ---

“When did I become so untrusting?” Hermione said to no one in particular. She set the cauldron down on the desk with a small cutting board and a silver knife.

Severus moved behind her, setting up the desks behind her. They moved from desk to desk, setting down the tools until every desk had the basic supplies needed for the first class, minus the books and other such supplies every student was accountable for on their own.

“The question is,” Severus began, “if there was a respectable reason for it.”

Hermione paused in her distribution of school supplies and pondered a moment. “He feels… too cheerful.”

“Elaborate,” Severus replied.

Hermione frowned and stared at one of the cauldrons in thought. “His energy didn’t match his face.” She looked to see Severus staring at her, his dark eyes looking through her as he chewed on her observation in her head.

“Describe the energy,” he continued.

“Heavy as if laden down,” Hermione described. “Sticky. Like a sneeze.”

Severus’ eyes seemed to gain an even darker appearance, his lips tightened into a thin line. “Come with me. There is something I must teach you.” He walked out of the classroom and down the hallway to his quarters, waving his wand to extinguish all the lights in the classroom.

Hermione followed, jumping a little as the door slammed behind her. She followed the dark flutter of Severus’ robe until they had passed through the portrait into his private quarters. He waved his wand
to bring the light to an acceptable yet dim level. He paced back and forth as he gestured for her to sit in the battered leather chair before the hearth. The tingle in the air signaled his wards being raised, and he cast the privacy charm as he paced.

“The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure,” Severus spoke softly, recalling the same words he once drilled into Potter on Dumbledore’s behest. “Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by an invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing. It can be bent… broken… unhinged. Those that attempt to delve into the minds of others may not find what they are looking for, even if it is just under the surface.”

His dark eyes met hers with a fierce glare, a trace of anger in them. “Those who use or abuse Legilimency do not always have to be good at it to find what they think they are looking for. It takes practice, skill, and great forces of will to be exacting in a read into someone’s mind. The mind can be damaged by such unskilled attacks. Especially to those who do not know how to shield from it. Not all of them will be as well-meaning as Albus.”

Hermione recalled that Harry had once told her that Snape had to teach something to protect himself from Voldemort. Was this what he was referring to? She frowned, trying to decipher what he was trying to explain to her.

Severus stopped pacing and looked at her. “I wish to teach you Occlumency.” He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “Your thoughts must remain your own unless you wish them to be read. I need you to trust me.”

Hermione closed her eyes a moment. She opened them and met his gaze. “I trust you, Severus.”

“Hermione,” Severus said softly. “This will mostly likely bring up things you do not wish to share.”

She nodded silently. “I trust you.”

Snape pulled up another chair and faced her. He help out his hands to her, palm up. She placed her hands in his, feeling his cool fingers close around her own. He placed his forehead to hers. “Clear your mind.”

Hermione took in a deep breath and closed her eyes as her face went expressionless.

Memories flooded back to her in waves, and he was there inside her head, guiding her how to encase them a wall and thrust them back into the corners of her mind. She saw the method, etched in his mind. She memorized the feel of the wall, forcing herself to remember how it reacted to pressure. She was dragged into a memory of Severus blocking his thoughts from the Dark Lord and forced herself to absorb the construction around his thoughts instead of paying attention to the scene itself. The memory of Ron leaving her and Harry in the wilderness rose up, and he guided her how to raise the wall and shove it back into crevices hidden within crevices in her own mind. She saw how Harry had accidently breached his carefully controlled shields before he had slammed his controls down over himself and cast Harry from his most painful memories.

Severus pulled away, releasing her hands, staring into her eyes. They stared at each other uncounted minutes until she took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m ready to begin.”

Severus stood, pulled out his wand, and pointed it at her. “Legilimens!”

Hermione screamed as the first wave of memories rushed by her. She saw herself erasing her existence from the minds of her own parents. She saw herself crying at the Yule Ball. She saw Bellatrix cackling above her as she cursed her to the edge of death.
“Concentrate,” Severus said. “Keep me out.”

She screamed again as memories of Snape standing above her in class, sneering at her, calling her an insufferable know-it-all. She saw Ron at the dance with his girlfriend. She saw his face as he accused her familiar for eating his rat. She saw Harry hanging limply in Hagrid’s arms. She saw Severus dying in front of her, bleeding out as she thrust the vial into Harry’s hands to collect the memories.

She gritted her teeth, pulling on the memory of Severus’ instruction. Clear your mind.

She snarled, pulling on the rage she tapped into when she threw hexes towards Ron when he returned from abandoning her. Focus on nothing.

She remembered the cold emptiness she found in the depths of the war when she raised her wand to deliver her first killing curse. Slow your mind until nothing is the only thing that remains.

Her eyes darkened, her face hardened into a cold expression of pure force of will. She built the walls as Severus had done around her memories and cast them into the abyss of her own mind, tearing them from her own thoughts and forced them fleeing into the darkness. She let the deadly calm fill her up, and she cast Severus from her mind, sending his wand flying into the wall of his chambers.

Hermione took in a deep breath and shuddered, expression returning to her face as she searched Severus’ face for a sign of her success or failure.

He stared at her with his obscure eyes and nodded to her solemnly.

Hermione stared into the fire, watching the flames dance across the wood. Her mind was settled and almost eerily calm. Her mind had clutched on the knowledge she had learned, harnessed it, and stowed it away for the future unknown.

Severus had retrieved his wand and was rustling with something on the far side of his quarters. He returned to the empty seat next to her and sat down, laying a tray with tea between them. They both stared into the flickering flames as they sipped the tea.

“Thank you for trusting me, Hermione.”

“Thank you for trusting me, Severus.”

They continued to stare into the fire together until the embers died out.

---Chapter 29: Who was the teacher again? ---

“Hermione,” Severus’ voice rumbled. “We have our first class in an hour.”

Hermione shot up straight in the chair, eyes wide. The blanket she had somehow acquired during the night fell to her lap, and she looked around wildly. Her eyes darted from place to place quickly, taking in the surroundings as reality came to her. “Crickets, I’m so sorry.”

Severus gave her an amused look. “You had a rough night. I will not begrudge you stealing my favorite chair.”

Hermione smiled at Severus. “It was a very comfortable chair.”

“Fortunately, I have two of them.” Severus handed her a breakfast biscuit and a glass of juice. “Eat.”

Hermione inhaled the biscuit hungrily, downing the juice in a couple seconds. Severus watched her
with an arched eyebrow and handed her another biscuit. “Thank you,” she mumbled with her mouth half full of biscuit.

“How confident do you feel about basic potion making and methods?” Snape said as he rustled through his wardrobe.

“I think I have enough grasp of my faculties to instruct a basic class without blowing anyone up, Professor Snape,” Hermione grinned as she wolfed down the last of the second biscuit.

“Oh?” Snape said in his familiar disbelieving tone.

“Yes, I believe I am,” Hermione said, meeting his gaze and tilting her chin up in defiance.

Severus pulled out a bundle of clothing and a potion with an ornate stopper on it. “Prove it, Professor.” He flipped the stopper and placed his wand to his head, pulling out a strand of hair and guiding it into the open potion bottle. He blew into it with his breath and replaced the stopper.

Hermione’s eyes got wide. “You want… you mean…. Me?” she squeaked.

“Oh, don’t worry. I plan to be watching you.” He stared at her for a moment and pulled out another potion, opening the lid. He eyed her silently. Hermione’s eyes sparkled with mischief. She placed her wand to her head and pulled a strand and sent it into the potion.

“You breathed into this one… do I need to breathe into that one for you?” Hermione tilted her head at the potion flask.

“Unless you want me to sound like this wearing your body, Ms. Granger, I suspect you should,” Severus rolled his eyes to look at her.

Hermione giggled and blew into the potion bottle and put the stopper back in. “I didn’t know you could do that! The polyjuice potion always changed the outside but left us our voices.”

“Hermione,” Severus admonished her with a look. “I’m the Potions Master. Did you think I hadn’t thought of that?”

Hermione laughed and accio’ed a set of her robes with her wand. She handed Severus the bundle and dashed out the door to her room.

Severus smirked as he sat at the back of the classroom watching himself walk into the classroom.

“There will be no foolish wand-waving or silly incantations in this class,” Hermione intoned lowly. She raked her gaze across the classroom, committing every face to memory. “As such, I do not expect many of you to appreciate the… subtle and exact art that is potion-making.” Hermione, looking as stern as she remembered him from her first year in Potions class, walked down the aisle of the classroom to the front. “However, for those select few who possess the predisposition, I can teach you how to bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses.”

Minerva had walked into the classroom while “Severus” was teaching, sitting down next to “Hermione.” “How is it going for you, dear?”

“Delightful,” Snape answered her.

Minerva looked closer at “Hermione.” She eyed her collar and noticed the lack of the apprenticeship
“Hermione” quirked her lips into a smirk, placing her finger to her lips. “Shhh, Minerva. I’m learning.”

Minerva looked back and forth between Severus and Hermione and placed her hand in front of her face to stifle a laugh so the young students didn’t turn around and stare at her.

“I can tell you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death,” Hermione lectured in Snape’s voice. She turned towards the class with a somber expression that caused the children in the rows to fidget.

“I cannot tell you that everything you learn in this class will grant you powers beyond comprehension or that it will save you from having to take your exams. I will tell you, however,” Hermione said in a low rumbling voice, using Severus’ naturally tone to carry across the room, “that one of these potions could save you or your friends from poison. One of these potions could counter the effects of petrification. One of these potions could restore blood back to someone who hovers on the line of life… and death.” Hermione used Snape’s dark eyes to glower. “A potion is a powerful tool. When used properly it can provide sleep without dreams, ease pain, and even induce euphoria.”

Hermione paced at the front of the classroom. “I’m sure at least some of you can understand why this class is just as important as learning to hold your wand correctly. It is my hope that by the time you are done with this class in your first year, all of you will understand this.” Hermione’s eyes unfocused a moment, her thoughts far away. “One day you may find that a potion is what saves those you care about from a fate far worse than detention. Pray that this does not come to pass.”

Hermione stood up to Severus’ full height. “Now to begin, I want this first row to put your heads together and give me information on bezoars. You may use your text, but I want at least one use that isn’t in the book. Think carefully.”

“This row,” she continued, “Break up and tell me one really good use for dragon blood that has nothing to do potions.”

“This row,” she rapped her knuckles on the desk as the first and second row had already started to chatter. “Find me the ingredient that is added to a Forgetfulness Potion that must be added with a dropper.”

“And you three chatterboxes,” Hermione used Snape’s trademark glare, “can tell me what is created when the powdered root of asphodel is added to an infusion of wormwood.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Get to it.”

Students scurried to move their desks together and break into teams. Chatter rose in the room, but somewhat miraculously stayed on the topic at hand. Teams whipped out their books and flipped through the pages quickly, attempting to find the answers to her questions.

Hermione, glided down the aisle to where Severus and Minerva were sitting. Her lip quirked up in amusement as Minerva waved at her to come sit down with them.

“Hermione,” Minerva laughed. “That was an impressive first go at it.”

“It is hard to forget my first potions lecture,” Hermione said in Severus’ voice.

“You do look the part,” Minerva made a face. “I won’t even ask how or why this happened, but
“Hopefully it wears off before lunchtime.” Minerva turned to look at “Hermione.” “It will wear off by lunchtime, won’t it Severus?” Minerva gave him the glare that spoke of unspeakable things that would happen if it didn’t.

“Of course, Minerva,” Severus cooed in Hermione’s voice.

Hermione chuckled, stood up and returned to the front of the classroom. “Times up, groups! Now tell me what you have discovered.”

Raised hands and excited yammering completed with each other.

Minerva smiled. “I think she’s doing just fine.”

“Undoubtedly,” Severus smirked.

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Chapter 30: Growling Stomach

Hermione sat in the empty classroom, slamming her head into the desk with a soft groan. Her first morning teaching had been slightly terrifying to her, though she had a feeling that the visage of the brooding Potion Master she had been wearing had not failed to bring a little terror into many of the students by appearance alone. She felt a little less awkward now that she was back in her own skin, but the morning’s mischief had been both surreal and draining. Imitating the Potion Master had been easier than some of the faces she could have been wearing. Her memories of her classes with him had been etched into her through constant and unwavering repetition.

The mirth had been worth it. Minerva’s response could have come with admonishing glares and a thorough chewing out session, but strangely the old witch seemed to think the entire scenario had been perfectly acceptable before lunch.

Why lunch? Hermione pondered. Oh right. She had to sit in with Minerva’s class this afternoon. She giggled to herself. Imagining Severus stuck in Hermione’s body forced to sit in Minerva’s transfiguration class caused her shoulders to shake in laughter. Now that would have been… interesting.

Hermione realized suddenly that she was sitting at her old desk. Memories of Neville’s many potions gone wrong caused her to snort into her old desk with amusement. There were so many memories of this particular classroom. Admittedly, some of them were far more positive than others.

Her stomach growled, and she was suddenly quite aware of the fact that her entire breakfast that morning had been a glass of juice and two breakfast biscuits. “Ugh,” she groaned.

Standing up from the desk, she adjusted her robes and collar. Scanning the room with her senses, she reinforced the wards, walked out the door, and sealed the classroom behind her.

Sunlight coming in from the upper hall windows caused her to squint. She inhaled the fresh air from outside, enjoying the scent that blew in. The sound of muffled whimpering broke her concentration. Turning towards it, she followed the sound. A young boy sat in the dark of one of the hall pillars. Parchment and books were scattered in disarray around him. A spilled inkwell and a broken quill seemed to point to something more sinister than tripping. Her mind searched her memory for his face.

“Mr. Mitchell,” she addressed him softly. “Is there a reason you are here admiring our outstanding tile work instead of going to lunch?” Without waiting for an answer, she kneeled down, gathering the scattered parchments. She patted them together and placed them together with the scattered books.
“I’m sorry, Pr…Professor,” the boy sniffed a reply.

Hermione looked the boy into the eyes. His eyes widened under her scrutiny, and she forced a happier expression upon her own face. “Here you go, young Mr. Mitchell.” She handed him his papers and books. With a wave of her wand, she tipped the inkwell upright, guided the ink back into the well, snapped the lip closed, and moved it into her hand with the broken quill. With a tap of her wand and a soft whisper, the quill mended itself. She handed both of them to the boy.

His eyes had watched what she had done with astonished fascination.

“What House are you, Mr. Mitchell?” Hermione asked gently.

“S…Slytherin House, ma’am,” the boy replied.

The corner of Hermione’s lip lifted with amusement. “Well then, Mr. Mitchell of Slytherin House. Let’s get you to the Great Hall before all the food is gone, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am!” he said excitedly, standing up and clutching his supplies to his chest.

She continued her walk towards the Great Hall, the young man trailing behind her with his books cradled in his arms. Students leaving the Great Hall moved out of her way as she led Mitchell into it. She led him to the Slytherin tables and waited until he found someone he recognized. A group of young Slytherins waved towards him. Mitchell looked up at her. “Thank you, Professor.”

“You are welcome, Mr. Mitchell,” she replied. “Enjoy your lunch.” She turned and continued her walk up to the High Table where Minerva and Hagrid smiled a welcome.

--- Chapter 31: Transfiguration Amusements ---

“Hermione, dear,” Minerva said as she peered down to the table at her. “Has Severus been starving you?”

Hermione froze in devouring the piece of chicken that she had practically inhaled bones and all. “I woke up late this morning, Minerva,” she replied sheepishly after swallowing her mouthful of food.

Minerva tutted at her, shaking her fork at her.

Hermione grinned genuinely and went back to tearing into her chicken leg slightly less ravenously as before.

Lunch went without a hitch, and Hermione followed Minerva to her next class afterwards. Hermione smiled as she passed through the middle courtyard, remembering many and exciting gossip session with her friends.

Minerva chuckled as they approached the classroom as Hermione found herself talking to a cat. Minerva padded towards the classroom on all four silent feet, her tail up in the air like a flag. At that moment, Hermione found herself missing Crookshanks fiercely, but she followed with a slightly smug expression cast about her face.

Hermione took a seat at the back of the classroom, favoring watching from where the view would be better. The students began to file in a few minutes after she had sat down, chattering and gossiping to themselves. Minerva sprawled over her desk in the front in typical cat style, her silver fur glistening against the dark of her desk.
Four seats were still blatantly empty when the clock chime rang, but the silver tabby on the desk did not move. The students, thinking their professor late, continued to babble on to each other while Hermione’s expression curved into a smirk.

Four students slinked into the classroom a few minutes later, keeping low to the ground in an attempt to slip into their desks. Seeing no one at the desk in front, they rushed forward and sat down.

Hermione stifled a laugh, recognizing the scene all too well.

“Mr. Harris. Ms. Doherty. Mr. Walker. Ms. Thompson,” Minerva’s voice broke the chattering. She sat on the edge of her desk wearing the scowling intolerant face that commanded instant respect. Gasps and muttering spread through the classroom as the new students tried to figure out where their professor had come from. “I will not tolerate tardiness to my class. That will 10 points from Gryffindor, 5 from Ravenclaw, and 5 from Hufflepuff. Do not test me again.”

Minerva clapped her hands together to focus the class. “Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts. Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned.”

McGonagall waved her wand towards the board nearby, causing Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration to scrawl itself upon the surface. “Now, can anyone tell me what Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration is?”

Class continued smoothly afterwards with no one daring to cross the stern looking witch. Despite their different methods, Hermione was reminded of the same wide eyes in Minerva’s students that Severus inspired in his. You didn’t cross Minerva McGonagall, and you most certainly didn’t cross Severus Snape. Those that were too dimwitted to figure that out within the first class were doomed to learn it through merciless repetition.

When the class was dismissed, Minerva shot Hermione an amused look. “Remind you of someone, Hermione?”

Hermione laughed. “I remember my first Transfiguration class, Minerva. As you well know what happened there.”

Minerva grinned at her, waving her wand to erase the board. “Could you be a dear and check up on an order of mice for me, Hermione? I ordered them for classes next week, but I haven’t had the time to figure out why they haven’t arrived yet.”

Hermione nodded. “Sure.”

After McGonagall locked up the classroom, they parted ways. Minerva headed towards the Headmistress’s office on a mission known only to her. Hermione trudged off towards the direction of the front gates.

Severus was standing in the middle of the far corridor, scowling down at a student. “If you cannot pry your eyes away from Mr. Williams long enough to pay attention to where you are going, Ms. Crankshaft, might I suggest you find a different sort of crowbar, unless you wish to contemplate the meaning of life in detention.”

“Y….yes, Sir! I’m sorry Professor Snape,” the girl stammered over herself as she tried to pick up her
books. She attempted to reach for the book that Severus had dropped during their collision, but his scowl darkened even more, sending the girl fleeing down the corridor as fast as her feet could carry her without actually running.

Hermione walked over and picked up the book from the floor, brushing it off with a smooth motion of her hand. She held it out to him, eyes twinkling.

Severus locked gazes with her and took a deep breath, his dark eyes flickered with annoyance. He carefully tucked the book under his arm, inclining his head in thanks.

“Minerva wants me to go check on her mice,” Hermione said as they walked together down the hall. “They haven’t arrived yet.”

“Exhilarating,” he replied sourly.

They walked together soundlessly in companionable silence until they reached a turn off.

“Do have fun collecting Minerva’s… rodents,” Severus said to her as they parted.

“You know I will,” Hermione grinned and excused herself, rushing out the front gates towards Hogsmeade.

Severus’ dark eyes looked after her as the normal detached mask cast itself back into place.

-H- Chapter 32: Rodent Management -H-

“Hermione?” came a voice behind her.

Hermione turned around as a familiar young man dashed up towards her.

“It is you!” The hug came in as a collision as he pressed his lips to both cheeks in greeting.

“Hello, Rupert,” Hermione greeted in return. “How was your summer?”

“Awful, ‘mione,” he admitted. “Mum and Da insisted we go on vacation this summer and we went to a muggle park of some sort in the States. They couldn’t use spells to make things more comfortable. We had to do it the hard way.”

“Aw, Rupert,” Hermione sympathized. “Was the scenery at least worth the trip?”

Rupert sagged at little at the shoulders. “Yea, the park was gorgeous. Very different from what we see here.” He looked like he was ashamed to admit it was worth all the hassle.

“Don’t look so down. It’s great to travel and get away from it all sometimes,” Hermione admonished him.

“I know, I know,” Rupert chuckled. “I just missed my mates, ya know?”

“I do know how that is, believe me,” Hermione shook her head in agreement.

“Oh, I didn’t get to tell you before I left for the summer. Thank you so much for the tutoring last semester. I swear I’d never have figured out that arithmancy homework without you!” Rupert bounced on his heels.

“She’s a strict one, Professor Vector,” Hermione admitted. “I did love her classes though.”
“You would love her classes, Hermione. Nothing ever phases you in academics,” Rupert hassled her. He looked at her funny. “Holy Crickets, ‘mione. I totally forgot you graduated last term…. Whaaaaaaa. Look at you! Spin around for me!”

Hermione arched a brow, but did as Rupert asked.

“So… official looking,” he observed. “I guess I have to call you Professor and Ma’am now, eh?”

Hermione laughed, “At least in front of others, Rupert. You definitely don’t want to get caught using my first name in front of Professor Snape or McGonagall.”

Rupert’s eyes went wide and his shivered in a conditioned response and shook his head adamantly. “No worries about that,” he confessed. Rupert furrowed his brows.

“What is your question, Rupert,” Hermione asked, seeing the tell-tale signs of his emerging question forming on his face.

“Will you still be able to help me with my Arithmancy now that you are… well you know…” Rupert tried to form his question into something more coherent.

“Rupert,” Hermione said with a shake of her head. “Of course I will still help you if you need it. We’re friends, after all. I do not have a anti-help wasting disease just because I wear teaching robes.”

Rupert sighed with relief. “I’ve never had a friend that became my professor before.”

Hermione shook her head with amusement. “You are welcome to come by the office after classes and I will help you with whatever questions you have. Do remember to knock. I may forgive you, but Professor Snape will not.”

Rupert’s eyes grew wide. “You share an office with Professor Snape?”

Hermione chuckled. “Of course. He is my Master, Rupert. Where else would a master’s apprentice go?”

Rupert seemed to digest this. “He won’t… yell at me for coming to you for help?”

Hermione smirked. It was utterly amazing how the mere thought of Severus Snape being in the same room as them sent a student’s ability to think rationally right out the window. “Rupert, it is office hours. That is why we have them.”

Rupert gave a lop-sided grin that reminded Hermione of Ronald when he was younger. It was both comforting and bittersweet.

“I’ll probably come by pretty regularly. You know me and Arithmancy,” Rupert said with a grin.

Hermione smiled and then cocked her head as if listening to something. “You are going to be late to class, Mr. Soloway.” She set a stern look upon her face. “Do not attempt to use me as your excuse for being tardy.”

Rupert grinned broadly and scampered off to class.

Hermione shook her head and continued on her way.
Unlike other days when she walked the long path down towards Hogsmeade, Hermione found herself greeted by a young thestral romping along the path. The almost skeletal looking creature bounced along side of her playfully, as if testing to see if she could actually see him.

Hermione ran her hand along the thestral’s back as he passed, her fingers gently brushing the soft skin of his wings. As if her touch flipped a switch in the young creature, he trotted along side her, rubbing his head against her shoulder and nipping at her hair with his flexible lips.

“How did you manage to ditch your herd, hrm?” Hermione smiled as she stroked the glossy skin of the young thestral. “Are you a rebel?”

The thestral lipped her fingers as he trotted along side her and placed his head across her shoulder, snuffling her hair. His breath tickled her neck.

“You better not be chasing the school owls,” Hermione said to the young thestral. “Hagrid will not be happy with you.”

The thestral nickered as if to placate her, nudging her cheek with his nose.

Hermione placed her arm across the thestral’s back and walked with him down the path towards Hogsmeade. Time passed quickly with the unexpected escort, and Hermione found she didn’t mind.

When Hogsmeade was finally more than a destination on the horizon, the young thestral bumped into her shoulder and nickered, tossing his head.

“This is where we part, hrm?” Hermione asked, giving the young thestral an affectionate pat.

He lipped her teaching robes as if in apology.

Hermione bowed her head. “Thank you for your company,” she said softly.

The thestral shoulder bumped her with his head and trotted back the way they had come, seeking whatever entertainment a young thestral was wont to find.

Hermione smiled somewhat sadly as the thestral left, but her eyes caught a shimmer upon her robes. She plucked a few strands of the young thestral’s mane where he had rubbed against her. Her heart warmed slightly at the gift, and she clutched the strands tightly. Pulling a vial out from her robes, she guided the strands into the vial and stoppered it. There were some gifts you did not question and could only accept.

She took in a deep breath as she turned to walk into Hogsmeade on her quest to fetch Minerva’s rodents.

“I’m so sorry about that, Professor Granger!” the squirrely looking man apologized as he stared at a purchase order. “I’m not sure why we didn’t get this up there sooner! It’s stamped and dated from over a month ago.”

Hermione raised a brow, watching the man flit around the counter like a man afraid for his life. Paperwork went flying in all directions until he found something that seemed to keep his attention for a few seconds. He tore off into the backroom without an explanation muttering things under his breath.

A bit of yelling, a thud, and a crashing sound that sounded like silverware later, the man came huffing back to her, carrying a few stacked cages of startled looking rodents. “Very sorry. Very
sorry,” he muttered, stamping the slips in front of him and handing her one in return. “I promise the next batch will be delivered as we originally promised.”

Hermione took the slip of paper with the same enthusiasm as a person accepting a used tissue. “Thank you, Mr. Raffordy,” she said flatly. She picked up the stacked cages, closed her eyes for a moment until the weight of the cages eased, and hoisted them into her arms. She exited the door with her acquired rodents and walked towards the direction of Hogwart’s.

Severus looked up from his desk as Hermione entered. A young Slytherin that was gathering his things balked as she entered and scurried off down the hallway towards the Slytherin common room.

Hermione lifted a brow. “Head of House counseling already?”

Severus tilted his head to the side and massaged his own shoulder with his hand. “Can’t even go a week into the return and someone is already causing drama. It seems that Mr. Anders had his Potions textbook transfigured into a bat and it flew off over Black Lake.”

Hermione gave a short barking laugh.

Severus rolled his eyes towards her, giving her the look that conveyed what he really thought of student abuse of books. “How was your… rodent fetching errand?”

Hermione shook her head. “Safely acquired and placed in Minerva’s classroom. The man tending the stockroom was… irritating.”

Severus lifted a brow. “Thin, wire-haired, wide-eyed, reminds you of a squirrel?”

“Yes,” Hermione nodded in affirmative. “Mr. Raffordy.”

Severus turned up one of his lips in a sneer. “Irritating fellow.” He stood up from his desk, shoving a pile of half-graded papers to the side with a grunt. “I suppose we should make an appearance for the dinner hour before the evening patrols begin.”

He inclined his head towards the door, and Hermione let the way out as Severus wand waved the door closed behind them.

---Chapter 33: Respect is Earned Not Given Freely---

Severus stood completely still in the darkened hallway as the DADA professor approached with an obnoxiously loud gait. The man had been hovering around him for hours, as if waiting for a time to catch him alone. Snape’s eyes narrowed as Brody approached him. His eyes gained the characteristics of deep obsidian. Slamming down the shields over mind, he reinforced the impassive expression on his face.

“Ah, Severus,” Brody called to him. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

“Is there,” Snape droned, “something you need?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask if I could steal your apprentice away for an evening,” Brody said cheerfully, as if asking to borrow cauldron. “I’d like some potions I need for my class next week, but
I’m not sure which ones are easily made with the stock we have here at Hogwart’s.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed.

“I figure instead of pulling you away from your classes and duties as Head of Slytherin, she could help me come up with a list of useable potions for my class,” Brody explained. He had an obnoxious cheerful expression on his face. His words seemed, for all intents and purposes, innocent enough, but Severus had not forgotten Hermione’s first sense of him.

Severus glowered and spoke in a controlled voice, “You may ask her for her assistance for a night if she does not have something previously planned by the Headmistress.” Severus locked gazes with him, causing the younger man to flick his eyes away instinctively. “See that you do not abuse it.”

With that, Severus turned, returning to his patrol, black robes marking his passage like a dark cloud over the moon.

“Professor Brody wishes to borrow your services for a night,” Severus said with a curl of his lip as Hermione caught up with him on his patrol. “Something about defense potions for his class that he doesn’t wish to bother me with.”

Hermione lifted an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware defense potions were standard curriculum fare for Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“It is not,” Severus agreed. “I gave my permission for him to ask you if Minerva had nothing planned; however,” he paused slightly, “if you to make up some duty I have inflicted upon you on whatever night he desires to use you, I would not fault you.”

“I do appreciate that, Severus,” Hermione chuckled as they walked together. Their eyes scanned the halls together for wandering young witches and wizards avoiding curfew. “I think I will humor him, if anything… to keep him out of your hair for a while.”

Severus grunted. “As you wish.”

Their attention was disrupted as a flash of movement gave away a student sneaking around the corner.

“Mr. Harrison,” Severus said with a growl. “What makes you think that your forays outside of curfew would go unnoticed?”

“Salmon feet flakes?” Hermione stared at the potion ingredient list. “I’ve never even heard of such a thing!” Hermione shook her head and quilled out a tentative list of potions that could be made without taxing the delicate balance of Severus’ reserves. “I refuse to believe that that Gillacutty Gilldragons are real, let alone their feet.”

“Are you sure this is a real ingredient list, Professor Brody?” Hermione’s voice had gone from amused to annoyed in a flash change of mood.

“Of course it is,” Brody tsked her. “I got it from our old Potion Master in Manchester. He always had a potion for everything, and he never complained about the components.”
“Well at least the Chinese Chomping Cabbage is real,” Hermione mumbled, her eyes darkening with each reading of the list the DADA professor had given her. She scribbled more on her parchment, her quill starting to gain speed with her rise in annoyance. “Oh bloody ‘ell,” she snarled. “Why would you put deadlyius in with a healing potion? You might as well just force a jar of Exploding Ginger Eyelashes down someone’s throat.”

Professor Brody didn’t seem fazed by Hermione’s frustration. “We had utter confidence in our Potion Master, Hermione. He never steered us wrong.”

Hermione growled lowly, an echo of her mentor resonated in her throat. She did not like the way her name sounded from a man she did not know. She felt a tingle on the edges of her mind, and she instantly slammed down her shields on her mind with a deeper growl.

Professor Brody dropped the tin he was holding, breaking her concentration. Her head snapped up with a glare, eyes narrowing. She forced a look of surprise on her face, twisting her face into a more calm and carefree expression. “That must be true. Why would a Master of Potions ever try to mislead you? That would be silly.”

Brody fumbled around on the floor looking for his tin. “Maybe I could just get some burn-paste and Draughts of Peace?”

“All that I know we can provide,” Hermione acquiesced, crossing out things on the parchment and scribbling down other notes.

“How long has Snape been Potion Master at Hogwart’s?” Brody mumbled the question as he groveled around on the floor.

Hermione lifted an eyebrow, wondering why the man didn’t just accio the bloody thing to his hand. He managed to pick up the tin with his fingers and drag it to him. “A long time,” she said vaguely.

She felt the odd tingle in her head again which iritated her, so she filled her mind with a curtain of dark space and slammed her shields down completely. She felt the emotionless visage slide over her face.

Professor Brody had stood up with his prize for a moment but dropped it again as if the tin was covered in butter. He went down to the floor again, patting around for it.

Hermione’s lip curved slightly in disdain. “I will take this list to Professor Snape, and we will get you the things you need for your class.” She stood, spun on her heels, and exited the room with a swish of her robe.

--- Chapter 34: Mourning ---

“He wanted… what?” Severus’ eyebrow disappeared into his hair.

“Salmon feet flakes,” Hermione repeated. “Gillacutty Gilldragon feet.”

“Preposterous,” Severus scoffed into his teacup. “There is no such things as Gillacutty Gildragons.”

“That’s what I said,” Hermione agreed. “He swears his Potion Master in Manchester used to make him these things all the time.”

Severus read the parchment with Hermione’s notes on it as he sipped his tea. “I can’t even tell if this is some regional naming mismatch from this. Deadlyius? In a healing draught?” He scowled at the
“Manchester?”

“That’s what he said, Severus,” Hermione placated the Potion Master. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“I don’t recall there being a Wizarding School or College in Manchester,” Snape’s voice rumbled. “Or even a well-known apothecary.”

“Somehow I doubt any place that says they are selling salmon feet flakes are going to go on the record as a fine well-known apothecary,” Hermione smirked. “I’d expect something like that at Wizarding Wheezes…” Hermione’s voice tapered off slightly as the memory of Fred and George Weasley brought back unwanted memories of Fred’s death.

“I will owl some people and see if those names are just a bad misnomer of something we already use, but I highly doubt it,” Severus said as he set his teacup down. “The recipe doesn’t even seem like it would work.”

Hermione was silent, causing Severus to turn to her. He saw the tears running down her cheeks. She trembled as she attempted to wrestle with her emotions, but the wound of that particular memory had caught her off-guard and vulnerable.

Silently, Severus put his arm around her, pulling her against him on the couch as she mourned into his robes. She shuddered against him, her breaths caught in her lungs as her soft sobs combined with her ragged breathing. She cried until her body finally stilled against him.

As he pulled a blanket over her, she stirred. “Severus?”

“Yes, Hermione?” he replied softly.

“I’m glad you survived that night,” she whispered as she buried her face into his robe.

He slowly placed his hand over her head, resting it there in silent comfort.

--- Chapter 35: Bad Dreams ---

The house was dark. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed all around him, rumbling the walls of the house with its unforgiving sound. He slowly stepped into the house, panic filling his mind and his heart. Lily. Lily was inside. His Lily. The only one he had ever cared for.

He crept into the house sluggishly, placing his feet with exaggerated slowness. The lightning flashed, providing flashes of devastation in a house filled with family pictures of happy times. Each step was agony, sending tremors of trepidation through his body. He forced himself to walk forward. A baby was crying. A high pitched wail of pain and confusion. He stepped over the body of James Potter. His eyes stared into nothingness.

Severus took another step. Another.

He crossed the threshold into the room and saw her sprawled on her stomach. Lily. No. Not Lily. She was supposed to be safe. She was supposed to survive.

Severus let out a cry of agony, sliding down the wall as every moment of joy in his life shattered inside of him into countless cutting pieces. He wailed, pulling her body close to him, wrapping his arms around her. He cradled her to him, rocking his body back and forth as if it would wake her. Save her. Somehow.
He placed his hand to her head, looking into her face, praying to see some semblance of life in her face.

It was Hermione’s face that stared back at him in death.

Severus jolted awake in his bed with a gasp, staring into the blackness of his quarters. His breathing caught in his throat as remembered pain rose unbidden from the jails he normally buried them. He swallowed hard, forcing his controls into place and willing his emotions to bury themselves back where they belonged.

He shoved a wave of despair away from his thoughts, but the image of Hermione’s lifeless face did not leave him. He fumbled in the dark for the drawer on his bedside table, pulling out a dark crystal vial. He opened it, sniffed it, and quaffed it, slamming the empty vial into the drawer. He fell back onto his pillow with a moan as the hurricane of thoughts slowly faded and sleep claimed him once more.

---Chapter 36: Invisible Paranoia ---

Hermione yawned as she stirred in her bed. She stretched while still under the covers and pulled her pillow close to her as her mind tried to backtrack the previous night’s activities. Blushing upon remembering her crying her eyes out on the Potion Master’s robe, she hoped he wouldn’t begrudge her falling to pieces on him. She was normally so much better at controlling her emotions without sobbing uncontrollably on her mentor’s clothing. That could be awkward when she saw Severus next.

She trudged off to the shower and stood in the warm water for few minutes doing absolutely nothing. Washing quickly afterwards, she toweled off, brushed her teeth, and grabbed a robe from the wardrobe. Furiously toweling her hair for a minute or two, she grunted, pulling on her outer robe, transferred her sigils, and yawned again. Calling her wand to her from whatever dark place she had left it, she waited until it slammed into her palm. Stashing the wand in her inner pocket, she headed out the door.

The door to the classroom was slightly ajar. Severus must have already been up setting up materials for the morning class. She hoped silently that he had tea waiting. She could use a good cup of tea… or fifteen.

Walking into the classroom, she smiled at the desks having been arranged in a perfect line. Perfectionist, she thought to herself.

A sound caused her to turn, and she spun, expecting an errant student poking their nose into the empty classroom, but there was nothing. The hair on the back of her neck rose as a tingle around her head brushed against her mental shields. Her wand was in her hand in an instant, and she squared her feet on the floor in preparation for battle. She slammed down extra layers of shields over her thoughts. Her face hardened as all trace of emotion drained away. Her body was a tense as a spring, reverting to heightened readiness for combat that came from war.

She growled, whispering something with gritted teeth. With a flick of her wand that was barely seen, mage-lights formed on the end of her wand and moved out throughout the room, casting a bright radiance that illuminated the potions classroom.
She stood, motionless in the classroom, tensed and waiting, her eyes stared into the corner, seeing nothing, but unable to shake the feeling of being watched.

A familiar brush of a shoe on the stone floor came from outside the potions classroom. She flicked her eyes towards the ajar door to see Severus staring at the half opened door with curiosity. She remained where she was, but her body relaxed slightly.

Severus had his wand in his hand as he stepped into his classroom, eyes scanning the room with a slight squint as the mage-lights hovered in places he normally did not expect bright light.

Severus felt a rush of wind move against him as he stepped in, causing him to whirl to stare out the half open door. With a low growl, he raised his wand and uttered the incantation to multiple wards – slamming them down into place over his classroom. There was a sensation of hot wind that blew through the aisles of the classroom as his wards crashed down, and only then did Hermione relax her posture and slowly lower her wand.

As both the wizard and the witch tucked their wands away, Hermione dispelled the mage-lights, bringing the room back to its more customary gloom. Severus ignited the torches at the same time as he walked towards Hermione with a concerned expression.

With a word, he transfigured their accustomed couch and pulled a tea set out of thin air, setting it down on the small table. Hermione had once asked him if Hogwart’s had the house elves keep fully prepared tea sets in stasis somewhere in the castle that each professor could just fetch at any given time. She had always been entirely too clever for her own good. She would have made an excellent Slytherin.

They both sat down wearily as if the morning had already been over and done with.

“You look horrible, Severus,” Hermione said candidly.

“Hrph,” he muttered. “Speak for yourself.”

Hermione smiled, despite her earlier tension.

He turned to look at her. “What happened before I came in?”

Hermione frowned. “I felt like I was being watched.”

It was his turn to frown. “Explain.”

She turned her eyes up to look at the ceiling a moment. “You remember how I told you last night that I kept feeling like a tingle in my head when I was around Professor Brody?”

Severus nodded, narrowing his eyes.

“It was like that, only, no one was here,” she said. “I put up the shields, as you taught me, but it only made the tingle go away. I still felt… eyes on me.”

Snape stared into the bottom of his teacup as he drank from it. “He has not attempted anything on me as of yet, but that does not mean I am making light of your concerns. I do not know, however, if he has attempted some clumsy scan of anyone else. It is not a topic one casually brings up over dinner.”

“Oh pardon me, Professor Sprout,” Hermione said cheerfully. “You would happen to have someone trying to pry into your mind lately, by chance? No? Well carry on then!”
Snape set his teacup down and closed his eyes a moment, seemingly wrestling down a laugh. “Yes… that would be too easy. Absolutely disturbing, actually.”

“You do look positively awful, Severus,” Hermione said with concern. “I’m sorry I kept you up last night.”

His eyes opened, and he locked gazes with her. “Never apologize for that, Hermione,” he said solemnly. “Do I make myself clear?”

She smiled back at him, casting her eyes down slightly. “Perfectly, Professor Snape.”

They worked silently in the lab until the breakfast bell rang. Hermione scooped up the thick orange burn paste into multiple smaller tins. She slathered it into each tin, making a face as it made a schlucking sound that was discomfiting. She dipped her fingers into the warm wax in the smaller cauldron next to her, running her fingers along the edge of the tins to seal them.

Severus worked beside her, brewing multiple cauldrons of Draught of Peace. His face was expressionless as he stirred each one, pausing only to add a pinch of the next ingredient.

Hermione set out the bottles for him without a word, setting the funnel down next to them. She turned and gathered the pile of paste tins into her arms and carried them to his desk, dumping them on top of the desk as she sat down in his chair. Pulling out a piece of parchment, she dipped a quill in ink and began writing out labels.

Severus poured doses of the draught into each waiting bottle and closed the tops just as a flurry of labels whooshed by him, wrapping themselves tightly around the bottle’s surface. He turned to look back at his desk where Hermione fastidiously quilled on the parchment in front of her. With a small smile of approval turning the corners of his mouth, he accio’ed a crate to him and began to set each potion into the cushioning straw.

He hoisted the crate up and carried it to his desk just as Hermione finished labeling all of the tins. She stood with a sigh, gently placing the burn paste tins into the crate straw with the draughts.

Severus inclined his head silently towards the door, and Hermione lead the way out. He carried the crate under his arm as he exited, waving his wand without looking back as the door snapped shut by his silent command. They walked up the spiral stairs out the dungeons.

“Professor Granger!” a boy’s high voice called to her as she and Severus rounded the corner past the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room.

The two professors turned simultaneously towards the voice.

The boy ran towards them with an excited gait, causing Severus to scowl down at him.

“Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione greeted softly. “Did you get to all of your classes okay?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he beamed up at her. He pulled out a small piece of parchment and held it out to her. She knelt down a little to meet his gaze. As she eyed the parchment curiously, it formed into delicate poppy flower. “Thank you for helping me the other day!”
Hermione smiled, grasping the gift with her delicate fingers. “You are welcome, Mr. Mitchell.” She stood back to her full height with a small smile.

The boy looked up at the towering figure of the Potion Master and wore the expression of one attempting to meet the eyes of giraffe from the viewpoint of a mongoose. “Good morning, Professor Snape.”

Severus looked blankly down at the boy. “Good morning, Mr. Mitchell.” He locked gazes with the boy in complete silence until the boy blushed and scurried back towards the Slytherin Common Room where a couple other students ruffled his hair and pushed his shoulder.

Hermione and Severus continued on their way. Hermione looked up into the Potion Master’s dark eyes with silent laughter. The corner of his lip twitched upward before he turned his gaze forward.
Part Three : Sinister Dealings

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus deal with dunderheads as well a growing affection for each other, however, something is going on at Hogwarts that is threatening the treasured peace in their life.

Chapter 37 : Kaboom

Severus had his hands steepled in front of his face as he stared out into his busy classroom. Each student flipped though their books, stared at his notes written on the board, and attempted to decipher the instructions on making their potions.

Time had flown since the start of the fall semester, encroaching on the colder hint of winter. Winter break was almost upon them and keeping his classes focused on their work was getting harder by the day.

Hermione had drawn over another blackboard, making a sketch on the board with his instructions, giving the more unsure students a different way of looking at it. The instructions were identical, yet it seemed that when she impressed upon them the reason why some things were done that way, it seeped in a little more. It was almost as if hearing it from her as well as him made it more real to them. She walked up and down the aisles, peering into cauldrons, motioning for some to stir clockwise while others to do the opposite.

Sometimes, a student would cringe from the scowling Potion Master and immediately seek an appeal from Hermione. Her face would gain the impassive look that mirrored her mentor’s, letting it be known that they would gain no respite from either of them for doing something wrong. Yet, even so, she showed more patience in explaining some of the more subtle tasks than he ever did. He admitted, at least to himself, that she helped take some of the innate desire to throttle some of his more idle-brained students.

Hermione didn’t mention any other incidents of being watched or possible Legilimens since the one morning after they pondered the strange order for salmon feet flakes and gilldragon feet. He shook his head at the memory of the odd ingredients.

Hermione was leaned over a student’s cauldron, testing the viscosity with a spoon when a BLAM shattered the quiet of the potions classroom. Green goo splattered over everyone in the back 3 rows of the room as a cloud of vapor with the odor of moldy bread permeated the room.

A dark cloud seemed to form around the dark wizard as he stood from his desk. The students in the front, who had escaped being slimed, stared down into their cauldron as if to will it to simmer by their will alone.

Severus moved towards the back of the room, the air of malevolence draped around him like a third robe. “Mr. Belfry, 15 points from Hufflepuff for careless use of potion ingredients and whatever you care to call THIS,” Severus pointed to all of the dripping students. You will report to detention with Professor Sprout tonight and every night for the rest of this week, and you will take a zero for that sorry excuse for a potion.” He scowled down at the dripping boy.
Severus stormed to the door of the classroom and stuck his head out and waved at someone down
the hall.

“Mr. Williams, you are a prefect are you not?”

“Yes, Professor Snape,” came a reply from the hall.

“Please… escort these sopping victims to the hospital wing and make sure they are not dying of
anything… overly fatal,” Snape growled.

“Yes, Professor,” the voice agreed. “Come along.”

The cluster of dripping students shuffled out after the prefect.

Severus waved his wand across the back of the room, vanishing the excess goo from the pores of his
violated classroom. “Everyone else, back to work.”

Snape sat back in his chair, pressing his fingertips together as he scowled back over the classroom.
Hermione smiled at him as she leaned over another student’s cauldron, inspecting it for color and
viscosity. He shot her a look, but the corner of his lip curved up as he nodded to her.

He placed his fingers on the bridge of his nose and stared at the parchment he was grading. Winter
Break couldn’t come fast enough.

“Have I broken out in a pox, Ms. Granger?” Severus asked as he graded his papers.

Hermione chuckled as she set the quill down she was using to grade the opposing stack of papers. “I
was just… remembering you.”

Severus arched a brow at her, his pen scribbling across the parchment. “I apparently need to give you
more things to grade.”

Hermione chuckled, picking up her quill again. She scribbled over the paper she was grading.
“Wow, this one says flobberworm mucus is gathered from… leeches.”

Severus grunted. “This one thinks adding frog brains to wheat hulls will turn someone into a frog.”

Hermione chortled as she continued to grade. “Fairy wings from fairy fungus.”

“Goosegrass harvested from between the toes of wayward geese,” he countered.

“Honey water harvested from bee-hives dipped in water,” Hermione giggled.

“Dragonfly thorax,” Severus replied, “harvested from the Dragonfly’s rear end.”

Hermione busted out laughing, taking a moment catch her breath. “No wonder you were always so
irritated with us. I’d be irritated at me too if I wrote something like that.”

“Hmmph,” Snape grunted. “You were never one I had to worry about despicably horrifying no-brain
answers.”
Hermione finished grading the stake of papers she was on and found herself watching Severus as he quilled away. His dark hair fell about his face as his pale hand controlled the quill with exacting detail. It was comforting watching him. He was familiar now in a way she could not imagine not seeing him there, furiously grading his papers.

“You’re staring at me again,” he said, marking a large ornate “T” on the paper in front of him.

Hermione looked away, but smiled. “I can’t help it, Severus. So many things have changed since the war,” she said in reply. “I treasure some of the irrationally mundane things that haven’t.”

“Like me crankily failing student papers?” Severus asked dryly.

“Yes,” she replied softly.

Snape lifted up the stack of papers he was grading and handed her a few more. “Don’t let me stop you then,” he said softly, continuing to scribble over the parchment.

Hermione grinned broadly, dipping her quill into the inkpot. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

--- Chapter 38 The Otter and the Doe ---

Hermione yawned sleepily as she stood in the hallway watching over three students as they fervently polished one of Hogwart’s chandeliers. The last hour had been about as exciting as watching mold grow and just about as interesting.

As the trio of chandelier polishers completed their task, she inspected the chandelier and nodded. “You may go. Next time you wish to prematurely pull up mandrakes, please think on how many chandeliers are hung around Hogwart’s.”

“Yes, Professor,” the trio nodded emphatically and scurried off to their dormitories.

Stifling another yawn, she went about her patrol. Finding a few students passed out in the corridor with their books, she helped them gather their books and shoo them back to their respective dormitories. Catching a few late night snoggers, she sent them packing with a stern warning to their face and a private laugh behind their back.

The hallways became the more peaceful quiet she remembered from the summer as the students and staff went to sleep, allowing her to be more alone with her thoughts. She walked out onto the ramparts, reveling in the soft blow of the wind around her. The scent of winter was mixed with the damp musk of fall. Her mind calmed in the peace of the night, setting aside the stresses of added responsibility. She imagined herself as Fawkes, flying over the ramparts.

She caught a familiar scent on the wind and turned with a small smile. “Good evening, Severus.”

“Hermione,” he greeted, joining her on the castle ramparts.

“Is the Astronomy tower clear of wayward deviants?” She chuckled as she looked at him.

“Miraculously,” he said dryly.

“The lake looks so beautiful from here,” Hermione confessed. “I can smell the scent of winter mixed within the loam of the forest.”

Severus’ dark eyes met hers, and she looked up at him with a gentle smile. “Would you like to get a
closer look?” His voice was soft.

“Are you hiding a port key in your robes that I do not know of?” she chuckled. “It is an awfully long way down there and we can’t apparate while the students are here.”

“Something like that,” he said, looking down at her with his dark unfathomable eyes.

She met them fearlessly. “Yes, I would.”

Severus extended his hand, palm up.

Hermione took his hand, feeling the familiar touch of his fingers curl around her own, and closed her eyes. His forehead pressed against hers and the familiar touch of his mind brushed against her own. Images danced within her head of what he wished to teach her combined with the feel of the power word in her mind. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized what knowledge he was weaving into her mind. His thoughts interlaced with hers in a rush of warmth as the realization of the gift he was giving her sank in.

He pulled away and she opened her eyes, amazement written on every line of her face. He lifted his arm to her as if to side-along apparate. She stepped into it, looking up at him as his arm curved around her back… and they flew.

It was dizzying.

It was exhilarating.

It was like racing as fast as you could run and being so caught up in the momentum that you couldn’t stop if you wanted to.

It was electric. She felt like a bolt of pure energy shooting across the landscape.

Hermione gave a cry of delight as they landed at the shore of the lake, breathless as her voice trembled in excitement.

With a spin of her arms she cried out over the lake, making a movement with her wand, “Expecto Patronum!” Her otter flew forth from her wand and dove in and out of the lake’s surface, playing in and out of the water as though it were real. She laughed with a genuine rush of warmth that had been buried deep within her wounded soul.

Severus moved his wand with a smooth circular movement, whispering, “Expecto Patronum!” into the wind. His doe sprang forth from his wand, bouncing across the lake’s edge a few leaps at a time, then slowly walking to the edge as if to put her head down to drink. The otter glided closer and their noses delicately touched.

Hermione turned to face him, her expression was beaming with pure, uncontained joy. She stood in front of him, looking up at him, unrepentant and unafraid.

“Thank you,” Severus whispered as he looked down at her, his face was calm and unburdened. “For trusting me.”

Hermione looked up into Severus’ dark eyes, watching the flicker of something pass across them. She placed her palm against his cheek, weaving her fingers into the hair around his ear. A shudder moved within him as his eyes half closed. He leaned into her touch warily as if he was afraid the act of pressing closer to her hand would cause her to disappear like mist over the lake. “I trust you, Severus,” she whispered softly. “With my life.”
He took in a ragged breath, enfolding her to him, the dark folds of his robe wrapped around her like a living thing. He shuddered with each breath, pulling her tight against himself as if they were able to merge into one being. He pressed his forehead to hers, his pale hand pressed her head against his. His mind was suddenly within hers, and she felt the rush of his emotions he normally kept meticulously and zealously guarded. “And I trust you,” he whispered into her mind. “With mine.”

--- Chapter 39 Lack of Sleep ---

Hermione stirred from sleep, her face happily burrowed into soft cloth around her face. “Mrmrph,” she managed to articulate. Maybe she could sleep in more. That would be heavenly. She was warm and enjoying the feeling of being curled in a nest of blankets. Her ears informed her on why she had woken at all. The birds were singing loudly, denying her ears a respite. Evil feathered alarm clocks. Why did they have to be so cheery in the morning? She pondered a muting bird hex in her mind as she attempted to bury herself in her blanket.

A soft chuckle broke her out of her contemplation of bird muffling and she shot up straight, which only half succeeded, as she was buried like a tick in Severus’ robe. Her eyes darted back and forth in surprise. “Merlin, I’m still… I mean…. lake,” she mumbled over herself.

“You are uncharacteristically articulate this morning, Ms. Granger,” Severus replied to her with his familiar biting tone, his dark eyes locked gazes with her. His face was expressionless, yet calm. The harsh edges of his normal mask of impassiveness were absent.

Hermione smiled back at him with a shake of her head, sagging her shoulders with a laugh. “I’m sorry, Severus, did I pass out on you?”

“Somewhere around chapter, 15,” he replied to her, closing the book he was reading and extinguishing the mage-light he had summoned to hover over the pages. The sun was coming up over the horizon, casting sharp shadows over the tree line they were leaning against.

Hermione rubbed her eyes groggily as Severus tucked the book into his inner pocket. The tucked his robe back into order around him as he stood. He extended his hand to her. She stared at it sleepily and placed hers into it, feeling the warmth of his fingers close around her own as he pulled her up.

He reached over to her hair and gently pulled a leaf out of it. They stood, wordlessly staring back at each other in the comfortable silence. They turned and walked back towards Hogwarts with a swirl of their robes behind them.

As they entered Hogwarts, the suspicious scurrying of student robes around the corner caused Severus to give a small sigh. He nodded to Hermione and stormed down the hallway after the fleeing delinquent.

“Ms. Wilkinson,” his voice carried down the empty hall. “I assure you that your talents as a chameleon in your previous life have not bestowed you inborn talents in this one.”

Hermione stifled a giggle with her hand at his familiar and condescending tone of voice. It amazed her despite how many different inflections she had come to recognize while working with him since her return. “How did I ever think he only had one tone and two volumes?” she thought to herself.

The hairs on the back of her neck rose, and Hermione was instantly in a fighting stance, her wand was in her hand as her senses reached out to detect what had caused such an instinctive and visceral response. Her shields slammed down with equal automation, draining all expression from her face as it twisted into a cold, emotionless façade. Her eyes darkened, her nostrils flared as a breeze kicked up
from the open windows, wafting the scent of the classrooms and something unidentified. She heard the rustling of people waking in the far common rooms, yet whatever was setting her senses on alert was here... with her.

Her lips curled back from her teeth slightly, anger filling in the void where she had vacated her other emotions. The wind shifted again, only this time it carried the familiar scent she had come to associate with a type of safety she hadn’t even realized she needed. She slowly lowered her wand as Severus’ hand closed around her wand hand.

His dark eyes flicked from her to the empty hall, narrowing as he too saw nothing. His hand gently pressed against hers, conveying the warmth from his body with his touch. “Come,” he said softly. “It’s time to inform Minerva.”

“Are you sure?” McGonagall’s face frowned as she attempted to digest what she had been told. She sat down in her chair across from Severus and Hermione. Still half garbed in her dressing gown, Minerva had a frown on her face.

“Someone or some... thing is watching me. I can feel it. It’s happened to me twice now, always when I’m alone. If Severus enters the room, the feeling fades.”

“Only Severus?” Minerva questioned.

Hermione pondered. “Every time it’s been Severus that comes in right after I get the feeling. No one else has been around after it starts. I get this tingle in my head.”

“In your... head?” Minerva frowned even harder.

Hermione slumped her shoulders. “I am not sure how to explain it. It feels like something is brushing up against... here.” Hermione swirled her fingers around her head. “The only time it happens when I’m not alone is when Professor Brody is around.”

McGonagall scoffed. “Professor Brody came with fine credentials. There was no hint at all of trouble with any of the places he was at before here. I wouldn’t have brought him in otherwise.”

Hermione slumped.

Severus narrowed his eyes. “Is there a chance that the credentials have been... altered?”

“I suppose I could send some owls out to the places on his references separately, but if their records are clean there is nothing I can do specifically unless he’s caught in the act. It’s all hearsay. We can’t bring in Aurors unless a crime has occurred.”

“Can you at least watch him more closely, Minerva?” Severus sighed.

McGonagall nodded. “I will do that, at the very least. I can’t warn the faculty or he’ll know for sure he’s being watched. Telling Pomona is akin to telling everyone.”

Severus placed his palm against his forehead and shook his head.

Minerva lifted her head. “I may be able to put up some more wards in the areas you are in normally, Hermione. You are my apprentice as well, so no one would question me putting up little protection
for your benefit.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.”

Severus stood and Hermione stood shortly after. They exited the room to leave McGonagall to her thoughts.

The Great Hall was bustling with activity by the time they had made their way in to sit down. A gliding paper airplane was floating through the air on its way to someone when it crashed nose first into Severus. It wasn’t too hard to figure out to figure out where it had come from as the harsh gasp of realization of whom he had hit with a floating plane sank in.

Severus narrowed his eyes in the direction the gasp had come from.

Hermione gently picked up the offending plane to Severus’ person and held it out to them. Scared eyes met with her as the boy slinked up to her, grasped the plan in his hand, and turned to scamper back to the table.

“Mr. Harper,” Snape growled.

“Y….yes, Professor Snape?” the boy gulped.

“What do you say to the savior of your offending aeronautical construct?”

The boy gulped. “Thank you, Professor Granger.”

“Mr. Harper,” Hermione chided. “What do you say to the victim?” Her face had a soft smile.

“Apologies, Professor Snape,” he replied in a rush and tore back to table as if the Furies themselves were after him.

Hermione looked up at Severus, meeting his dark eyes with silent laughter. The dark wizard scowled down at her with a slight quirk of his lips. They continued up the path towards the High Table.

Hermione was already dozing of half way through breakfast. The chatter at the High Table was dull roar mixed with the laughs and conversations floating over from the rest of the Great Hall. It took her a moment to realize that someone was speaking to her.

“Hey, ’ermione,” Hagrid’s voice filtered out from the buzz in her ears.

Hermione shook her head. “Yes, Hagrid? Sorry.”

“Could you bring the ‘ealing balm by after breakfast?” Hagrid repeated his question.

“Sure, Hagrid,” she nodded in affirmative. “I’m sorry. I’m just so tired this morning.”

Hagrid grinned at her. “What does this brooding wizard have you doing, Hermione? Grading all his papers and teaching his classes?”

“Don’t forget the patrols,” Hermione teased.

Severus grunted, refusing to rise to the bait any more than offering that vocal interjection.
Hermione poured a cup of tea and placed it in front of Severus with a small smile. “I’ll get that balm out to you this morning, Hagrid. You going to be there all morning?”

“Aye,” he nodded.

Hermione tried to shake the sleepiness from herself by forcing herself to imbibe a cup of coffee instead of her regular tea. She made a face akin to the one she made quaffing potions with horrible aftertastes. Severus nudged her, pointing to his half full glass of juice.

She took it and drank it down, chasing away the unaccustomed taste of the coffee.

“Thank you,” she said.

His dark eyes met hers with amusement as he went back to finishing his eggs.

Chapter 40 Hidden Eggs

The small crate of healing balm hadn’t seemed so heavy until she had attempted to cart it over to Hagrid’s place. She contemplating just levitating the crate with her, but decided against the impetuous show of magic in front of the students for no more reason than the wish to be lazy at that particular moment.

Hagrid’s hut was as unchanging as ever. It always managed to seem cozy whatever the season. It was cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Whether it was due to magic or something far more ordinary, his hut stood as a comforting reminder to Hermione that there were some things like Hagrid that would always be welcoming.

Hagrid’s door was slightly open, so she pushed her way in to set the crate of balm down on his table, nudging over the scattered jars and clutter on the top. As she moved the crate into place, a plate and set of cutlery crashed to the ground and rolled, causing Hermione to close her eyes and slump her head.

Standing up straight and calling her wand to her, she waved it, sending a rush of wind to circle around her. A cloud of dust wooshed out of Hagrid’s hut as a flurry of books, crates, pots, utensils, jars, and hand carved knickknacks set themselves upright and in place.

She sneezed as the dust exited the doorway, sitting down in the nearby chair with a sigh. Buckbeak’s corner in the hut was empty, leading her to believe Hagrid was off giving him some time to stretch his wings away from Hogwarts.

She heard a peeping noise coming from the corner of Buckbeak’s normal place and curiosity pulled her towards it. The peeping grew louder as she approached, and she cautiously moved the straw away to expose a mottled egg. Eyes growing side, she touched the egg, the warmth from it seemed to grow, making the dark red and brown coloring shimmer slightly with orange. It looked like it was crafted of fire.

The peeping grew louder as cracks ran down the sides of the eggshell, and a dark beak pushed itself out of the egg. Hermione stared, transfixed, unable to move as the small creature struggled to be free of its shelled prison. Pieces of shell punched out like pieces of a muggle jigsaw puzzle.

A shadow cast over her and she looked up to see Severus staring at her from the doorway. Her face broke into a smile, and she silently waved him in closer. His brows furrowed in confusion, but he did as he was bade, silently kneeling down beside her.
The eggshells were peeling away due to being kicked out by small bright orange feet. The small captive peeped furiously, bursting from the shell with its colossal effort and splattering itself with a flop of damp wings in the middle of the shards of eggshell.

Dark beak opening and closing as its tiny sides heaved, the small creature’s dark black eyes looked up at Hermione and Severus trilled. There was a circle of feathers that had already dried and fluffed on his head giving the appearance of a small crown.

“Look, he has a crown, like a little prince,” Hermione giggled, scooping up the small creature in her hands. She placed it in Severus’ hands with a smile, covering his hands with hers, forming a small makeshift nest with their intertwined hands. The bird yawned with a wide beak, exhausted from its efforts, snuggling into their hands with a soft peep. Hermione smiled at Severus and pressed her forehead to his, closing her eyes as she communed with the small miracle that had just taken place.

Severus leaned into her touch contentedly and closed his eyes, willing to share in her moment in the quiet of the morning.

“Severus,” Hermione whispered. “Look!”

Severus opened his eyes and stared down into their cupped hands. The sleeping creature had dried, covered in a dark red and orange down. The fluffy down filled out around the bird to give it a statelier look.

“He’s beautiful,” she whispered in awe. She took her fingers and gentle soothed the down on his head around the crown of downy feathers. “It least… it could be a he…” She peered down at the down ball in their hands. “This is what I get for missing a year in the Care of Magical Creatures.”

Severus chuckled. “Do not look at me, witch,” he commanded softly. “I could make a sex identification potion, but this,” he inclined his head to the down ball in their intertwined hands, “is not my area of expertise.”

Hermione’s eyes glinted in mischief, and then her eyes went wide as a shadow blocked the entrance to Hagrid’s hut.

The dark wizard and his apprentice looked up to see Hagrid standing in the doorway. “Uhhh…” Hagrid said in resignation, “I uh…. Okay time for tea then. Get in here, Fang, an’ stop messin’ wit’ Buckbeak’s tail.”

Hagrid pulled out extra chairs around his table and pulled a kettle off the hearth. He poured tea into each cup while pushing Fang away from the table with his leg. “Move ya big oaf,” he muttered.

Fang was too interested in sticking his nose down to sniff the newly hatched addition to the hut. Each snuffle of his nose caused the down to swirl around the bird like a wind storm. The bird peeped in protest, nailing Fang on the nose with his small black beak.

Hermione untangled her hands from Snape’s and stood up, cradling the small bird in her one arm and offering her other to Severus. He pulled himself up into a more dignified standing posture before they both sat down around Hagrid’s table, staring at him intently. Hermione’s face was insatiably curious; Severus’ was a glare.

“Uh… well,” Hagrid said, scratching the back of his head with his hand. “’e wasn’t supposed ta hatch yet.”

Severus’ eyebrow raised. Hermione was preoccupied with slowly scratching the bird’s neck with her finger.
“I was watching the egg for a friend of mine in France,” Hagrid admitted. “It was to go to her in a week or two, once the students left for holidays.”

“Do you mean, Madame Maxime?” Severus asked evenly.

Hagrid’s blush under his beard provided enough of an answer to that particular question. “Aye,” he said. Hagrid shook his head. “But it was ‘upposed to be a rare ‘irebird. Blue as the sky o’re the mountains.”

Severus peered at the bundle of fluff quizzically. “If my understanding of primary colors is correct, Hagrid, I think you have been had.”

“Well you can still give him to her, right Hagrid?” Hermione stared into the dark eyes of the little bird and smiled warmly. The eyes looked so much like another dark eyed wizard she knew. She agonizingly lifted her hands to give the little bird to Hagrid.

Hagrid sighed. “I suppose, but, she ‘old me it ‘as a blue ‘irebird. I’m not sure what ‘appened or if she ‘as a place for the little guy.” He cupped his large hands out for Hermione.

The bird sat calmly in her cupped hands until the moment he was set into Hagrid’s hands and peeped furiously, legs pumping, and downy wings flopping as he struggled back towards Hermione and Severus. He bumped his rear into Severus’ robes and tucked his head over Hermione’s wrist, attempting to wedge itself between the two as thoroughly as possible.

Hermione frowned at the little bird, and scooped him up. He settled into her hands and peeped contentedly. She locked gazes with Severus, and he wordlessly nodded, extending his hands to her. She gently placed the little bird into his pale hands. The bird yawned widely, and curved its head around his thumb.

Hagrid sat back in his chair. “Well now,” he said. “This makes things ‘ore complicated.”

“It’s a what?” Severus’ voice startled the little bird and it peeped in protest. “Give me that book,” he muttered, handing the bird to Hermione. The bird settled into her hands as Severus dragged the book she was reading into range and peered at it. “You have to be joking.”

“Look at the eggs. They are almost identical. The only difference is the sheen on the shell when they are about to hatch,” Hermione gave him the look that was equivalent to his own. “Maybe whoever shipped the eggs mixed them up?”

“A phoenix is one of the rarest birds a wizard or witch can have,” Severus muttered. “You cannot tell me that they would let some addle-brained shipping clerk tend to a bunch of highly rare eggs and then let them ship the wrong one to… anyone!” Severus clutched the bridge of his nose. “Albus was the only one with a phoenix that I knew of in all the years I’ve been at Hogwart’s. They don’t just… show up in the mail like a Christmas goose!”

Hagrid was trying to make himself look as small as possible as Severus and Hermione argued back and forth, which would have been extremely comical in a situation that didn’t make him feel like he was going to die horribly if he interrupted either of them.

“Don’t you think I know that, Severus,” Hermione spouted back, “but look at the spots and baby lines on his back. The markings are spot on. His legs are striped back there where his legs meet his body. He has to be one.”
Severus let out a sigh and looked at her, his dark eyes meeting hers. She stared back into his as the thrum of their energy combined into understanding. “You’re right,” he admitted. “I just don’t want to believe it could happen. I want to think that person in a professional position can at least organize their sock drawer correctly without professional counseling.”

Hermione smiled at him, tension gone as if it had never been there. She reached out and touched his hand, allowing her fingers to curl around his.

The corners of Severus’ lips twitched upward, his fingers gently curved around hers in response before he pulled away to cradle the book in his hand again. He glared at the pages as if the knowledge had to be burned into his memory. “Herbivore,” he said after a few moments.

“Hagrid,” she asked. “What did Headmistress Dumbledore feed Fawkes?”

Hagrid was staring at them like he’d just seen a rare solar eclipse in his window. “I.. uh…” he began.

“Out with it, Hagrid,” Severus muttered. “You do not have to flop around like a fish.”

Hagrid shook his head. “Err… lots of things, actually. Fruits, berries, vegetables. Pretty much anything off his plate that wasn’t meat,” he recalled. “I think he even ate fungus that we wouldn’t even be able to eat.”

“Well… at least we don’t have to go traipsing through the Alps for Ice-Vein Wizard Berries or something equally aggravating,” Severus said with a sigh.

Hermione groaned, causing Severus to peer at her curiously. “What are we going to tell Minerva?”

“I do not,” Severus began, “know.”

The little bird was awake now, and opened his beak and made a plaintive sound. Severus and Hermione peered at the bright orange lining of the dark black beak. Hermione and Severus reached for the fruit bowl on Hagrid’s table at the same time. Hermione grasped a blueberry and watched it go down the little bird’s gullet with a quick gulp. Severus fingered a cherry, using his thumb to separate the fruit from the pit. The greedy chick snatched it, swallowing it and the stem in a few gulps.

Hermione giggled, giving the little creature a few more blueberries until he snuggled against her neck next to the folds of her robes. Severus watched, dark eyes staring at little fluffball.

“You should probably give the little ‘uy a name,” Hagrid said, breaking the silence.

Hermione fingered the tufted crown of feathers on the little bird. “Prince.”

Severus stared at her wordlessly. Hermione smiled back at him, unabashed and unrepentant. He nodded to her in acquiescence.

“We have class on the hour,” Severus said, standing up. “I should probably be there lest the students think the world is ending.”

Hermione laughed, causing Prince to blink awake sleepily. “I’ll go tell Minerva and join the class after she is done interrogating me.” She smiled with a slight look upward. She stood up. “I’ll go with you to Hogsmeade this afternoon to see if we can straighten where the paperwork went wrong, ok Hagrid?”

“Naw, Hermione,” he replied. “I’m marching down there now while I have the morning off.”
“Okay, Hagrid,” she replied. “I’m sorry we kind of… stole your phoenix.”

Hagrid waved his hands in front of him. “It was never mine to begin with!”

Hermione laughed and turned, exiting the hut with a swirl of her robes.

Severus gave Hagrid a stony gaze. “Hagrid,” he said, inclining his head.

“Professor Snape,” Hagrid replied.

Severus turned and walked out of the hut, his black robes swirling behind him.

Fang woofed from the chair he was commandeering.

“I never would ‘ave believed it either, Fang,” Hagrid said as he watched the two disappear towards Hogwarts.

--- Chapter 41 Fluffy Distractions ---

“Hermione,” McGonagall cooed as she laid eyes on the fluff ball in her hands. “Whatever do you have there?”

A chuckle came from the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. “It’s a phoenix, Minerva.”

“A what?” McGonagall’s eyes widened as she took in the sight of the fluffy chick. “But its so fluffy!”

Hermione smiled. She wanted to be able to hand the chick over to the Headmistress, but she remembered its adamant response to being put into Hagrid’s hands. Concentrating like she did with Crookshanks back in the day, she entreated with the fluffy chick to tolerate the transfer temporarily.

Slowly, she placed the chick in Minerva’s hands and was rewarded with Minerva’s smile of delight and the chick’s beaky yawn.

“He’s beautiful, Hermione,” Minerva cooed as she scratched the chick under the chin with her index finger. “Or she?”

“We’re calling it a he until we find out otherwise,” Hermione admitted.

“Howver did you find one, Hermione?” Minerva asked, still scratching the little chick under the head.

“Eeeeah,” Hermione began. “That is a long story. Do you want the short version or the longer more detailed please don’t kill me version?” Hermione gave the Headmistress a forced grin.

“Better start from the beginning, dear,” she said softly. “It better be good.”

“Oh,” Hermione replied. “It is.” She began at the beginning.

“So,” Minerva summarized. “Hagrid was egg sitting a blue firebird egg for Madame Maxime. The egg was mixed up with a random, utterly rare, phoenix egg somewhere between here and wherever phoenix eggs could come from, and you and Severus happened to be in Hagrid’s hut the moment it hatched.”

“Yes?” Hermione confirmed softly.
“I swear that Potter and Weasley are haunting me to this day with their sheer dumb luck,” McGonagall said with a shake of her head. She handed the sleeping chick back over to Hermione with a soft expression on her face. “I suppose it does no good at this point to admonish Hagrid. He wasn’t doing anything illegal, and it wasn’t your fault that you happened to be delivering healing balm right as the little beast hatched.” Minerva smiled at Hermione. “It was probably fortunate it was you and not Hagrid running around with another anything. I will order some perches to be placed around the school for you, since I have a feeling he’s not going to be content to sit here like Fawkes all day.”

“Thank you,” Hermione smiled back at her.

“Don’t you have class this morning, Hermione?” Minerva looked upward as if to tick off the time and date in her head.

“Yes,” Hermione chuckled. “Severus sent me to tell you about Prince.”

Minerva scoffed. “Prince, you say? Why ever did you chose that name?”

“Look here,” Hermione said, pointing out the tuft of feathers on the little chicks head. “It’s like a crown.”

“Well, so it is,” Minerva agreed with a laugh.

“Well I had better check on the Potions class,” Hermione said, excusing herself from McGonagall’s office. “Today is potion review day for exams.”

“That should be delightful,” McGonagall chuckled.

“It’s not about if a cauldron will blow up,” Hermione said as she left, “but when.”

Minerva laughed as Hermione left her office, Prince hidden in the waves of her hair.

“Mr. Ashford,” Snape’s voice broke the sound of burbling potions. “I am fairly certain that the answers to your questions are not to be found in Professor Granger’s hair.”

“Y…yes, Sir,” the boy replied, casting his eyes down towards his cauldron.

Prince peeped softly in Hermione’s hair as she checked his potion. “Your potion color is perfect, Mr. Ashford. The texture, however, is too thin. You will have to start over and add the goosegrass sooner.”

“Yes, Professor,” Ashford replied as Hermione vanished the contents of his cauldron so he could start again.

Seeing a trend in the distracted students who kept looking into her hair, Hermione glided up towards Snape’s desk and gently transferred Prince to his collar, where he snuggled into his neck and peeped contentedly.

Since no one dared stare at the Potion Master for longer than a second at a time, the distracted glances came to a grinding halt. Hermione corrected more potions than she praised, but at least a handful of students managed to follow directions.
As the last of the students either succeeded or failed abysmally, each filed out of the classroom. Severus flicked his wand, shutting the classroom room. “As if we needed more things to distract these bunglers,” he muttered.

“It’s not like any of them have probably ever seen one before, Severus,” Hermione noted. “I figure they will be curious a while before that wears off.”

“Joyous,” he remarked flatly. He waved at her to sit down. “In the meantime, we have papers to fail.”

Hermione laughed and sat down in front of his desk, taking half of the stack he was grading. Prince wiggled on Snape’s collar and he placed the wiggling chick down on the desk between them. He perched on the edge of stand for the inkpot, pecking at the quills every time Hermione or Severus attempted to dip their quills into it.

“Fffft,” Severus scolded, using his fingers to dislodge the errant bird from his quill. “Stop it.”

The grading continued until the bell for dinner rang, waking up Prince from his doze on top of the inkpot holder.

“Good news, Severus,” Hermione said cheerfully. “Lovage is the cure for dragon pox!” She wrote an ornate “T” on the paper.

Severus wrote an “D” on the paper in front of him. “Scurvy grass turns you into a pirate.”

Both of them threw down their quills and stood. Hermione tucked Prince onto her shoulder, and they walked to dinner together.

--- Chapter 42: Accusations and Bias ---

“Look at that little blighter eat,” Filius laughed as he passed the gravy down the table.

Prince had just downed an entire strawberry in one gulp, which distracted most of the faulty on one side of the High Table. Chuckles went down the table as Hagrid had to explain the story of how the little chick had come to them. Severus enjoyed watching Hagrid squirm each time he had to tell the story. Hermione laughed softly as she nudged a piece of lettuce over to the hungry chick and watched him try to stuff it horizontally into his mouth.

Professor Brody, however, was strangely absent from the High Table. Sybill made a comment about him overseeing the dueling club, which caused a number of raised eyebrows down the table. Hermione wasn’t sure if it was because of the dueling club having being started up yet again or that it was because Trelawney was speaking at all.

As the laughter went up and down the table, Hermione excused herself, giving Severus the silent gesture for the beginning of patrol. He inclined his head in silent acknowledgement and rescued the exploring chick from the fate of being covered in mashed potatoes. Severus met the eyes of a few of the curious students trying to decipher the antics at the High Table, who quickly stared back down towards their table.
Hermione walked the emptying corridors of Hogwart’s, shooing the students back to their common rooms and dormitories. As she passed the Slytherin common room, students waved to her as she passed. She smiled and nodded to them, continuing on her way, silently wondering how the relationship between Slytherin and she, a known Gryffindor, had become so cordial. The moving stairs carried her up the familiar path to the Gryffindor dormitories. She grinned as she waved to some familiar faces and a few whose faces still remained unidentified.

The quiet gave her some comfort to be alone with her thoughts again. She knew Severus would meet up with her at some point between her rounds and his, and she found herself looking forward to his quiet companionship.

As she walked the darkening corridors, she smelled something in the air that caused her hair to raise on the back of her neck. It was the familiar scent of the unknown watcher, who shadowed her steps. Her hands clenched, a moment’s breath away from calling her wand to her hand.

Nicolas Brody rounded the corner. “Ah, Hermione. Might I speak with you a moment?”

Controlling her initial and instinctive distrust, she put her professional mask across her face. “Of course, Professor Brody. What do you wish to speak to me about?”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about your apprenticeship,” Brody admitted. “With Snape.”

Hermione arched a brow. He called her by her given name, yet called Severus by his last name. “Oh, to what end?”

“I’ve heard you are a talented young witch from all of the faculty here,” Brody told her. “You could have picked any branch to apprentice or had your pick of jobs at the Ministry. Why did you pick Hogwart’s?”

Hermione smirked slightly. “It is my home.” Hermione had a family home once. She had her parents who loved her. She had memories growing up under their care. In the end she had sacrificed those cherished memories and erased them from the two people who had always been there for her. She had erased herself from her parents’ lives for their own safety. There would be no going home to them to visit them during Christmas. Even if she saw them, they would never know her, remember when she fell and skinned her knee, or broken her first flower pot by accidently throwing it across the room with her epic temper tantrum at the age of five. They would never be proud of her, and she could never bask in their unquestionable love for her again. She could never send them birthday cards. She would never get the homemade birthday cake her mother crafted for her every year since the day she was born. That was the price of her love to them. She had loved them so much that she gave them up.

“Why do you apprentice with Severus Snape of all people?” Brody asked her candidly. “I’m still hearing horror stories about him from my students. He’s positively dastardly.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes and continued to walk forward. “He is a talented Potion Master, Professor Brody. If you have not noticed this.”

“He’s a Death Eater,” Brody answered her as if that explained everything.

Hermione stared out into the darkened courtyard and turned to continue on her patrol, forcing Brody to keep up or be left behind. So, Brody knows about that. Why would he be so angry about it? Even Harry had admitted that Severus had been one of the bravest men he knew. “He almost died to save us from a future that held nothing but darkness and pain for anyone but pure-blood fanatics,” Hermione said as she walked. “Or did you miss that memo somewhere between Hogwart’s and
“You’re firey, I’ll admit, Miss Hermione,” Brody replied. “But I don’t think you realize how many innocents he killed “saving” us from a Dark Lord you can’t even prove really existed.”

Hermione spun towards him. “Are you round the bend? How can you not believe Voldemort was real?”

“I think Voldemort was the name they used to excuse their murders,” Brody said loudly, his voice carrying down the empty hall. “The same excuse they used before they killed my family.”

Hermione stared at him intently. Many loved ones had died by the hands of Death Eaters. Some had died by Severus’ hand as he gained the Dark Lord’s trust. She knew the feeling of having to kill someone and not wanting to. She also knew the feeling of being willing to. It was the coldness of resolve. For her, it had been accepting that in doing so a part of her would be changed forever. She would be forever willing to cross the line and take a life. It didn’t matter what reason it was – defense or blatant wrathful revenge of her loved ones. There had been a time, not so long ago, when she would have hexed Ron beyond recognition for leaving her in the forest. Had Harry not been there, she may have. The girl who had always looked on the positive side of life had been a casualty in the war. The woman that remained no longer could.

“I’m sorry your family was killed, Professor Brody, but that does not give you the right to question who or who I do not apprentice to,” Hermione said flatly.

“You just stand next to him and let him teach you how to be a good little Death Eater, don’t you?” he challenged her with his voice and a glare.

Hermione’s eyes darkened as all the emotion in her face drained away. She was used to glares. His held no candle to the best of them. “I will never see my family again, Mr. Brody. I sacrificed everything I ever cared about to bring down your figment of my imagination. What were YOU doing when Voldemort was bringing down the walls of this castle and killing the people who died defending our future from him?”

“Burying my parents!” Brody yelled at her. “Because of HIM!”

“Welcome to the real world, Mr. Brody,” Hermione said coldly, her face as impassive as her mentors. “We’ve all lost people we love here. The lines of good and evil are not drawn in white paint with clear boundaries between savior and damnation. I can tell you for a fact that Severus Snape sacrificed more than any of us, long before many of us who enjoyed the fruits of his labors were even born.”

Brody scoffed. “You’re just like him. I thought you could be reasoned with. He’s a murderer, and none of you will admit it.”

“The war made many of us… murderers, Professor Brody,” she said evenly, her voice was quiet but uncompromising. Hermione looked him straight in the eyes, the darkness moved across her own without being called. “I can only be reasoned with when the person I am speaking to speaks within reason.” She turned on her heels and continued down the hall without him, her black robes flowing behind her.

**Chapter 43 : And That Happened**

Severus was waiting for her on the ramparts, the wind blowing his robes behind him like a character
out of the muggle comic books. He met her eyes with his own as she approached.

Without a word, she walked straight into him, wrapping her arms around his waist and burying her face into the buttons of his inner vest. Severus stiffened for a moment as his mind and his body attempted to process what had caused the sudden action on her part and the proper action that would be required to counter it.

He recovered after a few moments, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her firmly against his body. He laid his head over hers, enveloping her in the drape of his robes. He felt her heart beating against his, but it gradually slowed. Prince cheeped softly from his shoulder, taking a few strands of her hair and pulling on it as if to gain her attention.

“Hermione,” he said in a soft voice. “What happened?”

“Brody asked me why I chose to apprentice under you when I could have had my pick of any career I wanted,” she explained into his chest.

Severus’ dark eyes flashed with an emotion he failed to hide. “But that wasn’t all?”

Hermione turned her face into his chest, smashing her nose into the fabric of his vest so her forehead could lean into his sternum. She shook her head after a while and gazed off towards the water. “He practically accused me of being a Death Eater.”

Severus placed his palm to her temple, dark eyes meeting hers. She tilted her head up to meet his, allowing her shields to drop as his familiar mental touch joined with hers as he sought the memories she could not express in words.

Hermione felt Severus stiffen against her. His anger rolled off him as he pulled his head back. His eyes held the coldness of his willingness to hex Nicolas Brody into the core of the Earth. She placed her hand over his as he turned to march into Hogwarts and track down the person who had accused her of being a Death Eater. “No, Severus,” she whispered softly. “It’s not worth it.”

He stared down at her, his dark eyes conflicted.

Hermione brought her palm to his cheek. “He is a misguided fool who only knows part of a story so much bigger than he is.” She brought both hands up to cradle his head. “He doesn’t know me, and he doesn’t know you—only the mask you spent decades perfecting.”

She looked towards the stars. “I was like him once. I believed in black and white ideals. I believed in my heart that a person could only be good or evil.”

She looked into his eyes, meeting his gaze with a tenderness she reserved for him alone. “I’m so glad to have been proven wrong, Severus. Because if I hadn’t, I would never have been here right now with you, my best friend, who I cannot imagine my life without.”

She stared back into his dark black eyes, a tear running down her cheek. “Please,” she entreated. “Let it go.”

Severus let his head press against hers and closed his eyes, his body relaxed against hers. He pulled her against himself, breathing deeply. “I was wrong too,” he whispered, holding her tight against himself.

Hermione moved back slightly and pulled his face closer with her hands and gently pressed her lips to his in soft and chaste kiss. She pulled away reluctantly, a genuine smile on her face.
Severus stared at her, his dark eyes full of questions.

She tugged on his sleeve as she guided him back into Hogwarts. “Will you read to me again?”

Severus’ expression was warm as his lips curved into a small smile. “Always.”

Chapter 44: Broken

She was asleep again, having drifted off as he read to her. There was a part of him, not so long ago, that would have never believed he would have a friend, let alone someone who would fall asleep against him as she listened to him read. Then again, that same part of him would never have volunteered to read anything to the insufferable know-it-all Granger that accompanied his memories of that time. He would have been equally furious if she had fallen asleep after he did it. They had both changed and had somehow, miraculously, not killed each other the first year of her apprenticeship. What was happening now seemed utterly surreal in comparison.

Prince cheeped from his nest next to the bed, hungry as usual. He leaned over carefully, plucked a piece of plum out of the bowl they had prepared in advance, and stuffed his open beak with it. Prince made a glugging sound as he sucked in the fruit and settled back into the makeshift nest.

Prince.

What an ironic name. It didn’t make him flinch anymore. She had given it to the little fluff ball, and he would not deny her it.

She stirred in her sleep, and he placed his hand to her head, gently stroking her hair. She settled against him again, peaceful.

There was a bond between them. He suspected it had started from the very first time she had allowed him into her mind to teach her. Each mental touch after that, from the building of the corridors together, to teaching her how to fly without a broom, all of it added a new silken mental cord between them. And now, as his fingers gently ran across her scalp, he felt the tremors of the bond strengthen and resonate. If he had any intention or desire to halt it before it became permanent, he would have to break it now. He would have to burn it away, and it would probably, very possibly break them both.

As his hand rested on the back of her neck, feeling the thrum of their combined energy joining together, he knew he would do anything to keep it. He would fight tooth and nail to keep her able to do just what she was already doing. Sleeping peacefully. Being his friend. Being so much more than some random fancy. He could not imagine patrolling the halls of Hogwarts without seeing her in the hallway as she finished her own rounds. He could not imagine sitting at his desk grading papers without her staring at him. He could not imagine the seat by him at the High Table being filled by another other person than her.

He would leave Brody alone because she alone asked him to.

He leaned down and gently placed a kiss upon her forehead. He placed his arm around her, pulling her against himself, and closed his eyes, allowing the blackness of sleep to take him at last.

A squirming warmth was wiggling under her neck and peeping.

Peeping?

Hermione opened her eyes to see tiny black eyes staring at her. “Eugh, good morning, my adorable lint ball prince,” she grunted. Her hand reached out to the bed stand and plucked out a peach slice and stuffed it into the gaping orange highlighted beak of devouring. She massaged the little bird under the chin and on the top of the head, watching his eyes close with pleasure at her touch. You have me wrapped around your little talons already, don’t you, Prince?” she whispered to the little bird. The phoenix chirruped sweetly, and she pinched his beak closed. “Shhh. You’ll wake Severus.”

She sat up and threw her legs down the side of the bed half tangled in her robe and part of Severus’. “One of these days I will actually get to hear the ending of that book. Oh who am I fooling?” She cupped the fluffy chick in her hands and smiled. He gaped at her, letting it be known that the stomach was definitely empty. He was obviously starving to death due to neglect!

“Ffft,” she hissed at the little bird, stuffing a gooseberry into his beak. “Hush.” He worked on getting the spherical berry into his gullet.

She turned to look where Severus had fallen asleep. His robes were strewn across the bed like a Victorian painting. His face was calm in sleep, with none of the hard edges that she had once thought were permanently etched into the foundation of his face. She brushed a strand of his black hair from his face with a smile.

Realizing that a shower and a change of clothes was probably in order, lest her students pass out as she walked by them, she carried Prince with her as she exited Severus’ chambers.

The hot shower took away some of the residual negativity she had raised up during the previous night’s argument with Professor Brody. While a part of her could almost condone some sort of retribution against the man, the other part of her pitied him.

Prince chirruped sweetly from on top of the showerhead, seemingly enjoying the steam bath. He stuck his beak into the running water occasionally, causing random droplets to spray in equally random directions.

She finished rinsing out her hair and stepped out of the shower with a yawn, pulling over a towel to dry herself off. She fetched Prince off the showerhead and walked back into her chambers.

A perch and bowl was already sitting in the middle of her room, and she quietly thanked Minerva for being one step ahead of her at all times. Placing the chick down on the perch, she changed into one of her robes and brushed her hair into a slightly more tame incarnation.

“Well, today is exam review day, take two,” she told the little bird. “Are you ready for fun cauldron explosions?”

Prince chirped a reply.

Transferring him to her shoulder, she walked out with Prince peeping random commentary from the waves of her hair.
“Mr. Nelson,” Severus called from in front of the class. “Can you tell me when the best time to collect acromantula venom is?”

Silence was the only reply to his question, save the shuffling of feet of the students as they looked down towards the desk.

“No?” Snape droned. “Perhaps you find the inside lining of your book where you are hiding your notes to Miss Alford more worth your study time. 5 points from Hufflepuff.”

“Perhaps something more benign is simmering in your minds before our next exam,” Severus said flatly. “Miss Alford, can you tell the rest of the class what ingredient used in potion brewing that is also found in Bertie Bott’s Ever Flavour Beans?”

Silence and the sound of turning pages was the only answer to his question.

“I am disappointed, Ms. Alford,” Severus scowled down the row of desks. “5 points from Gryffindor.”

“Perhaps, I am underestimating you all,” Snape said in a steely voice. “Can anyone in class tell me what type of skin is found in potions such as polyjuice? I realize this is a sixth year question, but by all means, prove yourselves better than my current opinion of you.”

“No?” Severus rumbled from in front of the class. “How disappointing.” Severus paced up in the front of his class. “Perhaps you think all of these questions are impossible to answer? That only I could possibly inflict such questions upon you and expect the answers answered correctly? Hrm?” His voice had become almost a whisper.

“Professor Granger,” Severus said loudly. “Can you tell me when the best time to collect acromantula venom is?”

“When you find a freshly dead one,” she answered from the back of the classroom where she was sorting through the used potion ingredients.

“And what is used in potion brewing that is also found in Bertie Bott’s Ever Flavour Beans?” Severus asked over the class.

“Cinnamon,” Hermione said, lifting a jar up to check its contents.

“And what type of skin is found in the polyjuice potion?” Severus asked evenly.

“Boomslang skin shed from the Boomslang snake. Male or female makes no difference,” Hermione smirked as she lifted a test tube and flicked it with her fingers.

“Now see,” Snape droned lowly. “It’s not just me who knows the answers to these questions.”

Mumbles rose in the class muttering that it wasn’t fair to compare them to another professor until Snape’s dark gaze silenced the classroom.

“Seeing as you all have managed to forget just about everything I have lectured on in the past two weeks, I require three feet detailing the use of agrimony in potions starting from the ancient Greeks until now,” Severus concluded. “It will be due next class, right before your exams.

The bell rang and fearful eyes stared back at him from each desk.
“You are dismissed,” Severus growled, watching the students scramble out of his classroom in due haste. He sighed, shaking his head and sat into his desk chair with an aggravated growl.

Hermione had come up behind him, gently rubbing his neck as he looked up at her from his chair. She leaned down over him and smiled gently. “It will be Winter Break soon, Severus. I promise.”

He harrumphed, but his eyes met hers. “Oh wonderful, then I get to stare at obnoxiously decorated trees and be surrounded in mirth.”

Hermione grinned down at him. “I love Christmas!” She stood up and laughed. “I also adore lunch!”

Severus stood from his desk pulling his robe around himself. “We can’t have Minerva thinking I starve you every day of the year.”

“Just a few?” Hermione said with a wink.

“Insufferable witch,” he grumbled with a quirk of his lip. He led the way out of the classroom, shutting it behind them.

“I brought ya the old bottles, ‘ermione,” Hagrid said as he watched Prince attempt to pluck the grapes off of Pomona’s hat. “I put ‘em in a crate down by the classroom.”

“Thank you, Hagrid!” Hermione nodded in approval as she used her hand to shoo the mischievous chick off of Professor Sprout. “I’ll have to go move them before the next wave of students come in for class.”

“Speaking of the next class,” Hermione groaned, wilting at little at her seat. “I should set up the lab for the next wave of frantic exam crammers.”

Severus reached over and nudged Prince out of the pudding, transferring the curious chick to his shoulder before he decided to inspect the salad dressing with his face. Prince chirruped sweetly, snuggling into his neck. Severus sighed, rolling his eyes towards Hermione.

Hermione gave him a warm smile, reaching out her finger to scratch the chick under the chin and allowing Severus his look of disgusted tolerance in front of onlookers. She stood to leave, and Severus stood shortly after, ready to follow her out.

“Severus,” Minerva called to him as she stood up. “Could you spare a moment to come confirm the reagent orders before we owl them off?”

Hermione grinned as Severus gave McGonagall the most bored look in his repertoire. “As you wish, Minerva,” Severus droned. He nodded to Hermione, who inclined her head and spun, leaving the Great Hall with a swish of her robes.

“Earghf” Hermione panted as she dragged the giant crate into the laboratory. “Hagrid must have filled these bottles with cement.”

She glared at the crate with a scowl and took out her wand, moving it to the table with a flick of her
wrist. “That’s better,” she chuckled, closing the door of the laboratory classroom with her wand. Rustling through the used bottles, she set them out and started to organize them by color and size to ready them for cleaning and reuse. Salve tins, blue bottles, green flasks, brown glass containers, and miscellaneous vials shifted places as she sorted through them. Some of them looked like they had been lost under one of Hagrid’s pieces of furniture for the last few years. Most of the containers had lost their labels, which didn’t surprise her in the slightest. Hagrid was many things, but being a highly obsessive compulsive organizer was not one of his trademark traits.

A cloudy jar rolled around with the remaining jars, and she picked up. It was dirty enough to obscure the contents from her. “I think Fang was using this as a chew toy, ew,” she wrinkled her nose as she held the jar in her fingers. “Even dried spit is disgusting.”

She opened the jar away from her face, expecting there to be mold or something equally awful inside. The jar quaked in her hand and slammed into the ground, sending a puff of black smoke into the air. Hermione coughed, using her robe to cover her nose and mouth as the foul odor made her gag slightly. “That was bloody horrible. What the hell did Hagrid store in that jar?” she gagged into her sleeve.

She picked up the offending jar and put it back with the others as she went to go wash her hands. Dizziness washed over her, and she shook her head. What the… She braced herself on the table a moment and stood, attempting to bring herself back into equilibrium. She walked towards Severus’ teaching desk and his more comfortable chair.

Hermione staggered. Her vision was dividing into multiple layers as twisting pain hit her in the lungs, making every breath painful. She tried to brace herself on the student desks, but they moved instead of holding her up, causing her to stagger.

“Severus!” she tried to call out his name, but her lungs were too busy trying to breathe to allow the waste of speech.

“SEVERUS!” Her mind screamed across the familiar channels formed during their learning sessions. Her body crumpled to the ground, and she sagged to the floor with a thump, her eyes staring towards the exit door as they glazed over.

Chapter 45: Descent

McGonagall checked off the list of orders as Severus confirmed them. He read them back to her in a tone of absolute boredom. Prince perched himself on the custom perch that had appeared as if it had always been there. He chirruped and peeped commentary with more enthusiasm than Severus showed the Headmistress’s lists.

Minerva smiled to herself as she noticed that Severus’ expression was calm, despite his bored demeanor. His dark eyes, while still the fathomless black they had always been, had a softer gaze about them as he spoke. He was tolerating her better than his usual snarky attitude. He had even placed Prince into her hands to help accustom the little chick to her presence like Hermione had done earlier.

As Snape leaned over the desk to point at an ingredient that was missing, two things happened at once. Prince let out a keening noise and Severus doubled over onto Minerva’s desk, his face drained of any remaining color on his normally pale face. “Hermione,” he whispered raggedly. He fled the Headmistress’s office with a flurry of his robes, staggering as he went against the doorway and the
“Severus!” Minerva yelled after him, snatching up the screaming little phoenix chick as he attempted to leave the perch. She hurried after him, attempting to catch up to him, but failing. The dark wizard ran down the corridors like a man possessed. Students staggered out of his way, whispering to each other of his uncharacteristic run through Hogwarts’s hallways.

He disappeared down the spiraling stairwell that went into the dungeons, and McGonagall stopped a moment to catch her breath. It wasn’t long after when she heard an inhuman wail of despair that tore into her heart and broke it by proxy.

As Severus slammed into the door to the classroom, he skidded into the room with a groan. Hermione lay sprawled on the floor before him, her eyes staring blankly at him. Her arms were flailed in front of her, as if she had attempted to break her fall but ultimately failed. In the first moments as his brain attempted to parse the visual he was given, he saw Lily sprawled in front of Harry Potter’s crib. He staggered, tipping over the classroom desks as he crawled to her. The sob in his throat transformed into a howl of pure despair as he clutched Hermione to his body, wrapping his arms around her and rocking her against him. His ashen face twisted in anguish as his hand pressed against her cheek. He pressed his forehead to hers. “Hermione,” he whispered as his voice broke.

Minerva skidded into the classroom with cry of her own, stumbling over the fallen tables and student desks. “Hermione!” She released her death grip on the little phoenix and touched Hermione’s face and neck. Her pulse was weak, but present. She waved her wand and dropped the anti-apparate jinx for them. “Severus! Snap out of it. Take her to Poppy! Severus!”

Severus’ black eyes stared at her uncomprehending. The little phoenix squawked and clung to Hermione’s hair desperately. “Severus, you can apparate. Take her to Poppy!”

The dark wizard’s eyes seemed to regain some clarity, and he pulled Hermione into a tighter embrace and disapparated with a crack.

Minerva slammed a stasis spell down over the laboratory classroom, slamming ward after protective ward over the room. She sealed the door, her lips pursed into a flat line of anger. She clutched her wand and disapparated with a crack.

Severus stood motionless behind Poppy Pomfrey and her team of medi-witches waved their wands over Hermione’s still body. They funneled potions down her throat, and worked over her tirelessly. Snape stared at the still form of his apprentice and his truest friend, unwilling to move lest something happen while he failed to watch.

Minerva arrived behind him with a crack, waving her wand to close Hogwarts’s to apparition. She stood next to Severus as the medical witches did what they did best.

The nurses had stripped Hermione of her robes, dressing her in the hospital dressing gown. They threw them aside in their haste to work on her, casting them at McGonagall’s feet. Prince clung to
Severus’s shoulder, peeping his distress. They stood as still as gargoyles, unable or unwilling to move.

When Poppy turned to face them, the rest of the medical staff silently disappeared back into the hospital wing. “It’s all we could do. She’s stable, but she’s not conscious. She may remain this way until we can counter whatever caused this directly.”

Snape turned his head to look at Poppy. His black eyes seemed to look beyond her rather than at her. “Poison or Dark Arts?”

“We have no way of knowing, Professor,” Poppy admitted. “We have no way to determine what she may have been exposed to. A hex or a curse or multiple poisons in combination. Who knows what sort of combination factor could have created this reaction. It’s a miracle we managed to get her stable.”

Minerva picked up Hermione’s robes from the floor, and held them close to herself before laying them on the nearby table. “I will contact the Aurors.” She saw Severus had already turned to gaze upon Hermione. “Poppy it’s important that no one but Severus and I stay with her without supervision. It is essential.”

Poppy nodded to the Headmistress. “I will see to it.”

“Severus…” Minerva began.

“I will watch her first,” he said coldly, his face taciturn and emotionless.

McGonagall nodded grimly and exited the hospital wing.

When Poppy pulled the privacy curtains around Hermione’s bed and walked back to the front of the hospital wing, Severus transferred Prince to the junction of her neck and shoulder. The little bird snuggled into her familiar hair, peeping softly.

He picked up the crumpled robes Minerva had left on the nearby beside table. He retrieved her wand from the inner pocket and slid it into his own robe. Carefully folding her robes, he tucked them into the drawer. Severus sat by the side of her bed and placed his hand over hers, feeling the weak thrum of her energy combine with his in the bittersweet ache of familiarity.

I would never have been here right now with you, my best friend, who I cannot imagine my life without, his memory of Hermione’s words the night before caused a crack in his emotionless façade. He wove his pale fingers with hers. Snape sagged noticeably, placing his head against her hand.

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Chapter 46: Flowers

Minerva was a tempest of fury as she stormed back into her office. She moved as though her feet never needed to touch the ground. She snatched a parchment, scribbling onto it with both haste and anger. She sealed it with her mark and gave it to the owl waiting on the window ledge with a piece of food. The owl hooted and went aloft, soaring towards its destination.

She paced for a while before collapsing in one of her chairs, slumping to put her face in her hands. “Albus,” she whispered. “I really need you right now.”
Poppy opened the curtain to check on Hermione. Severus was sitting in the nearby chair, his hands steepled against his face as he stared through her. His black-eyed stare was cold and piercing. There was nothing calm in his regard. His face was hardened with the same guarded and impenetrable expression that he had worn for decades.

Poppy cast her eyes down and waved her wand over Hermione, checking for changes. She could feel his gaze like daggers in her back. If there had been any truth at all to his being more at ease since taking an apprentice, she could not see it now. This was Severus Snape from before the war – dark and incomprehensible.

Poppy pulled the blanket up for Hermione and left, closing the curtain behind her.

Severus stared at the curtain where Poppy had left. He closed his eyes slowly and turned to Hermione. His pale fingers touched her forehead as the tingle of their tenacious bond rippled through him. His hand warmed as he touched her skin, responding to the feel of their contact. His expression softened as he stared at her face, calm as if she were only sleeping.

Prince was cuddled into her hair and seemed to have no desire to budge. He pulled a small handful of berries out of his robe pocket and held them out to the little bird. He grasped the offering in his beak and swallowed them, but this enthusiasm with eating seemed to have faded with Severus’ mood. Snape brushed Hermione’s hair over the little chick, allowing him the closeness he himself was denied. Prince gave a soft peep and closed his eyes.

Minerva was coming to relieve him. He could hear her distinct footsteps approaching. He straightened and turned to face the curtain as it opened. The Headmistress’s face was fraught with worry and she nodded to him as she took up place by Hermione.

Severus said nothing as he walked out of the hospital wing; his black robe hung upon him like a shroud.

If the students in Potions class thought their teacher was strict with them before, they found themselves re-evaluating the definition. The classes had been moved to one of the outer labs while the main one had been sealed off to await the arrival of the aurors. Whispers and rumors spread amongst the student body that somehow Professor Snape had managed to become even more intolerant of his students.

The students of Minerva’s transfiguration class found themselves being taught by a substitute that was not Professor Granger, sending even more rumors through Hogwart’s as to the situation that had befallen the young Professor.

Tales of Professor Snape and Headmistress McGonagall sprinting down the hallways of Hogwart’s were spreading throughout the classes they didn’t even teach. A nervous tension spread across the student body as whispers that the Aurors were going to arrive at Hogwart’s. It seemed at times that
the entire body of Hogwart’s was holding its breath, waiting for the second foot to fall.

Severus found his way blocked by a young boy from the Slytherin House. He scowled down at the boy, attempting to recognize him. “Mr. Mitchell?” he questioned flatly.

The boy smiled at him shyly and raised up a bunch of wildflowers that had undoubtedly come from the fields around Hogwart’s. Inserted between the flowers were pinwheels and magically crafted constructs made to look like flowers, while green and silver Slytherin colored ribbons wove themselves around the stems. “We heard Professor Granger is sick, Sir,” he said to the towering dark wizard. “Could you… give these to her? We want her to feel better soon.”

Severus gazed at the boy with his dark eyes. “We?”

“Slytherin House, Sir,” Mitchell smiled. “We gathered them for her.”

Severus looked down at the flowers and slowly reached down to grasp the bundle in his hands. “I will tell her,” Severus said softly. “Thank you, Mr. Mitchell.”

The boy beamed and rushed off down the hall to his next class.

Severus stared at the Slytherin-themed bouquet. When had Slytherin House ever shown such compassion for a known member of Gryffindor? He closed his eyes. Perhaps it had happened at the same time as when he had begun to soften to the selfless friendship of one of Gryffindor’s most argent representatives. “Ten points to Slytherin House,” Severus said softly to the departing boy. “For unprecedented solidarity with a rival House.”

He continued down the hallway, his dark robes whipping out behind him.

Chapter 47: Aurors

“I’m Aiden Gauge, Headmistress McGonagall,” the tall mall introduced himself. He took off his cap to reveal a head of dusky brown hair. “I’ve been assigned to your case, Madam.” He bowed slightly to the Headmistress. “I believe you already know these two. They insisted on coming with me on this one.”

McGonagall smirked and nodded. “Hello, Mr. Potter,” she greeted. “Mr. Weasley.”

“Where would you like to begin, Mr. Gauge?” Minerva asked.

“Aiden, please,” the Auror insisted. “I’d like to start with your professor that was attacked first then where you found her.”

McGonagall nodded. “This way, then,” she led the way out the door.

As they walked down the corridors of Hogwart’s, Harry noticed something. “Wasn’t this wing destroyed during the battle?” he recalled.

“Hermione and Severus rebuilt it this last summer, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall answered him as she escorted them towards the hospital wing.
“All of it?” Ron looked up into the ribbed vaults above.

“All of it, Mr. Weasley,” Minerva smiled despite the situation at hand.

“How did you find her, Headmistress McGonagall?” Aiden questioned.

“Minerva, please, Aiden,” she corrected. “Severus found her sprawled on the laboratory classroom floor yesterday morning. We had just seen her at lunch. She was heading down to the classroom to prepare it for the next class.

“Does she normally do this alone?” Aiden asked.

“No, Severus and Hermione were leaving together to take care of it,” Minerva explained. “He would have been with her had I not unexpectedly called him to my office to go over some orders.”

“So,” Aiden deducted, “There is a good chance that, had he been there as well, we would have two victims in this?”

Minerva looked frowned. “Yes, and in the commotion, I never even thought that Severus could have been mixed up with it as well. They are both very adept with magic, Aiden. I cannot believe that she or Severus could engage in a battle without someone in the halls noticing something.”

“How did you even know to check on her?” Aiden asked.

“We were in my office, Severus and I,” Minerva recollected. “We were going over some orders. His face went white as snow as their familiar started to make this awful noise.”

The Auror nodded to her as Harry and Ron looked back and forth at each other.

Minerva opened the doors to the hospital wing. Poppy came up almost immediately to greet them. Seeing the Headmistress, she nodded, gesturing to the far corridor of the wing.

Severus watched them all as Minerva pulled back the privacy curtain. His dark eyes flicked from Minerva, Harry, Ron, and the Auror he didn’t recognize. His eyes narrowed as he stood silently, placing a small bowl of fruit down on the bed side table. “Potter,” he said flatly. “Weasley.”

“This is Aiden Gauge from the Auror Office, Severus,” Minerva introduced. “Aiden, this is Professor Snape. He’s the one who found her.”

“Pleased to meet you, Sir” Aiden greeted. “If we may some time alone to run our scans?”

Severus’ dark eyes bore into the Auror, but he nodded silently, exiting the curtain with Minerva.

“Whatever has its claws in her is not specifically dark arts,” Aiden said as he passed his wand over Hermione. “I can sense nothing on her now that points to it.”

“Could time effect the trace?” Harry asked, watching his mentor carefully.

“Not for what we are looking for,” Aiden replied. “Look here, how there is not even a flutter of change in the trace. If she had some sort of battle with someone, there would definitely be residue. There is nothing.”
“Nothing doesn’t do this, Sir,” Ron replied as he stared down at Hermione. He stared at her face intently. “It seems like one of us always ends up here.”

“You have a history of being in the hospital ward?” Aiden questioned as he stared at the trace he was emitting from his wand.

“We both do,” Harry said. “We practically had name plates on our beds permanently engraved on a team basis.”

“Speaking of history,” Aiden said conversationally. “Is he always like that on first meeting?”

Harry smirked as Ron shivered in automatic response in response to his old Potions professor. “That was pretty… normal.”

“Classes must have been interesting,” Aiden said, passing his wand over Hermione’s chest and neck.

“I think the only one that really succeeded in his class consistently was Hermione. I only beat her in grades once because I had help,” Harry admitted.

“Sounds like she would make a good Auror from what you told me,” Aiden smiled, moving his wand up and down Hermione’s body. “I think you told me she came back and took all her N.E.W.T.s yes? What did she get?”

Ron slumped his shoulders a little, “O’s in everything. Literally everything.”

Aiden’s eyebrows raised. “Impressive.”

“She wouldn’t just keel over without a fight,” Harry insisted. “There has to be something in the scan.”

“I’m getting nothing, Harry,” Aiden admitted. “If there is Dark Arts at work here, it wasn’t directly involved in her collapse. We may find the real reason in the classroom Minerva said she sealed off for us.”

Harry nodded grimly, taking Hermione’s hand in his and clasping it gently. “We have to find what or who did this to her, Sir.”

“We will, Harry,” Aiden agreed.

Ron moved to pull the blanket back up to Hermione’s shoulders, and a black beak shot out of Hermione’s hair and pecked his hand furiously. “What… OW!” he cried, pulling his hand back and rubbing it. Angry peeping emitted from Hermione’s hair.

Harry and Aiden both leaned in at the same time to examine her hair more closely, knocking their heads together in an almost comical fashion if the situation had not been so serious.

Aiden moved over a few locks of Hermione’s hair with his wand, and the black beak pecked his wand and fingertips. He fumbled with his wand in surprise. “What is hiding in there?”

Harry took out his wand and moved Hermione’s hair with a spell, exposing the small angry black eyes of Prince.

“Whoa, what is that?” Ron asked, trying to get in for a closer look.

“That must be her familiar that Minerva mentioned,” Aiden said with a laugh. “I’m surprised the little guy didn’t peck at me earlier when I was doing the trace.” He motioned with his wand, moving
Hermione’s hair back over the disgruntled phoenix.

“I didn’t know Hermione even had a new familiar,” Ron said. “Not since Crookshanks anyway.”

“Ron, I need you to come with me to question some of the medical staff on what they did when she came in,” Aiden directed. “Harry, you wouldn’t mind staying here with your friend until we go down to the classroom?”

Harry nodded gratefully. “I’ll stay here.”

Aiden shooed Ron out the curtain with him, and Harry sat in one of the chairs nearby. He heard Aiden talking to Headmistress McGonagall for a few minutes before their voices became indistinct. The curtain rustled a few minutes later, and Severus stepped back in past the curtain.

Snape gave Harry a slightly longer look. For a moment, Harry saw something flash across his countenance that was more than the ubiquitously morose expression he typically wore. “Mr. Potter,” he said flatly. He picked up the bowl of fruit pieces on the table and squished a gooseberry with his pale fingers. He placed the bowl on top of Hermione’s chest as he brushed back her hair from her neck.

A gaping orange inner mouth wobbled back and forth, and Severus deposited the crushed berry into the hungry chick’s mouth. He waited for the entire berry to disappear before he plucked a piece of bell pepper out of the bowl and offered it to the hungry chick. When that, too, disappeared, the chick settled back into his nest in Hermione’s hair. Severus combed Hermione’s hair back over the sleepy chick and replaced the bowl of food on the table.

“Sir,” Harry broke the silence, “Is that a Phoenix?”

Severus turned to look at him. “Yes.”

Harry clearly wanted to say more, but he seemed torn about making conversation with the man who had rarely said more than he had to his entire life.

“Do you,” Severus asked in a soft tone, “wish to see him?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, Sir. Please.”

Severus’ dark eyes bored into him a moment. It was always Lily’s eyes that looked back at him, even though his face remained a painful reminder of James Potter. Silently, he brushed Hermione’s hair back and dislodged the sleepy chick from his nest. He had grown already, fitting more snugly in his palms. Miniature scarlet and orange feathers had tufted on his head and tail, making him look slightly less fuzzy and more like a proper phoenix. His head crest rose up inquisitively as Severus lifted him, and he peeped, curving his head around Snape’s nearby thumb.

“He’s beautiful,” Harry said. He reached his hand out to touch the chick, but stopped half way, remembering what the beak had done to Ron and Aiden’s hand earlier. “May I touch him?”

Severus closed his eyes, and Harry braced himself for a curt denial. Yet when his eyes opened, he nodded to Harry. “You may.”

Prince peeped, but didn’t try to take a chunk out of Harry’s hand as he gently stroked the chick’s head. “I’ve never seen a real baby phoenix, Sir,” Harry admitted. “I saw Fawkes after a molt, but he was usually sitting in a pile of ashes looking… less dignified.”

“I would imagine Prince will be much the same when he is old enough to molt,” Snape said dryly.
“Prince?” Harry couldn’t help but noticed the name.

“Hermione wanted that name,” Severus said in a tone that was softer. “He had a crown of down tufts on his head when he hatched. She insisted it made him look the part.”

Snape placed his cupped hands in front of Harry, and Harry looked up at him with wide eyes. “It is a phoenix, Mr. Potter, not a death adder, do you wish to hold him or not?”

Harry nodded up to him, eyes wide. He cupped his hands together under Snape’s. Severus gently placed the chick in Harry’s hands. Prince peeped a little in protest, but settled when one of Snape’s fingers soothed the feathers on the back of his head.

Harry stared at the little phoenix. He didn’t want to move, lest the little bird take offense somehow. Prince opened his mouth hungrily, complaining that his stomach was most definitely empty again.

“There is fruit in the bowl there, Mr. Potter,” Severus commented. “If you wish to keep your fingers.

Harry seemed to struggle with the logistics of holding the bird and reaching for the bowl and decided to compromise by cradling the bird in his lap and reaching for the bowl with his free arm. He extended a grape to the gaping maw and watched it disappear with an enthusiastic gulp. “I just saw you feed him. His stomach must be bottomless.”

“You are correct,” Snape agreed. He pulled a brush out from the bed side table and slowly began to brush Hermione’s hair back into order from its unaccustomed duty as a nest. He pulled a cloth from the nearby washbasin and poured water into it. His hand hovered over the basin until steam rose from the water. Dipping in the cloth, he swished it around and then wrung it. Seemingly ignoring Harry, Snape gently drew the cloth over her face and neck. He dipped the cloth back into the basin and repeated the procedure, silently washing Hermione’s exposed arms and hands.

Harry was torn between feeding the amazing creature in his lap and watching Severus tend to Hermione. He was tending her without being asked and without a word of remonstration. Thankfully, the hungry chick finally settled the conflict by refusing more food. His stomach was full for the moment.

Severus completed his task and vanished the water from the basin, laying the cleaning cloth over the edge of the basin to dry. He tucked Hermione’s arms back under the blankets, and pulled the covers up to her shoulders. He turned towards Harry and extended his hands.

Harry just stared senselessly for a moment until realization dawned. He cupped the chick off his lap and placed him back into Severus’ palms.

Prince peeped again at being moved, but settled back against Hermione’s neck with a quiet warble of sound. Severus tucked Hermione’s hair back around Prince and left him to his vigil.

Harry placed the now empty bowl back on the table. His eyes saw the bouquet sitting next to the bed for the first time. His hand touched one of the magic pinwheels, and saw a puff of green and silver sparks spin off it, forming a small glowing snake that weaved itself around the flowers before disappearing.

“The students of Slytherin House sent their well wishes,” Severus answered his unspoken question.

“Slytherin House?” Harry said with amazement. “I…wow.”

“Apparently Gryffindor did not get the memo,” Severus responded dryly.
Harry looked up at Snape at the unexpected humor. It was delivered in his normal, soft, and uncompromising voice, yet he had most obviously made a side comment in humor. He knew there was so much more to the man than any of them had suspected during their schooling at Hogwart’s, but seeing proof of it was mildly if not very shocking to his schema for Severus Snape.

“Harry, it’s time to go down to the classroom,” Aiden’s voice broke the silence.


“For what, Mr. Potter?” Severus’ dark eyes met his, taking up all light and giving none.

“Allowing me to meet Prince,” Harry explained and paused. “And… taking care of Hermione,” he finished.

Severus narrowed his eyes a moment. “You are welcome for the first,” he said evenly. “The second requires no thanks.”

Severus’ expression was blank, and Harry nodded in acceptance, turning and walking out of the curtained area.

Severus placed his hand over the blanket where Hermione’s hand lay underneath and closed his eyes.

Chapter 48: Classroom Crime

“I don’t think I’ve seen this classroom in such disarray… ever,” Ron said as the Headmistress left them to the empty classroom. His eyes went to the shelves where many of the class reagents were stored. Hermione’s elegant script adorned many of the bottles mixed within labels of the Potion Master’s own equally sophisticated quillwork.

The neatness of the potions ingredients that lined the back wall made the scattered desks and clutter all the more proof that something horrible had happened within the confines of the potions classroom. Ron walked up to where Harry and Aiden were casting a trace.

“Don’t force the trace, Harry,” Aiden admonished. “You have to let it seek out what it was meant to without your guidance. See?”

Ron pulled out his wand and recalled the layers of the tracing spell in their proper order. Recalling them did not come as easily as it did to Harry, but what he lacked in speed, he gained in determination. The tracing spell emerged from the tip of his wand, spreading in a slow weaving pattern. There was a sharp flash of intense blue light that broke his concentration completely.

“Ron, what did you find,” Aiden came over to him in a hurry.

“I’m not sure, Sir,” Ron admitted. “I was concentrating on getting the trace right, so much so that I wasn’t ready for the result.”

Aiden nodded. “It takes time to be ready for both things at the same time. Here, let me do one.”

Aiden waved his wand and muttered the incantation, sending out a swirl of the trace spell. A bright blue light flashed from the far table, sending an echo shimmer down to the floor. The Auror stepped closer, waving his wand over the table until he pinpointed one container out of sea of bottles and flasks. He followed the trace down to the floor, where the trace made a splat formation on the stone,
like a remnant of a dropped liquid.

Aiden muttered another incantation, and the energy from his wand turned red, swirling around the area as if driven by wind. He pulled a vial out of his chest pocket, flipping open the cap. He directed the red vapor into the vial with his wand and snapped it shut with his thumb. Placing the vial into his coat pocket, he pulled out another but held it in his hand.

With a flick of his wand he isolated the jar he had traced, levitating it in the air with a bubble of stasis around it. He stared at it, turning it around and peering into the bottom. He formed a stable stasis bubble around the jar and grasped it with his fingers. “There is something sinister in this jar, but it is not dark magic. This jar, however, is a very carefully crafted construct of Dark Arts.” Aiden pointed to the floor where the residue of the trace spell still made the splat pattern visible. “Dark Magic was the vehicle that exposed Professor Granger to whatever was in this jar.”

“We will have to analyze what is in this jar,” Aiden concluded. Tapping his wand to his head, he pulled out a strand of his memories and guided it into the vial, snapping it shut the moment it filled the smaller container. He gave two empty vials to Ron and Harry.

Ron and Harry pulled their memories of both their earlier conversations about the timeline and the visuals of the laboratory, sealing them inside the vials.

“I would normally give this to Daniel to analyze,” Aiden admitted. “This is beyond my skill in potions to decipher, and I am no fool with potions.”

“Begging your pardon, Sir,” Harry interjected. “I believe the best person to analyze that… is right here in Hogwart’s.”

Severus looked up from the book he was reading as the door to the hospital wing swung open. Prince cheeped quizzically, and he placed his hand over the chick, tucking Hermione’s hair over him. “Be still,” he thought towards the little bird. Prince settled almost immediately, sensing Severus’ change in demeanor.

His wand was already in his hand before he stood. He slowly placed the book next to Hermione as he straightened to his full height. His fingers remained tight against his wand. Unfamiliar footsteps were approaching, and Severus silently cast a ward around Hermione’s bed.

The curtain rustled and Severus pointed his wand directly at the opening.

Minerva stepped into the curtain and saw him. Her face went wide-eyed at Severus’ presence there and the wand he had pointed directly at her. She looked towards Hermione’s bed quickly, but backed out from the curtain and hurried out of the hospital wing, as if she had not found who she was really looking for.

Severus sensed something amiss. He knew Minerva’s tread all too well. Why had she not simply asked for who she was looking for? He narrowed his eyes; a darkness pooled within them. He took a few steps forward as if to pursuit and then stopped. He would not leave Hermione unguarded.

Growling lowly, Severus put away his wand. He moved Hermione’s hair back to expose the phoenix chick who had burrowed deeper into her hair. Prince had hunkered down as low as possible, keeping his body still at his behest.
Snape stroked the bird’s head in reassurance, gaining a relieved cheap. The little bird perked up from the flat position, rubbing his beak against Severus’ fingers. He picked up the book beside him and sat down again, flipping to the page he had left off at. With Prince beginning to chirrup sweetly from Hermione’s hair, he read the words aloud.

**Chapter 49: Jars and Insidious Devices and the Half-Blood Prince**

The floating jar spun in the air in its private stasis bubble in front of the Hogwart’s Potion Master. His black eyes stared at the suspended jar as if to memorize its every curve and contour. They had cleared a space in the hospital wing for him to work since Snape refused to leave Hermione’s general vicinity without Minerva there to relieve him.

“This jar is a very nasty piece of work,” Severus said lowly. “Someone put a lot of hate into its creation but was also… careless.”

“What do you see, Professor Snape?” Aiden questioned as he watched the spinning jar.

“There is a remnant of a shield on the surface that would have concealed its contents from casual notice,” Severus explained. “There is a tripped trigger on the inside, designed to agitate the contents the moment the lid is removed. The trigger was not crafted as meticulously as the jar. It may have tripped later than expected.”

“Was it keyed specifically for her, Sir?” Harry asked.

Severus’s black eyes met Harry’s. “No.” Severus turned to gaze into the jar. “Either they were impatient, careless, or inexperienced in some stage of this type of work... or they were imbued with uncanny luck, this jar is as crude as it is complex. The payload, this… fine powder… was not designed to be launched airborne. It was too heavy to leave the jar in a large cloud, which is why some of it remains… here, under the trigger plate.”

“Can you tell what the payload was?” Aiden asked.

Severus’s eyes had become darker like tunnels leading into the pits of the Abyss. “Draught of Living Death.”

“What?” Ron squeaked.

Severus silenced Ron with a glare. “It was mixed with a few nasty muggle toxins. Which explains why the potions and spells the Medi-witches used made her stable, yet also why she cannot wake.”

“It was meant to kill her then,” Aiden concluded. “Not just put her into sleep like the Draught alone.”

Severus lifted his head and regarded Aiden. Aiden apparently knew his potions well enough to realize that the Draught of Living Death was not crafted specifically to kill. He lifted one eyebrow. “Yes, the toxins were mixed in to finish the job.”

Snape waved his wand, returning the trapped jar to Aiden’s hand.

“I’m afraid it’s been too long since I studied antidotes for that particularly nasty draught. I haven’t even had a case of its use since I became an Auror,” Aiden sighed. Ron and Harry looked back and forth at each other, shaking their heads.

“Well I know for sure we don’t have that one in our stores at the Auror Office. Daniel never mentioned it, and he talks about his potion stocks daily,” Aiden said, pacing.

“I will craft it,” Severus said in a voice that would not accept no for an answer. “We do not have stewed mandrake here at Hogwart’s however, as the mandrakes are not fully grown. We are also out of lionfish spines due to a student… mishap. It was one of the items we were ordering before… this happened.”

Aiden nodded and turned to Harry and Ron. “Harry, floo back to the Office and gather the ingredients and bring them back here. Tell Daniel I owe him tickets to next week’s game. Ron, go fetch the Headmistress and fill her in on what has happened. I’ll stay here and watch over Professor Granger so Professor Snape can gather the rest of the ingredients.”

Harry and Ron were rooted in place.

“Get a move on!” Aiden raised his voice. “Now!”

Harry and Ron scrambled out of the hospital ward and ran in different directions.

“They will be wonderful Aurors one day,” Aiden spoke softly. “But sometimes… I just want to…”

“Strangle them?” Severus offered.

Aiden met Severus’ dark eyes and smiled. “Exactly.”

Severus’ expression remained somber, but the corner of his lip curved upward just slightly. “I will fetch the ingredients. Do not allow anyone in to see her while I am away. Not even Minerva.”

“The Headmistress?” Aiden questioned.

“Her most of all. If there is something so pressing that she must tell me, she can wait for me to return,” Severus’ voice was dangerously low. “I cannot stress this enough.”

Aiden frowned, but nodded, silently wondering why Snape was worried about the Headmistress visiting Professor Granger.

Severus’ black eyes bored into Aiden before he turned on his heels and exited the Hospital wing, his black robe billowing behind him.

Aiden had his wand up and out as he heard rustling outside of the curtain. He stood at the edge, and slowly opened the curtain to look.

Severus was clearing the area on the countertop and setting out jars of reagents. He had set out a cauldron and various utensils had had rolled up in cloth holder.

“You can put that wand down, Mr. Gauge,” Severus said, his back still to him. “Unless you prefer to brew this potion alone and care to explain to Minerva why her Potion Master is hexed on the floor of the hospital wing.”

Aiden lowered his wand with a sigh. “Sorry, with your instructions before you left, I wasn’t even sure if I should trust you when you came back.”
Severus turned and appraised Aiden with his gaze. “Ask me what you wish.”

“I didn’t mean,” Aiden began.

“Of course you did, Mr. Gauge,” Severus said lowly. “You are an Auror.”

Aiden met Snape’s dark eyes and straightened his collar. “How did you know to find her?”

Snape raised his head and narrowed his eyes for a few heartbeats. “I heard her scream my name.”

“From the dungeons?” Aiden asked.

“No,” Severus corrected. “Here.” He gestured to his head with a pale finger.

Aiden made a face that clearly showed incomprehension. “You have a shared familiar?” he ended up asking.

“So it would seem,” Severus replied.

“I didn’t even know that was possible,” Aiden admitted.

“Nor,” Snape replied, “did we.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Harry returning with a bundle of ingredients.

“Put them over here, Mr. Potter,” Severus said.

Severus began to work, his mind blacked out all outside distractions one by one until there was only the dull roar of his own blood in his ears. Even that faded after a time as his focus homed in to the task at hand.

He stirred in the salamander blood until the potion turned a deep crimson and kept stirring until it turned a bright shade of cadmium orange. He added more of the blood until the potion shimmered into a deep yellow and then changed to green. He added more salamander blood until the potion turned a deep turquoise. He moved the potion cauldron to the fire and watched it intently.

The potion burbled for quite some time before it changed color again into a deep indigo. He removed it from the fire and added more salamander blood. The potion seemed to shudder inside the cauldron and turned a bright pink. He moved it back onto the fire and waited.

The potion changed from bright pink to red, and he added placed in the lionfish spines one by one and watched for the color to change. The potion changed again, shifting from red to yellow, and he placed more spines in. Setting the spines aside, he scooped up flobberworm mucus from a jar and placed it in the cauldron, spoonful by spoonful until the potions shifted color to a vibrant purple. He stirred the potion now and watched as it turned through many colors before settling on red. He added another scoop of the mucus until it turned orange and stirred until it changed back into a vibrant yellow. He shook the cauldron and added more mucus until the color went into a deep orange.

Setting aside the mucus, he grasped a vial of honey water and added it until the potion shuddered into orange. He placed the cauldron back on the fire until it turned a rather light pink. Finally, he added salamander blood, and the potion shuddered as if it were going to blow up, but turned a
vibrant emerald green.

He moved the cauldron off the fire and stared into it as it cooled. He found himself expecting the empty vials to be waiting for him as they always had been since Hermione had started working with him. The thought sobered him out of the trance he had put himself in. "Flasks, please."

Aiden grasped the empty potion flasks from the hospital shelves and did a cleansing charm on them in case there was something left in them. He placed them in front of the Potion Master. Severus ladled measures of the potion into each flask and stoppered them.

He accio’ed parchment over to himself and grabbed a quill from the nearby desk. Refusing to leave any potion he made to sit around without a label, he scrawled “Wiggenweld” on the parchment multiple time. With a wave of his hand the labels flew off the desk and wrapped around the potion vials like spring blossoms in the wind.

He took one of the flasks and turned to his unintended audience who simply gaped at him. In all the years they had known him, Ron and Harry had never seen Severus work in his element. He had always been the instructor.

Aiden looked at him with an awed expression. He had seen Daniel work before, but never by memory. Daniel had always had 3 books out at once, checking and double checking his instructions to make sure nothing was ever amiss. Severus had pulled it all from memory in exacting detail.

“Now we just need a wizard prince,” Aiden whispered.

“Wha?” Ron and Harry said at the same time.

“Don’t you remember the story of the Wiggenweld potion?” Aiden asked his trainees.

Seeing their dumbstruck expressions answered him.

“Honestly, Potter,” Severus said in the all too familiar scornful tone. “Did you learn anything from my classes that you didn’t flush out of your brain the moment you left my classroom?”

Severus curled his lips in disdain and walked over to Hermione’s bedside. Ron and Harry looked at Aiden for explanation. Their supervisor closed his eyes and shook his head, gesturing at them to go find out themselves.

The Aurors stood at Hermione’s bedside. Severus sat on her bed, pulling her into his lap. He transferred the roosting phoenix chick to the headboard of the bed. He adjusted her in his arms, tilting her head back over his arm. He pushed the stopper out of the flask with his thumb and sniffed it, then put it to his lips.

Harry and Ron made a move to protest that the potion was for Hermione and not Snape, but Aiden put his arm out in front of them and shook his head sternly.

Severus filled his mouth with the potion, tilting his head back to close his mouth as not to lose any of what he held. He lowered his mouth to Hermione’s and covered hers with his. His pale white hand stroked her neck as he did it, causing her to swallow. As the last of the partial dose went down her throat, he quaffed the potion flask again, and placed his mouth over hers, gently stroking her neck once more to insure the dose was swallowed. He pulled away, taking a deep ragged breath. Hermione shuddered, her eyes fluttered, slowly opening.

“Severus?” she whispered, her hand touched his cheek as her fingers soothed the hair by his ear.
Severus quaffed the last of the potion into his mouth, and lowered his mouth to hers in a kiss, transferring the last of the dose as his hand gently stroked her throat with his fingers. The cords of their bond solidified with a rush of power that sent a wave of power that blew outward like a hot wind, causing the curtains around Hermione’s bed to blow in the magic induced wind. Prince let out a trill of melodious notes that seemed to float directly into each person in the hospital wing, filling them all with unspoken but undeniable joy.

Severus pulled away, staring down at Hermione as she smiled back at him, the color returning to her skin. She pulled Severus to her body and buried her face into his neck, closing her eyes. “Severus,” she repeated his name into his robes, oblivious to anyone but him.

Severus shuddered a moment, taking another ragged breath. Slowly, his arms closed around her, pulling her tightly against himself. “Hermione,” he whispered, closing his eyes as the warm embrace of her arms and mind welcomed him home.

Ron and Harry’s eyes were wide as they stared at their best mate and Potion Master locked in an embrace. They looked at Aiden accusingly, as if he left some crucial piece of the puzzle out of the equation.

Aiden smiled at his two trainees with a wicked grin. “The potion is traditionally administered from the kiss of a wizard prince. Didn’t you remember that from your studies?”

The little phoenix on the headboard tilted back his head and trilled melodiously, filling the hearts of all who heard it with unconcealed joy.

Chapter 50: Awkward!

“Ron!” Hermione cried. “Harry!” Hermione’s face lit up with joy at seeing her friends again just before she realized she was only wearing a hospital dressing gown. Blushing furiously, she attempted to cover herself with the hospital blanket.

Severus put an arm out, covering her modesty with his robe. “Enough,” he said lowly. “Leave us a moment before the questions start.”

Aiden smirked and shoved his trainees out the curtain.

Hermione wrapped her arms around Severus’ waist, burying her face into his robes. He wrapped his arm around her silently, closing his eyes as she attempted to burrow into him.

“I was so scared. I couldn’t breathe. My lungs were on fire,” Hermione whispered. “How did you find me?”

Severus placed a hand on her temple, brushing her hair back gently. “I heard your call.”

Hermione pulled back and looked up into his eyes. A smile broke out over her face. Prince chirruped from the headboard. “Aww, Prince, look at you. You’ve feathered out!”

The phoenix chick puffed out his feathers and down and chirped pleasantly.

“I brought you a change in clothes,” Severus said, pulling a bundle out from his robes and making it normal sized with a tap of his wand. “Your old ones will probably have to go to the Aurors as… evidence.”

Hermione nodded, brow furrowing. She set down the bundle and attempted to stand on the floor, her
feet slowly touching the floor. She hung onto Severus’ arm as a bought of dizziness hit her. She leaned against him, closing her eyes as she fought the dizziness off. He held his arm around her, supporting her as she regained her footing.

As she began to undress to change, Severus turned to give her privacy. Hermione touched his arm, shaking her head. She gazed into his dark black eyes, silently asking him to not leave her alone, even if it was just turning his back to her.

He nodded as she gave a small smile of gratitude. She shed the hospital robe with some difficulty. She pulled over her chemise. Severus held out her inner robe, which she slipped on carefully. She slowly slipped on her vest. He gently fastened each button into place with his pale fingers. He pulled the sash off the bed, encircling her waist with it, flipping it up and around to tie it in proper place so the ends hung to her side. He held out her outer robe, and she slid her arms into it, allowing him to pull it around her so it fell about her shoulders. He straightened her collar with his long fingers, clipping the two sigils at her throat. He looked down at her with a calm expression, his dark eyes glittering as though the stars glinted behind them.

Prince chirped from one of the flower stems next to her bedside, flapping his wings as he bounced up and down on the stem with his exertions. His wings spun the pinwheels, causing them to spark and send the magical serpents to twine around the flowers.

Hermione touched the flowers with wonder and looked up at Severus.

“Slytherin House sends their regards on your speedy recovery,” he said softly.

Hermione spun one of the pinwheels and smiled. There was a poppy flower nestled in the middle of the bouquet and she recognized the creator’s signature. “Mr. Mitchell,” she said with a smile.

“I’m not sure what has happened to my House, but the students there seem to think a certain Gryffindor is worth their regard,” Severus’ tone was disgusted, but when Hermione looked up at him, the sides of his mouth were twisted slightly upward.

“You don’t think “a certain Gryffindor” is worth your regard, Severus?” she asked, tilting her chin and facing him unrepentant.

He placed his palms to her temples. “I find one Gryffindor worth my regard.”

“Minerva?” Hermione smiled back at him.

Severus made a face that told Hermione just what he believed of that particular thought.

Hermione laughed genuinely, placing her hands to his head and bringing it down so she could press her forehead to his.

She pulled away as Severus nudged her back onto the bed. He rolled her socks with his fingers and pulled them up her feet and above her ankles. He picked up her ankle boots from the floor and pulled them up over her feet. He jerked the laces to tighten them up to her ankles and looped the tie closed.

Severus reached into his robe and pulled out her wand, handing it to her.

Hermione smiled as she took the wand and tucked it into her inner pocket.

There was a rapping at the curtain. “Professor Granger, are you decent?”

“Come in,” Hermione said with a chuckle. “I am… decent.”
“My name is Aiden Gauge, Professor Granger,” Aiden introduced himself with a short bow. “Please call me Aiden. And I believe you know my trainees.”

Hermione smiled. “Please, call me Hermione.”

Aiden smiled. “Do you remember anything before your collapse?”

“I was cleaning the jars and bottles that Hagrid brings me every few months,” Hermione recalled. “I was sorting them by size and color so I could clean them properly. They always come back dirty.”

“Was there anyone in the hall with you or in the room?” Aiden questioned.

“No, it was just me,” Hermione said. “I’m pretty… paranoid usually. There wasn’t anyone in the room with me. I opened the jar to empty it… and it shook in my hand and fell to the floor. There was this… foul odor. I figured it was something Hagrid left to congeal.”

“This Hagrid,” Aiden began. “Is there any chance he could done this to you?”

“Absolutely not!” chimed Hermione, Ron, and Harry at the same time.

Aiden glared at Harry and Ron. “Is there anything else you can remember?”

“There has been a couple of times when,” Hermione began. “Like I felt like I was being watched. But just when I was almost to the point of flinging out spells, Severus would join me and it would stop.”

“Always you then” Aiden said. “And always when you are alone.”

“Yes,” Hermione said softly.

“Well for now, I think, we should have Madam Pomfrey look at you,” Aiden said with a smile. “We’ll go talk with… Hagrid? And I think you should not be alone until we can figure out who hurt you. Do you have somewhere you can stay?”

Hermione looked down. “I live alone, Sir.”

Severus placed one hand on her shoulder. “She can stay with me,” he said in a soft voice. “As my apprentice, no one will question her being there.”

“Surely it would be more natural to stay with Headmistress McGonagall!” Ron blurted out.

Hermione looked away, closing her eyes. Aiden shot a glare at Ron.

“Minerva may have been compromised. We cannot trust her to be herself,” Severus said lowly. His voice was quiet, but it had an immediate effect on Ron, causing him to make himself look smaller.

“What do you mean?” Aiden asked.

“She was here earlier today,” Snape replied, “but it wasn’t really her. She came in past the curtain. She saw me and fled as if she were looking for someone else.”
“Polyjuice?” Aiden asked.

“Yes,” Snape answered. “She did not speak. You can ask anyone at Hogwarts how unlikely that is.”

“So now we have to be doubly careful,” Aiden sighed. “Ah, Madam Pomfrey, we’ll get out of your way.”

Poppy shooed the Aurors out of privacy screen. She looked as if she were about to kick Severus out as well, but Hermione shook her head. Poppy closed the curtain and began her tests.

“I’m not sure what you did, Professor Snape,” Poppy said as she checked all of Hermione’s vitals, “but she should be fully recovered in a few days. I’d be wary of dizziness and excess use of magic for a day or two.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you, Poppy.”

The nurse smiled at her. “I’m glad you are awake again, Hermione. He and the Headmistress have been at your bedside nonstop since your fall.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “The entire time?”

Poppy smiled at her. “Now go rest, before you put yourself back in here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hermione replied automatically.

Poppy gave her a grin and moved out the privacy curtains completely before walking deeper into the hospital wing.

“Come,” Severus said, extending his arm for her. “Let me help you back so you can rest.”

Hermione took in a deep breath and nodded. She dislodged Prince from the bouquet of flowers, and transferred him to her shoulder. She looked up at Severus for moment before closing her eyes to collect herself. Opening her eyes, she started to walk forward, weaving her arm around his.

Chapter 51: Meeting with Minerva

“There is another ME out there?!” Minerva cried out in a half screech, wringing her hands as she paced the inside of Severus’ chamber. “It’s bad enough you didn’t even tell me she had awakened, but now you tell me there is another person out there that looks like me?”

“We didn’t tell you because we had no way of knowing you were you at that time, Minerva,” Severus explained matter-of-factly. “You know you would have done the same.”

Minerva paced and sighed. “You are right, Severus.” She looked towards the bed where Hermione slept obliviously. “How is she doing?”

“Better now that she isn’t being interrogated,” Snape replied.

“The poor dear,” Minerva said with a shake of her head. “I did manage to convince Horace to cover your classes until all of this blows over.”
“Marvelous,” Severus said with a curl of his lip.

“I know you don’t think he’s an adequate teacher, Severus,” Minerva admonished, “but you have to admit your standards for acceptable potions proficiency is higher for students than most people will ever need once they leave Hogwart’s.”

“Hermione met them,” Snape replied with a raised eyebrow.

“Psh,” Minerva said. “You know she is beyond exceptional in her studies.”

“Spend some time grading some of the papers I’ve had this semester, and you will understand why I think Slughorn will do them no favors,” Severus growled.

“It’s temporary, Severus,” Minerva countered. “I know you want to keep her safe. I do too, and you can’t teach and guard her at the same time. Especially since one of us needs to be out there making things look normal.”

“It is…” Severus began and swallowed as if the next word was painful, “appreciated.”

Minerva looked at him and then nodded. “Draught of Living Death,” she muttered. “Aiden said to tell you that… Daniel? Daniel sends his thanks for the extra Wiggenweld potions. I will have to have you two make us a store of them for the hospital wing in case they are ever needed again, though I really do hope not.”

“They can have fun trying to administer it,” Severus said with a smirk.

Minerva shot a glance at the Potion Master, “Did you really have to traumatize both Potter and Weasley like that?”

“Do you think I would risk not administering it the traditional way, Minerva?” Severus’ expression was completely deadpan, but he was utterly calm.

Minerva shook her head. “No, no. I would never want to risk it failing either.” She looked into the fire thoughtfully. “Hagrid is helping them trace his steps that morning to see where the trapped jar might have come from.”

“I would be more concerned with who placed it there,” Severus said.

“Nicolas has been the very image of proper every time I see him, Severus,” Minerva said. “If he’s the one behind it, he is being the very definition of careful. He hasn’t even asked about anything.”

Severus tilted his head. “Doesn’t that strike you a little strange?”

McGonagall frowned. “How so?”

“Think about the majority of the conversations at the High Table, Minerva,” Severus replied. “How is it that he doesn’t ask about what every other person at the table would? Even if as a passing gossip?”

Minerva rubbed the space between her eyes with her fingers. “This paranoia is exhausting.”

“Try being a spy,” Snape said dryly.

“No thank you,” McGonagall replied immediately. “Well, I will let the both of you get some rest before we meet up again with the Aurors tonight. What shall we use as a password?”
“Solanaceae,” Severus said immediately.

Minerva raised a brow. “I think I preferred Albus’ random candy names to whatever that is.”

Severus smirked. “It is nightshade, Minerva.”

Minerva shook her head and scoffed at the password choice then left quietly, shutting the door and the portrait behind her.

Severus yawned and stood, removing his outer robe and hanging it over the chair. He carefully unbuttoned his doublet and cuffs and pulled it off with a sigh. Laying it over the chair with the robe, he walked over to his bed where Hermione lay sleeping. Prince was nestled by her hair on the pillow as asleep as Hermione. He lay next to her, listening to the soft sound of her breathing as he closed his eyes and let sleep carry him into oblivion.

Severus woke to the feel of Hermione’s hand in his hair. He opened his eyes groggily, but the thrum of her touch on his skin sent a shiver down his body. He moved, pulling her against him as the renewed relief of her being there filtered back through him. His hand combed her hair as his fingers gently brushed her scalp.

Hermione took in a deep breath as if to imprint his scent upon her memory, smashing her face against him. “Severus?” she mumbled his name into his shirt.

“Hrm?” Severus managed to articulate.

“What is this… between us?” Her voice was calm and sleepy.

A hundred different answers came with a hundred different definitions of “this,” causing Severus to hesitate in guessing which one she was referring to.

“This,” Hermione repeated. She took her hand and gently brushed her fingers into his hair. The forming bond resonated, sending a shiver down his back and his breath caught in his lungs.

Severus summoned the willpower to move in order to look her in the face. “I believe… it is a bond. Infantile as it is, but formed when we worked together mind to mind and now resonates with touch.”

Hermione looked into his black eyes, sleepy but curious. “Is it permanent?”

Snape’s eyes closed a moment. “Not yet. It may yet be stopped with disuse or… purposeful severance.” He couldn’t face her as he mentioned the intentional breaking of what had unintentionally formed.

“Does it pain you?” Hermione said, placing her fingers on his chin to guide his eyes back to hers. “To be bound to me?”

“Never,” he replied. He was worried that she would repudiate the link out of loathing, yet she was concerned if it pained him to be bound to her. “It…” he struggled to put it into words. “It is very intimate.”

“So it’s not just me then,” Hermione said with a shy smile.

Severus struggled to say what had to be said. “Hermione, if you wish this to end before it becomes… permanent, it would have to be done… soon.”

Hermione’s eyes widened at him, horror went across her face. Severus turned his gaze away, unable
to face her rejection.

“Severus,” she placed her hand to his cheek and drew it back towards her. “Why would I want to give up such a beautiful gift?”

“Because I am old,” Severus voiced his doubts. “I am stubborn, set in my ways, slow to praise, and fast to rebuke. There are far better people out there than… being bound to me.”

“Severus,” Hermione brought both hands to his face, causing a tremor of the bond. “There is no one else I would rather be bound to. And you are not old. Old is like… four hundred and twenty-two.”

“Four hundred,” Severus began, “and twenty-two?”

“Yes,” Hermione said with a blush. “Don’t mock my choice in numbers. It’s true.”

Severus touched her face, his dark eyes meeting hers. “Are you sure you wish to be bound to an old, jaded war veteran?”

“As opposed to me?” Hermione countered. “Who is slightly younger jaded war veteran?” It was her turn to be doubtful of her own worth, and she turned from him. “I’m broken. There are pieces of me I don’t even realize are missing until… I find myself thinking such horrible things. Horrible, unthinkable… unforgivable things. I would understand if you didn’t want to be reminded of that.”

“Hermione,” Severus interrupted her train of thought. “I would fight tooth and claw to keep you able to do… what you have already done. Sleep here. Peacefully. To do this,” he said pulling her hand to his face, “and not cringe back in horror at what you see there or here.” He tapped his finger to his head.

“I would stand by your side until we were both past… four hundred and twenty-two,” Severus admitted. “Until the skies burn. If that is what you desired.” His black eyes were haunted as he gazed down at her.

Hermione pulled his head down, pressing her lips against his in answer to his question, but at that moment, Severus couldn’t remember what in Merlin’s name the question was. In fact, he was quite willing to take his first zero on the failed recollection as his arms went around her waist and pulled her against him into an embrace.

Chapter 53: Waking Up

A melodious warble woke Hermione from her sleep. She stirred under the blankets with a lazy stretch like a cat. Severus’ arm was still around her and it took a great deal of willpower to sit up instead of burrowing back into his embrace and hiding there for the rest of the day. Day?

She waved her hand over the small stone orb on the bedside table. It glowed faintly in a slightly orange red. Almost night. You would think, she thought to herself, that being under the effects of a Living Death spell would have made it so she would not have to sleep as much rather than the reverse.

She turned and placed her hand in Severus’ hair, soothing it with her fingers. The thrum of the bond snapped tighter and a shiver of pleasure rewarded her that started over her body but ended in her mind like the sound of a tuning fork being struck inside her.

Prince warbled again, and she finally disengaged herself from Severus’ arm. His face was peaceful in sleep, almost downright youthful. The mask he held tightly over his face at almost all times was
absent. The hardened lines of his control had softened, taking away the customary morose expression that had become a default.

Prince flapped his wings up and down as he clung to the perch by the hearth. His primary and secondary feathers were emerging through his fluffy down. His proportions were starting to become more regal. His neck was elongated slightly. The crest of feathers on his head were more delicate at the shaft and flared out towards the end. Even his tail had started to sport the telltale fan of his species, cascading down to the floor with a miniature version of the future.

Prince fluttered his wings, reverting to the baby peeping sounds as she approached. His beak opened and he rocked his head back and forth to let her know, in case she had forgotten, that his stomach was indeed empty.

“Yes, Yes, my lovely prince,” Hermione answered. “Let me at least put a robe on.”

She grasped the dark robe from the chair and pulled it over herself. As she walked over to the table which was now conveniently stocked with fruits and vegetables at all hours of the day or night, she silently thanked the house-elves for their efficiency. She picked up a banana from the bowl and unpeeled it, breaking off a piece and offering it up to the starving pit of famine that the little phoenix had come to incarnate.

He chewed on the piece of soft fruit awkwardly, getting mashed banana all over his beak before he managed to swallow it. Hermione giggled and offered him another piece. He chomped on it, maneuvered it into a better position, and made it disappear more swiftly. Opening his beak again, he vibrated his wings. Still hungry.

“I swear,” Hermione said to him. “Molly would be hard pressed to keep you sated.” She offered up the rest of the banana piece of piece until all of it was gone. Prince looked like he was contemplating seconds, but yawned and roosted with his eyes half closed on the perch.

“At last, he is full,” Hermione giggled slightly, massaging the bird on the head crest with her fingers. He rewarded her with a soft peeping and a warble and a mental rush of contentment.

Hermione yawned. “No, not again, I just woke up!” She shuffled over to where Severus kept his tea set and scooped up some loose tea into a tea ball and put it into the pot. She grasped the water kettle off the hearth and poured the steaming water into the teapot. Severus had enchanted the water kettle to always be cool to the touch, but it always remained full of perfectly hot water. She was pretty sure Molly would have adored one of her own.

She replaced the water kettle and stared at the tea pot blearily. No magic for a day or two didn’t seem like it was going to be hard. She barely had enough energy to avoid falling asleep standing up.

She bought the tea tray over to the chairs by the fire and sat down, waiting for the tea to seep. Her eyes closed without her permission.

“Woman,” Severus’ voice rumbled. “You are wearing my robe.”

Hermione opened her eyes blearily. “Mmmph?”

She looked up into Snape’s dark black eyes. His expression was calm as he stared down at her. He had his doublet pulled on, but his buttons were only half fastened. He leaned down, pressing his forehead to hers. “Mmmmph,” Hermione restated.

Severus stood up straight and began to fasten his buttons on his cuffs going up his arms. Hermione stood and came up to him, her fingers fussed with his buttons, going up to his collar. He stood still,
watching her with his eyes, as if he was memorizing every action she made.

As her fingers fastened the last button at his throat, he clasped her fingers with one of his hands, staring down at her face with no words passing between them. She smiled at him sleepily and yanked her hands free to work on his cuff buttons. Severus gave her a puzzled look, wondering if he looked so tired that he couldn’t dress himself properly.

As she finished all of his buttons she grinned up at him and sloughed off his robe with a giggle. She held it out for him so he could place his arms in, then gently tugged it over his shoulders so it draped elegantly to the floor. She placed her hands around his collar, straightening it so it encircled his neck stiffly in the way she always remembered it to be.

She looked at him appraisingly, smiling at how he always stood so still. His outer robe draped upon him like folded wings. He looked elegant.

Severus stared back at her watching him. Her eyes gained that faraway look as her thoughts drifted to the memories she was revisiting. “Unless you wish to greet Minerva and the Aurors in your chemise,” he rumbled softly. “Might I recommend a change in attire?”

Hermione blushed and made a step towards the wardrobe Minerva had filled with her things, but the dizziness came shortly after her.

Snape’s arm was around her waist before she even realized she was staggering, pressing her close to him until she stabilized. He helped her to the bed and walked over to the wardrobe himself, pulling out a set of her robes. He laid them down for her, and she shooed him off, embarrassed that she couldn’t even walk across the room by herself. He allowed her the moment of inconsistency, feeling through her touch that she was frustrated at being weak… not that he would ever consider her weak in any incarnation.

He went over the hearth and poured the tea. Prince warbled, rocking his head back and forth for donations to the empty stomach fund. “Where DO you put all that food?” Severus asked the phoenix. He picked up a couple of strawberries from the table and deposited them into the incoming donations beak and smirked as all three disappeared within a second. He scratched Prince’s head with his fingers and drew his hand down his back and down his growing tail. Prince peeped and tested out another string of notes. “Hrmph,” Severus commented, rubbing the bird under the chin.

Hermione came up behind him, gently pressing her head against his shoulder. “I think I’m ready,” she said with a small smile.

“Tea first,” Severus said, handing her a cup and saucer. “I do not intend to sit in a room with Weasley and Potter without tea first.”

Hermione’s shoulders quaked in silent laughter that bubbled over into a chortle. “Merlin forbid you ever get along.”

“That would require… a lot… more… tea,” Severus said as he sat down in the chair by the fire.

Hermione let out her breath with a laugh and sat down in the opposite seat.

“I see Lily in his eyes,” Severus admitted quietly. “But I see James in his face.”

“James?” she questioned, curious. “Potter?”

“He and his… Marauders,” Severus recalled, “Did their best to thwart me at every turn. Of them all, James was… by far… the worst of them combined. He managed to bring out the worst in me, even
now when I look into his son’s face.”

Hermione grasped his fingers from the other chair and held them silently, but he did not pull away from her.

Chapter 54: Confessions

Harry, Ron, Aiden, and Minerva were already standing in the room when Severus and Hermione entered it. Their combined teaching robes swished behind them as if propelled by wind, yet there was none. Minerva beamed happily, and gestured them over with her hand. As conversations went on into the night, conclusions came to dead ends.

Hagrid’s help had only managed to confirm two things. One, he wasn’t guilty, which everyone but Aiden knew already. Two, the jar had found its way into the crate after Hagrid had left it at the step of the classroom. Aiden had even resorted to old-fashioned muggle fingerprinting on the jar, but alas, the only prints to be had were Hermione’s – yet another dead end.

Since the jar could have very likely been crafted by a person separate from the one who put in the trigger and the powdered potion, they were either looking for a genius amongst wizards who could do all of the above, or a very determined individual who made other wizards’ work do the work for them.

At one point, Hermione was tired of sitting in once place and stood. Minerva and Aiden were still rapidly chattering back and forth about the same debate with no end in sight. Hermione inclined her head to Severus, making the laboratory gesture and slid her eyes over to Harry and Ron with a short flick.

Severus nodded silently in understanding.

Hermione kicked Ron in the shins and whapped Harry over the head with some parchment, and inclined her head to bid them follow her out. Aiden saw the commotion out of the corner of his eye, but did not protest the exit by his trainees since Severus seemed completely indifferent to it.

“Guah, I thought they would never stop,” Ron said, rubbing his head.

“Technically they haven’t,” Harry said with a grin.

Hermione chuckled as they went into the laboratory, and she shut the door with the wave of her hand, slamming down multiple wards without looking back. Ron and Harry looked at each other a little more impressed by their friend than before.

“Ah, I shouldn’t of done that,” Hermione said a moment later. “I’m not supposed to overdo it for a few days.”

“Can you two… make something comfortable right around… here?” Hermione pointed to the open space in the laboratory. “Before I do anything else I’ll regret later.”

Harry took out his wand and transfigured a stool into a large U shaped couch. “Good?”
“Perfect, Harry,” Hermione smiled and flopped down on the couch with enthusiasm, closing her eyes a little. “It’s so good to see you both again… though I do wish it wasn’t because I was trapped in a magical coma.”

“You always had a little flair for the dramatic, Hermione,” Harry teased as he flopped on the couch too.

“Pffft,” Hermione answered him. “Says the guy who dies and comes back to life.”

Harry laughed with her. “Tie?”


“Ron, jeez, mate,” Harry yelled, “sit down before you pace yourself into the floor.”

Ron collapsed into the couch and grunted.

Awkward silence had Hermione looking at Harry who looked back at Hermione with wide eyes and a shake of the head.

“Ron, what is it?” Hermione finally broke the silence.

Ron stared at his feet. “He… kissed you.”

“Ron,” Hermione began.

“No, it’s just,” Ron put his arms around the back cushion, “I wasn’t ready for it, ‘mione. I don’t have any right to act like I did. It could have been… some other wizard prince with a potion or some bloke you met at a conference. When I think about it, I just get angrier at myself. I want you to be happy, ya know? You deserve to be happy. I just need time to… sort out my head.”

“So do you, Ron,” Hermione said softly. “You need someone that can be there for you. Someone less jaded… who can forgive. I am sorry.”

Harry leaned in towards Hermione. “You hid something from Ginny when she visited didn’t you?”

“She doesn’t know, Harry,” Hermione closed her eyes. “She can’t know.”

“Know what, ‘mione?” Ron asked, leaning in to listen.


“Forget what?” Ron asked.

Harry looked at Hermione. “Everything… like I did to myself when I stepped up to be killed. Only… part of you never came back did it?” He was speaking to her, his eyes meeting hers with a deeper understanding of what had really happened to Hermione during the war.

“You have to show him, Hermione,” Harry said. “You’ll still be our best friend. I swear it.”

Hermione nodded to Harry and closed her eyes.

Clear your mind.

She felt the air around her still.
Think of nothing.

The sounds of Harry and Ron’s breathing and shifting on the couch disappeared.

Slow your mind until nothing is the only thing that remains.

She filled her mind with the dark blanket of stillness and shoved all of her memories and emotion into the far corner depths beyond touch. Her mind was utterly still as all trace of emotion drained off her expression. She was ready at that moment to do whatever was required of her. She was ready to kill. There was no remorse at all.

She opened her eyes and stared at Ron with cold, emotionless, dark eyes. She stared at him unblinking and focused, as if he were a piece on a chessboard.

Ron fought back his visceral reaction to scramble backwards. It was Hermione, but it was like all the happiness he remembered her for was gone. Her eyes took in everything and gave nothing in return. He thought back to Bellatrix Lestrange’s eyes, but they were not the same. Bellatrix’s had held the shine of insanity, joy in torture, and enjoyment of death. What he saw in Hermione was nothing. There was nothing staring back at him, and it was vast and fathomless. Ron remembered where he had seen the same expression before. “Blimey, Hermione,” he stammered. “You’re like him.”

“Hermione,” Harry said softly.

She looked at him, then closed her eyes. And like a switch had been turned, the Hermione they remembered was staring back at them with sad, remorseful eyes.

Harry smiled at her warmly. He knew why she had hidden this part of herself from Ginny.

“I’m sorry, Ron,” Hermione said softly. “Please forgive me.”

Ron took in a deep breath. “I think I understand now. I can… never understand that… and you really need someone that can understand that… but I can still accept you as my friend. Don’t be sorry, ’mione. You never lied to me. I just lied to myself.”

A small smile crept into Hermione’s face.

“Speaking of forgiving, mum says if you don’t come to Christmas Dinner that she will never forgive you,” Ron said sheepishly.

Hermione laughed. “Did you get that threat too, Harry?”

“Oh I’m kind of obligated in advance with Ginny and all,” Harry said with a blush.

“Should have seen that coming, dating my sister and all,” Ron ribbed his mate.

“Look, I need to tell you guys something,” Hermione said softly. “Severus… is important to me. I know we’ve had our history. I know he’s not an easy one to like. Merlin knows that we almost killed each other the first year I came back… but I understand more about him now. He’s not just a heartless bastard who is abusing me for my slavery in the laboratory like Pomona thinks.”

Harry snickered at the mention of Pomona and then sobered. “Hermione… I never told you all of what I saw when I stuck my head into the pensieve.” Harry looked over to Ron. “He’s a good man. Braver than any one I have ever known. My father abused him. He had every right to be angry at him. But my father was still a good man. Snape has done many horrible things to protect me and… everyone. He too… is a good man.”
Harry smiled at Hermione. “Can I still admit he still scares me?”

“You’re not the only one,” Ron said, shivering.

Hermione smiled back. “He would probably find that amusing.”

“You’re not allowed to tell him that I might admire him for anything, ok?” Harry nudged Hermione.

“My lips are sealed,” Hermione chuckled. “But he’ll probably read it directly out of my mind.”

Harry paled a little. “How did I even forget about that?”

Hermione leaned back on the couch and laughed. “It’s okay, Harry. He doesn’t go diving into my brain looking for things to use against you. That’s what the students are for.”

Harry was silent a moment and then busted out laughing, a small tear trickled down his right eye.

“Aw… wow. Hey. When did you get a phoenix?”

“Oh now that is a long story,” Hermione said with a shake of the head. “Let me try the short version. Remember that egg I wrote you about?”

Harry nodded. “You said you could never get close enough to ID it.”

“Hagrid was out of his hut, and Severus and I were there when it hatched into our laps,” Hermione said with a bemused smile. “And the little bugger has been eating us out of all of our food since.”

“I never even knew you could share something like that,” Ron said with wide eyes.

“I didn’t know anything like that was possible either, Ron,” Hermione admitted. “I think if it had happened before someone would have written something about it.”

“We should get back to the room,” Hermione said as she stood up.

As they filed out, Severus walked down towards them. He waved his wand, closing the door to the laboratory behind them, reinforcing the wards upon the room. His black eyes bored through them one at a time, but settled on Hermione. “You set the wards,” he said simply.

“I forgot,” Hermione confessed. “It was so automatic.”

He nodded. “You should probably rest.”

He inclined his head towards his quarters, and they all walked ahead of him.

Chapter 55: Switch-a-roo!

“Maybe we’re just going about this the wrong way,” Hermione interjected into the arguments that circled around the room.

Many gazes turned to stare at her.

Hermione smirked. “Maybe we should give my anonymous stalker exactly what he wants.”

“Are you mad?” Ron blurted. “Look what he did to you already!”
Minerva and Severus exchanged looks, and Minerva broke into a sly grin.

The three Aurors looked confused together.

Severus stood suddenly, walking back into his bed chamber. He returned a moment later with two flasks and two bundles of clothing. Handing one to Hermione, they both popped the cork on the flasks, touched their wands to their head, and guided a hair into the flask. With a mutual smirk, they blew into the top of the flask, closed the stopper, and shook the potion within.

Depositing the bundle of clothes into the confused arms of Harry and Ron. Severus and Hermione handed each of them their flask.

“Congratulations on your new teaching positions, Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley,” Minerva cackled. “I’m sure you will do wonderful here at Hogwart’s.”

Aiden suddenly burst into laughter as it dawned on him what was going on. “No one is going to believe this in my report.”

“I’m sure you remember me well enough to act the part, Potter?” Severus asked evenly.

Minerva laughed and waved her wand and incanted, causing two shoji changing screens to appear in opposite corners.

Ron’s eyes got wide like saucers. “I have to be a GIRL?!”

Hermione burrowed her head against Severus’ shoulder as laughter shook her body. He wrapped part of his robe over her and pulled her against him with a smirk, allowing her to cackle into his vest. Minerva covered her mouth with her hand in a failing attempt to be more polite, but her mirth bubbled over in the irony of the moment. Aiden caught the laughs like a disease to which he was not immune, laughing into his sleeve as the rustling behind the shoji screens came with accompanying curses.

Harry came out first, and Hermione fell over into Severus’ lap, laughing so hard there was no sound. Harry hadn’t figured out how to button Snape’s very extensive button chain on either sleeve or his chest, and the outer robe was inside out.

Hermione half rolled onto the floor and picked herself up, half crawl walking into an upright position to help Harry dress himself. She tried to contain her laughter, but she ended up making a noise that sounded like a snake laughing.

Harry glared at her, but with Severus’ face, causing Hermione to cackle all the harder.

Severus stood beside Harry and yanked at his outer robe, pulling it off. “Honestly, Potter, do you not know how to dress yourself?”

“I know how to dress MYSELF!” Harry yelled indignantly in Snape’s voice and then covered his mouth with his hands. “How… but…. My voice?!”

Severus helped Harry put on his outer robe, pulling it over his shoulders in the proper position with a
short yank. He stood behind Hermione as she fastened all of Harry’s buttons and then tugged on his collar to make sure it stood up stiffly in position.

“You will have to be very careful with your voice, Mr. Potter,” Severus said lowly. “Or people will suspect something.”

“How do I have your voice?” Harry said.

“My polyjuice potions are not the toys the Ministry bids us teach,” Severus replied.

“How long will this last?” Harry asked.

“Six hours for each dose,” Severus replied. “You will have to return to take another dose if you find that is not long enough.”

“Six hours?” Harry boggled. “That’s amazing!”

Severus lifted a brow. “Walk for me.”

Harry walked forward slowly.

“No…” Severus corrected. “Walk like me.”

Hermione chuckled and moved out of Harry’s way. Severus stood stiffly as he attempted to control his irritation with Harry for tripping all over himself. She brushed her fingers against his, curling them against his hand. Severus curled his fingers into hers with a gentle clasp, the thrum of their bond shuddered through their fingers as she moved off to help Ron.

As Ron came out from behind the screen, Hermione had to stifle another chain of laughs. While he managed to get the outer robe on, the vest was on inside out and it looked like he hadn’t figured out how to use it for the method it was designed. Hermione spun him back behind the screen and helped him adjust himself into the proper carriage. Dragging Ron out by the arm, she adjusted the outer robe so it hung properly. Yanking the sash tight across his waist, she knotted it, overlapping the layers in the proper order.

“There,” Hermione said with a sigh. “Now you look like me.”

“This doesn’t feel right,” Ron said in Hermione’s voice. His eyes went wide. “Holy Crackers, I sound like a girl.”

Hermione’s hand went to her collar and she removed her apprentice sigils, moving them to Ron’s collar. “Now you look as much like me as you can. Now try walking around a bit and get used to it.”

Hermione walked back into the bed chamber and picked up the bowl of fruit. Prince perked up immediately and flapped his wings in a tight vibration, opening his mouth to accept the food offerings. She stroked his head and smiled transferring him to her shoulder. She gave him another strawberry, and it disappeared like the rest. Walking out towards the other room, Prince chirruped sweetly, warbling a chain of happy notes.

“No, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall admonished. “You do not stride like a caveman. You walk like a lady.”

Ron attempted to walk forward again and Minerva swatted him in the stomach. “Stomach in, chin up.”
Hermione walked up to Severus with a smirk on her face. Even though Harry was the spitting image of Snape, she could tell by the way he curled his lip in pure disgust at the other “Snape” who was who. As she neared, he touched her cheek gently, staring down into her eyes with his own and pressing his forehead to hers in a moment of shared calm. Slightly surprised by his action in front of witnesses, she smiled back up at him.

“It seems we need to show our doppelgangers how to walk like us, Ms. Granger,” Severus said. He straightened and inclined his head towards the far wall.

“Watch us, please,” Hermione said, clapping her hands. “Ron if you tear my teaching robes, I will personally hex you into next Tuesday.”

Severus took the lead and she followed, turning with him as she turned and then keeping pace with him with their usual stride. They stopped at the end of the room and spun together. “Your turn,” Hermione encouraged.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose as he watched Ron attempting to keep pace with Harry with some semblance of grace. “He walks like a bloody Neanderthal.”

“Ron, you can’t keep trying to get in front of Harry,” Hermione admonished. “Severus is always a step ahead. I don’t…trip him up like that.”

Hermione touched his wrist with her fingers. “You’re not going to like this, but will you work with me?”

Severus gazed down at her with his impenetrable eyes. “You wish me to work with… Weasley.”

Hermione forced a smile, “I’ll work with Harry.”

Severus closed his eyes, but brushed his fingers against her wrist. “As you wish.”

They broke off into groups, each teaching the other how to work with their “partner.” Prince made encouraging warbles randomly to both parties. Finally, the groups parted off, and Harry and Ron strode across the room with the more familiar stride that Severus and Hermione typically used.

Aiden and Minerva were laughing together on the far couch as Ron and Harry finally managed to get in synch with each other.

“Come here, you two, and I will tell you where your patrols are after the dinner hour,” Minerva beckoned.

“We have to go to dinner like this?” Ron burst out.

“Of course you do, Mr. Weasley,” admonished Minerva. “Remember not to move too quickly either. Hermione is recovering from being in the hospital, and Severus will be attending to her more zealously. It will be important to make sure this is seen.”

Minerva walked over to where the real Severus and Hermione were standing. “You two go get some rest. Let them do what they need to do. Aiden and I can fill them in on the rest.”

Severus inclined his head to Minerva and turned and walked back into the bedchamber.

“Thank you, Minerva,” Hermione thanked softly.

“You’re welcome, dear,” McGonagall smiled at her. “Get some rest.”
Hermione followed after Severus and shut the door behind her.

A/N: Warning: Slight lemonade chapter, but to be honest it’s not something that requires barricades and crime scene tape for overly explicit content. Feel free to skip this chapter and you won’t miss much, except for a discussion on baby birds and trust. :)

Chapter 56: Sleep or Something

“At last, he sleeps,” Hermione said softly as Prince roosted contentedly on the perch near the hearth. “I think he gets bigger by the hour.”

“Considering how much food he packs away,” Severus commented, “this should be no surprise.” He shrugged off his robe and slung it over one of the far chairs by the wardrobe. His pale fingers slow worked down his buttons.

“Have you ever cared for a baby bird?” Hermione asked curiously as she walked over to the second wardrobe and rustled through it.

“No,” Severus replied. “This would be the first.”

“I used to watch a family of robins outside my window when I was a child,” Hermione recalled. “Mum would leave out little cakes for them, pastries, and mealy worms. If I held my hand really still, the robins would come to my hand and take the worms. Then they would go stuff their baby’s beak with them as I watched. Their stomachs really are bottomless.”

“More bottomless than certain Weasley family?” Severus asked.

“Pretty close,” Hermione snickered as she disrobed and slid into a dressing gown. “The epic battles if another robin dared encroach upon our family’s territory… It does remind me of Molly Weasley, now that I think about it.”

Severus smirked as he closed his wardrobe, and cast off his shoes and socks next to the chair. He had pulled a loose robe on for once, and it looked much more comfortable than sleeping in his teaching robes from nights previous. “Why are you staring at me again?” Severus asked softly.

“You look much more comfortable,” she noted with a smile.

“Hrmph,” Severus replied to her, stepping closer to her, tilting his head down so he could stare her in the face. He placed his palm to her temple, gently stroking back her hair. A soft hiss came from his lips as a shiver of pleasure shuddered through him. She leaned into his touch, rubbing against his hand like a cat, closing her eyes in mutual enjoyment.

When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her, his dark eyes held an element she never expected to see… vulnerability. At that moment, he was afraid. He was afraid to move. He was afraid she would move and have that moment vanish before him like every other dream that had been taken from him. Hermione saw the image of her sprawled across the classroom floor in his mind and felt his despair as he thought that she too had been lost.

She weaved her hands into the hair around his ears and pulled his head down, pressing her lips to
his, allowing the chords of their tenacious connection to snap into place.

Severus shuddered against her, his arms pulled her closer, clinging to her as though she were Life itself. She sank into him, allowing his embrace to swallow her up in a flood of power and emotion, trusting him without question or doubt.

When she came to, she realized she was on the bed, but the sensation of Severus’ teeth on the skin of her neck caused her eyes to roll back in her head. She groaned softly, her hands sought the touch of his skin on his back and she ran her fingers down his shoulder blades and down his spine. His teeth grasped a soft spot on her neck, and she arched against him involuntarily, her arms clutched his back and drew him down upon her. His mouth rejoined hers as his hand slowly brushed down her chest, brushing against her skin as his mind explored which places she enjoyed the most.

He pulled away from her with a ragged breath, his eyes closed as he withdrew. When his dark eyes met hers, she felt the shudder of his desire countered by the steel of his control. “Hermione,” he exhaled her name. “Is this what you truly… want?”

Hermione’s brain cleared slightly from the fuzzy place it was rolling in, and she realized he was giving her the choice to refuse him. She knew as she stared into his face that he would do whatever she truly desired him to do – stay with her… or leave. She had no doubt that if she turned him away he would never cease to keep her safe, but he would never touch her like this again. He would honor her wish till his dying breath.

“Severus,” she breathed his name like it was the only word she knew. “I want this. I want… you.”

He stared at her for a long moment, perhaps to weigh the truth of her words with his own doubt. Slowly, his face softened as his eyes met hers and he slowly met her lips with his. His hands traveled down her skin as his mind listened to the distinctive hum of hers. As his fingers roamed the surface of her skin, tremors of energy zipped back and forth between them. Hermione rubbed against him like a cat seeking the hand that was petting it. She made a soft purring sound, enjoying his touch and the feel of his physical and mental caress.

“Hermione,” he whispered, his voice had the texture of silk as it transformed into a low vibration. He watched her face as her pupils engulfed her irises as she was lost to the feel of his distinctive brush of mind and body against hers. He felt the tremor of his own touch through her mind, and his eyes half-closed. He pulled her close to him and let his mental shields drop, clasping her back and drawing her close. Hermione gasped, her body trembled against his as her mind joined with his, sharing his thoughts and memories as she shared her own.

Hermione clawed at his back, pulling him against herself as the cords of their pervasive bond drew tighter, solidifying, and cementing in place. For every painful memory he had, she gave him one of her happier ones. For every painful memory she had, he gave her an understanding that shook her to the core. She knew, as the rush of his need washed over her, that it was so much more than physical. A lifetime of unrequited hidden emotions sought something he had subconsciously been hunting for his entire existence and found in her. The pain and suffering she had endured during the war was enough to give her understanding instead of pity and comfort instead of blind sympathy.

They entwined together as their minds blended, united together in their inevitable purity of purpose, bound together in their interdependent need, and forged together in their unified trust. In their blinding moment of shared delection, they were one. There was no Hermione. There was no Severus. There was only unity and the exultant peace of finding singularity in rapport. They were bound until the end of all things. Even death could not break what was brought into being between them at that very moment of acceptance.
They collapsed together, breathing heavily, as they slowly retreated into the familiarity of their own minds and bodies, yet they were still irrevocably together. Severus placed his hands to her temples and placed his forehead against hers, closing his eyes as his heartbeat and breathing attempted to normalize into something less resembling the stampede of a thousand panicked Kneazles.

“Severus,” Hermione managed to articulate with a soft pant.

“Yes, Ms. Granger,” he rumbled, mischief in his mental voice.

“Thank you,” she murmured, burrowing her head into his chest.

Severus closed his eyes as he pulled her even more tightly against him. “You are welcome.”

Chapter 57: Harry’s Patrol

Harry walked the long stretch of Snape’s patrol alone as was expected of the Potions Master. Fortunately for him, most students immediately scurried back to their dorms without a word from him. It seemed as though Snape’s presence alone did what it had always done in Harry’s memory, sent wayward interloping students clambering back to their dormitories as swiftly as humanly possible without running. Running would incur even more wrath, and no one wanted to give Snape a reason to look at them longer than necessary. He never thought he would be glad of that.

Walking down the emptying corridors was slightly surreal. He felt like the real Severus Snape would come whipping down the hallway to administer a stern warning to get a move on. When students addressed him, it took every amount of control he had to keep his voice quiet and controlled. It took even more to keep his face steelied into the blank. He struggled to remember the things he had forced himself to do during the war to keep his mind shut and expression hardened, but unlike his beloved friend… he had returned from the war whole. He had returned to Ginny with purpose to never let a moment go untreasured between them.

It took focus to walk like Severus Snape. It wasn’t just the mechanics of not getting tangled up in his outer robe. He felt like he had to stride forward as if carried by an unseen force and trust that his feet would find the floor before he fell flat on his face. He summoned every memory he had of Snape’s presence, his roll of almost malevolent power behind the ice of his unquestioning control. Harry also realized why he had to be the one to emulate him. He was the only one who had seen his memories that made him exactly who he was. He did feel a little sorry for Ron, though.

Ron had been attacked by students during dinner. Not just any students, but a steadfast group of Slytherin youth. They had hugged the bottom of his waist and congratulated him on being out of the hospital and asking if “she” had liked the flowers. Ron’s face had looked absolutely mortified before he forced Hermione’s face into a smile and thanked them all for their concern and the flowers.

Harry had struggled to keep a straight face, having a little more respect for the man who rarely expressed an emotion through any vehicle but the tiniest of tells.

As Ron recovered from being hugged by his rival House, Harry had forced himself to put his hand to “her” waist, gently pushing Ron to the High Table.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ron hissed through gritted teeth he forced into a smile.

“Being considerate, you dolt,” Harry growled in Severus’ steely tone. Harry wasn’t sure if it was what he said or the fact that Snape’s voice automatically caused him to cast his head down and be reprimanded.
Save the swift kick Harry gave Ron to not wolf down his food like… well Ron Weasley, the dinner went smoothly. Harry had seen Severus eat at the High Table enough times to know exactly how to act.

The hallways were quiet now, giving Harry time to amuse himself with the memories of the dinnertime antics.

A footfall scuffed on the ground down the hall, but he saw nothing. His hand tensed, the part of his mind he had honed in countless battles came rushing back to him. A man came around the corner, walking with the same demeanor as the old Defense Against the Dark Arts professor he remembered… Gilderoy Lockhart. He had the same arrogant carriage and self-assuredness that seemed too good to be true. Harry’s eyes narrowed, and he forced his face into the deadpan expression Snape wore like a glove.

“Ah, there you are Severus,” the man chimed in an almost sing-song fashion. “I was wondering if I would see you again after that unfortunately incident with your apprentice.”

Harry felt a tingle and he slammed down the barriers around his mind in force, blocking even his most mundane thoughts. “Is there… something you need?” Harry said lowly, forcing his words to be low and extended as he turned to continue on his patrol as he knew Snape would have done.

“Do you think you can just sweep her off her feet with your brooding manner and deep thoughts, Severus?” Brody’s voice mocked the Potion Master. “Did your valiant rescue win the heart of the fair maiden and blind her to your cause? I know what you are.”

Harry whirled around, his black robes spinning with him. He called on the dark stillness he pulled on to face Voldemort and channeled into his black eyes.

“You’re a murderer,” Brody accused him. “Some left over henchman to a non-existent Dark Lord. Somehow you’ve managed to fool everyone here in this… institution into thinking you are reformed. I know better.”

Harry curled his lip up in a half snarl and glared down at the smaller man, face as still and pale as stone. “You. Know. Nothing.”

Brody flinched away from him a moment, but then seemed to find some courage in the depths of his own conviction. No longer attempting to look away from Severus’ gaze, he met it with his own.

“You killed my parents while you were off being a “hero,” Severus Snape. I will find a way to make sure everyone here knows exactly what you are to avenge their deaths.”


“What are you going to do, Snape?” Brody scowled at him. “Kill me?” he glared up at Snape with a cocky smile. “Go ahead and prove to them that I’m right. Prove to her that you are nothing but a murderer. Either way, I will win.” Brody stormed away down the corridor, not even bothering to look to see if Severus would retaliate.

Harry glowered into the dark of the hall before continuing on his patrol.
“Is it bad that I miss our patrols?” Hermione said as she flopped her head against the pillow. “I think I’m stir crazy. It’s like I’m missing all the time I was out cold.”

“You miss sending errant deviants and miscreants running back towards their dormitories?” Severus’ voice was amused.

“No,” Hermione laughed, whapping Severus on the chest. “I mean our strolls.”

“You miss our strolls being accosted by Pomona with random emergencies?” Severus asked with a straight face.

“Severus,” Hermione said, slamming her forehead against his chest.

“Yes?” he replied innocently.

“You,” she said, “are horrible.”

“Hrm,” Severus grunted. “Whatever shall I do… to make it up to you?” His black eyes smiled while his face remained unexpressive.

Hermione looked up at him and placed her hand to his cheek and drew her fingers through his hair.

He hissed lowly, eyes fluttering. When his eyes opened, they were unfocused, as if looking through her.

“I love that I can do that,” she admitted.

Severus took a deep breath and struggled to refocus. “Distraction?”

Hermione laughed, “No…” She stroked the hair around his ear with a soft expression. “Pleasure.”

Severus touched her temple with his fingers and drew it down her cheek. “It is more than that,” he answered softly.

She looked at him curiously.

“It is peace,” he said, the corners of his lips turned up slightly. “Solace. It is like petrichor… the very smell of earth in the air after rain. It is the very whisper of spring in the winter and rain after the dry season.”

Hermione looked thoughtful. “All that from a touch?”

“Your touch,” he replied, his dark eyes meeting hers. “Yours alone.”

Hermione smiled at him in wonder.

“And what does my touch give you, witch?” Severus rumbled as he stroked her hair and down the line of her neck.

Hermione’s eyes practically rolled back in her head. “I’m not sure if there are words… for… what it gives me.” She managed to finish before losing all sense of anything but the feel of his fingers moving across her skin and the echo of it in his mind.

“Perhaps,” Severus whispered in her ear, “We should work on your vocabulary, Ms. Granger.” His
teeth nipped the sensitive flesh under her ear.

Hermione shuddered against him, her arms went around his neck and pulled him down on top of her, effectively ending the verbal conversation.

Chapter 59: Wait… Which Goddess of Wisdom?

Minerva trotted down the hallway on all fours, tail high in the air she walked. She padded down the edges of the hall, going in and out of the shadows as naturally as only a cat could. Her padded feet made no sound, and her ears flicked back and forth catching the sounds around her. People talking, rustling of papers, scraping of shoes, whispering in the halls as students out of curfew fled back to their dorms.

Lights were starting to go out throughout Hogwart’s, but she never had problems with seeing where she was going once they did. She caught the sound of muffled sniffles coming from behind one of the columns and padded over to investigate. She sat down in front of the child, looking up at her tear streaked face.

“Hullo, kitty,” she snuffled, petting McGonagall on the head.

Minerva tried to remember the student’s name and remembered that one of the visiting lecturers had brought a daughter along with him. That would explain being out of uniform and not knowing her face from a class.

“I miss my mum,” the girl snuffled. “Dad says I have to be strong.”

McGonagall purred softly, rubbing against her leg.

“You’re awfully nice,” the girl said, scratching her ears. “Maybe when I’m old enough to come to Hogwart’s for real, I can have a familiar too.”

McGonagall head-bumped the girl’s hand and purred.

“Dad says he met mum here,” the girl said proudly, “back before the first war.” She petted Minerva on the back.

“I’m Melody,” the girl announced. “I wonder what your name is. You have spectacles around your eyes. That makes you wise. I’ll call you Athena, okay?”

Minerva meowed, head-bumping into Melody’s knee.

Melody sniffed once more, but rubbed her eyes. “I need to get back to… a gryphon door. Dad said they had a guest bed for me there, but I haven’t seen a door shaped like a gryphon anywhere. Do you know where one is, Athena?”

Minerva meowed and trotted down the hall a few steps and waved her tail back and forth like a flag.

“Okay, I’ll follow you,” Melody said and trotted along behind.

McGonagall let Melody down the hallways until they reached the moving stairs. She moved onto one and meowed, leading Melody from each staircase until they got the portrait of the Fat Lady.

“Password?” the Fat Lady asked.

McGonagall meowed loudly.
“That’s not the pass… oh I’m sorry Headmistress,” the portrait swung open.

Minerva meowed and walked into the portal, waving her tail.

Melody followed behind her until one of the other students who was pacing in the common room ran up to her. “Melody, where have you been? I’ve been worried sick!”

“I couldn’t find the gryphon door, Miss Bumblebee,” Melody sniffed. “Athena helped me get here. She’s a familiar. She’s very smart.”

“It’s Adlebury, Melody,” the woman corrected. “Come let’s get you settled in.” She turned to the cat by the doorway and tried to apologize to the Headmistress, but Minerva had already padded back out the portal, her tail high in the air.

Ron had a bad feeling.

It had started like an itch just out of reach, but now it was a full blown allergic reaction. He patrolled the halls that Hermione would have, waved to the students in the Slytherin Common room as he passed, and grinned to the people in the Gryffindor common room as he passed there just as he had been instructed. Everything seemed normal enough. He still couldn’t get over being hugged by Slytherin students, but Hermione had insisted he not botch that relationship up. He really didn’t want to have to crawl out of some random quicksand pit in Africa that she would undoubtedly hex him to if he did botch that up.

The itch would not go away.

Maybe it was that potion Snape had given him before Harry and he had left.

“Drink this, Mr. Weasley,” Snape had said as his dark eyes glowered at him. “It will help clutter your mind from being read temporarily by filling it with random factoids about Arithmancy. It should guard you against amateur Legilimency for a short time. This may not be a problem for you, but try not to think of anything overly long, lest it be read by someone.”

Ron shivered. The man could still scare the ever-living daylights out of him. Having Harry running around looking like him didn’t help his phobia either. He admired Hermione for being able to stand in his presence let alone work with the man. They were close enough that it was normal for Snape to touch Hermione while working with her, which it turn meant Harry had to touch him. That was beyond unnerving. The only touch Snape ever gave him was to force his head down towards his books and drag him somewhere. Both were equally unpleasant memories.

Ron felt like he was being watched, but there was no one in the hall with him. No one he could see anyway. Knowing he was a walking target didn’t really help matters any. Even though he felt the eyes upon him, nothing came of it. He kept his wand close to his hand the entire patrol, but whatever was causing his paranoia did not manifest. None of the things he had been taught in Auror training had touched on being stalked by an invisible person. There were plenty of skills to deal with something you could see.

Hold on a tick.

Ron pulled out a jar of black powder from his robe he had been holding onto for Aiden’s lessons in
muggle fingerprinting.

He opened the jar and waved his wand, “Deprimo!”

A powerful wind wicked around him like a personal storm, extending outward, carrying the dark powder with it like forming storm. He flung the wind outward down the hallway like tide, watching where the pigment passed through and where it…

There! In the corner.

“Expelliarmus!” Ron threw the spell at the pillar where the dark powder had collected, forming a distinctively human face in the wind.

The figure fled down the corridor. Ron attempted to pursue, but forgot to dispel the wind, and it came billowing back at him, knocking him backwards. He fumbled with his wand to counter the storm and ran in the direction of the fleeing figure, grabbing the fallen wand off the floor as he ran.

As he skidded down the hallway, he screeched to a halt as Minerva had her wand to the throat of a man half covered in black powder. “I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced,” Minerva hissed, shoving the tip of her wand into the powder covered figure. “But I assure you, this will be rectified soon. Incarcerous! Stupefy!” Ropes swirled around the figure and tightened as they fell flat on their face with a thud.

Ron let out his breath as he remembered to breathe again. “Thank you, Headmistress McGonagall.”

“Oh no, Mr. Weasley,” Minerva said as she stared at the black powdered, rope covered, unconscious man on the floor. “Thank you.”

Chapter 60: Purging the Dark Taint

There was someone knocking at his chamber door, and Severus opened one eye to glare at it accusatorily. “Come in, Minerva,” he grunted.

Minerva slipped into the room, closing the door behind her. “Severus, we found the stalker, but he’s still invisible. Can you help?”

Knowing Minerva was no fool when it came to dispelling enchantments on the body, he rose into a sitting position. “Permanent invisibility?”

“Or something close to it,” McGonagall said with a shake of her head. “None of the dispels work. If he wasn’t half covered in soot, or whatever that black powder is Mr. Weasley dumped over him is, we wouldn’t see him at all.”

Severus put his hand to his forehead and rubbed, attempting to force some coherence into himself. “Give me a few minutes to put some tea into myself, Minerva. I’ll be no good to anyone in this state.”

McGonagall nodded. “We have him detained in one of the free classrooms. Aiden is talking to him. Potter and Weasley are still outside in your waiting room, waiting for polyjuice to wear off so there aren’t two of you running around.”

Severus lifted a brow. “Which classroom did you shove our stalker into?”

“The unfurnished one next to 3B in this wing,” Minerva replied.
Severus waved his hand in the air like shooing a fly. “Alright, just... give me a few minutes.”

McGonagall nodded sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Severus. You know I would have preferred to let you both rest.”

Snape nodded with a slight drag of his head, blearily attempting to clear it. He waved his hand again at her dismissively and grunted as she exited the door, closing it behind her. Prince made a tired peep from his roost by the fireplace, not even making the obligatory appeal for food. Now he knew he was exhausted.

“Bocknee,” he called tiredly.

There was a soft popping noise. “Bocknee is here. Happy to serve most honored House of Slytherin.”

“Tea, please. For two, and” Severus grunted, “some crumpets and jam and a bowl of fruit.”

“Yes, Master Snape,” the elf chimed. “Bocknee is happy to serve.” The house-elf disappeared with a pop.

The elf reappeared a few minutes later with a tray of tea and food, placing it on the table by the fire where Snape had always taken his tea.

“Bocknee,” Severus snapped tiredly.

“Yes, Master Snape?” the elf quivered, wondering if he had somehow offended the Potion Master.

“Thank you,” he grunted, waving his hand for him to go.

The house-elf’s eyes grew wide and he bowed, disappearing with a soft pop.

Severus touched Hermione’s temple with his fingertips, gently caressing her hairline with a soft hissing breath. “Hermione, it is time to wake up.”

Hermione’s eyes opened slowly. She grasped his fingers and pulled them closer to herself, practically pulling him down on top of her.

Severus let out a small chuckle. “You will be the end of me, witch,” he murmured into her hair, closing his eyes as he took in the scent of her hair. “Come, I have had Bocknee bring us tea and food.” He extricated himself from her warm embrace with great difficulty.

Hermione mumbled something and slowly put her leg out to touch the floor with her toe.

“I will say,” Severus commented as Hermione sleepily auto dressed herself with her eyes half closed, “that you dress yourself half asleep light years ahead of Weasley wide awake.”

“You should see him try to dress himself half asleep,” Hermione commented blearily. “I’m pretty sure Molly made those sweaters for him specifically because he could wear them backwards and not embarrass himself.”

Severus closed his eyes at the mental image. “Amazing woman, Molly Weasley.”

“Speaking of Molly Weasley...” Hermione said with a tired smile.

Severus braced himself for something undoubtedly horrible.
“Molly wants us to attend Christmas Dinner at the Burrow,” Hermione said sweetly. She sat in the chair by the fire and practically threw the contents into the back of her throat without waiting to see if it was hot.

Severus lifted a brow, “Us?”

“Well she invited me,” Hermione admitted, “but do you really think I would go without asking you to come too?”

“You could spare me the social giddiness that is the Weasley Family Christmas,” Severus stated flatly.

“Nonsense, Severus,” Hermione scoffed. “You’ve faced Voldemort for decades, and you shudder at the thought of spending Christmas Dinner with my friend’s family?”

“It is infinitely more terrifying,” Severus said dryly, his face expressionless.

Hermione gave him a warm grin, extending her arm to curl her fingertips around his.

Severus closed his eyes at her touch, and then met her eyes with his impenetrable black ones. “As you wish,” he replied with a slight scowl, “but there had better be a galleon’s hold worth of tea waiting for me there.”

Hermione clasped his fingers with a smile.

“They rebuilt the Burrow?” Severus asked suddenly.

“First thing they did after the war,” Hermione answered him. “I think… it was really important to them to have that familiar space again.”

Snape nodded as he downed a second cup of tea and inhaled the crumpet in two bites.

“We should go. The stalker awaits us.” He stood up and moved to the wardrobe to dress.

Hermione guzzled the last of the tea gratefully and made 3 of the crumpets disappear in a matter of seconds. By the time she had finished emptying the fruit bowl into Prince’s hungry beak, Severus has dressed. His pale hands drifted up his doublet with practiced efficiency, making it look like wandless magic. She transferred Prince to her shoulder, and the Phoenix yawned widely, swishing his tail feathers down her back like a second wave of her hair.

Severus approached with a flow of his robes behind him. His pale hands touched the sides of her head at the temples lightly. He pressed his forehead to hers gently even as the mask fell into place over his face. Hermione closed her eyes, following his lead, allowing her thoughts to settle and banish themselves behind the many buried doors. They exited the chamber into the waiting room where Harry and Ron awaited them.

Hermione was somewhat relieved to see Harry and Ron looking like themselves again. As amusing as it was to see the both of them awkwardly attempting to be them, she wouldn’t have wished it on them for longer than necessary.

Ron handed back Hermione’s clothes with a sheepish grin, saying that he would never make fun of
her taking time to dress again. She smirked, taking the sigils off the collar and transferring them back to her own. She took the bundle of robes and shoes from Severus before taking them back into the other room.

When she returned, they all filed out, heading towards the isolated classroom Minerva and Aiden awaited them in.

As they walked, students had begun to stir and walk the hallways. All of them cleared the way for their professors with customary deference, though many of them stared at Aiden, Ron, and Harry curiously.

As they passed the Slytherin Common Room, a group of young students rushed up to Hermione and passed her a small pin shaped like a potion. The older student flicked the potion with his fingers and it glowed like a real potion, trembling as an emerald snake rose up from the mouth and burst into a shower of silver snowflakes. Hermione smiled warmly, pinning it to her robe, and allowed them to hug her, tousling their hair with her hand in thanks for the early Christmas gift.

Mitchell stood out of the gaggle of Slytherin students and walked up to Severus and held out his hand to him. Snape looked down at him, expressionless.

“Yes, Mr. Mitchell?” Severus inquired softly.

The boy put out hand for him.

Severus put his hand out slowly, his palm up. His dark eyes were unreadable.

Mitchell placed something in his hand with a shy smile and rejoined the other students with a shy downturn of his eyes.

Severus lifted his hand and peered at the potion shaped pin. Hermione reached over and flicked it with her fingers, and the pin loosed the emerald green Slytherin snake that burst into a shower of silver snowflakes. Snape’s dark eyes met Mitchell’s and he inclined his head silently.

Hermione took the pin and smoothly attached it to his robe with a straight face. She placed it on his vest, so it would be covered by his outer robe, knowing that he would frown on public displays of such gifts. She adjusted his collar as if it were actually crooked, running her finger across the back of his neck.

Severus hissed softly, but kept his face utterly blank.

They all chattered adoringly at Prince, who calmly accepted head scritches and a handful of raisins from their hands. Prince shook his head at one point to unruffle his feathers, and a longer piece of half-down baby-feather dislodged from his head crest. Hermione grasped it between her fingers and gave it to Mitchell in thanks for his bravery delivering the flowers. Mitchell pet the feather with wide eyes as his friends reached over to pet it too, making him the center of attention in the group once more.

Hermione thanked them all with a soft grin then put on the stern face and reminded them that they should not be late for breakfast and do their pre-break exams on an empty stomach.

“Yes, Professor Granger,” they all chimed, rushing back into the Common Room with light laughter, rustling each other’s hair and clapping each other on the back.

“Blimey, Hermione,” Ron said after they scurried off. “What did you do to Slytherin House?”
“Helped a boy,” Hermione said with a faraway look in her eyes. “Who had no friends that day.”

Ron and Harry exchanged looks. Severus gently placed his hand to her waist and inclined his head down the hallway. She smiled and they continued their walk towards their destination.

“So you’ve finally come,” the figure wrapped in rope spat as Severus entered the room. “Here to gloat over your victories as only a traitor can.”

“That’s the first they’ve said since I started questioning them this morning,” Aiden whispered to Minerva, Ron, and Harry. They all stood in the far corner, watching Snape carefully. Hermione waited in the hallway at Severus’ request.

Severus stood silently, his dark eyes stared into the bundle of ropes and black powder. His blank face twisted into a cruel smile. “Acacia,” he rumbled. “Still running around with your father’s voice?”

The figure hissed at him, “At least my father died for the cause he believed in!”

Severus’ dark eyes stared directly into the “face” of the captive. “And are you so sure, I didn’t? I see you are still poisoning yourself with that failed invisibility potion. How many of them have you imbibed to get to this point? How many chunks of your own flesh and blood have you had to carve to make it once your father died and couldn’t give more of his?”

Aiden and Minerva exchanged horrified glances. Ron and Harry looked like they were going to hurl.

“I should have known your crude signature on that bottle, Acacia,” Severus said flatly. “Only you would craft a jar so perfectly vile and then be too impatient to execute it properly.”

“That jar was for you!” Acacia hissed at him. “You weren’t supposed to have an apprentice. You never took an apprentice, even back when I begged you to take me as yours. It would have been perfect. Hogwarts’ Potion Master killed in own classroom by his own dark arts. No one would have been the wiser.”

“You told me I’d never amount to anything, but I managed survive the war and come back to repay you for what you did to my father!” The chair Acacia was bound up in rattle as they struggled.

“I killed him,” Severus said darkly.

There was a gasp behind him from the cluster behind him.

“Because you peeled the skin from his flesh and used it in your little potions,” Severus said steely. “You used his blood so much, that even your voice became a reflection of his. What you left behind breathing in your laboratory was not an act of a loving father to his daughter. It was an act of sadism and insanity. I killed him… to free him from you. He begged me to.”

“That is a lie!” Acacia hissed back at him. “He LOVED me!”

“You have no inkling of what love is,” Severus said darkly. “Even your love of power is warped beyond recognition. I wonder, if we dispel this enchantment you’ve bound to your very skin, what we will see?”

The captive spit out profanities at him.

Severus turned from her and inclined his head to the three Aurors and Minerva. His dark eyes were
completely unreadable. There was no emotion and no flicker of life behind his eyes. There was no recognition to be found there. What looked back at them was the depths of the Abyss. He stood beside the invisible captive and extended his hands.

Hermione walked into the room from the hall as if summoned. Her face was expressionless and eyes dropped off into the bottomless depths of the unknown. She took her place across from him and placed her hands in his. Their wands met side by side as their fingers interlocked. Prince perched on their other interlocked hands, spreading his wings outward like the thunderbird on top of a First Nations totem pole.

Aiden made a step forward as if to stop whatever it was Snape and Hermione were going to do, but McGonagall laid her hand over his and shook her head silently.

Severus locked gazes with Hermione, their dark eyes stared into each other, unblinking. They both closed their eyes. There was a wind in the room, swirling from the bottom of their feet and formed a cyclone of heat and cold combined into one.

The wind howled in the room, drowning out the curses from the captive in the chair. Severus’ and Hermione’s robes flapped in the winds around them, rising up from the ground and suspending themselves in the air like clouds.

The captive was surrounded in wind and a growing glow of power as the wizard and his apprentice banished the dark art taint that seeped into Acacia’s very bones. It exited her like a stream of black flies from her mouth, darkening the room with its undeniable wrongness. Ron and Harry felt a recognition in the pit of their stomach. It was the same torn unnatural feeling of evil that came from one of Voldemort’s horcruxes. It was the ultimate taint of the most supreme acts of evil.

The cloud spun around Severus and Hermione, trying to find purchase in either, but it was denied. There was no emotion to corrupt. There were no thoughts to intermingle with. It attempted to rush over to where the Aurors and Minerva were, and they immediately threw up their wands, throwing up a dome shield over themselves, repelling the cloud from themselves. It made a horrific howling sound as it failed to find something in which to escape.

Aiden yelled at Ron and Harry and they stepped forward together, pointing their wands at the black cloud of dark magic. “Expecto Patronum!”

The cones of their Patronus surrounded the swirling cloud of hate.

“A Murder Patronum!” yelled Minerva over the roar of the swirling magic. A fierce cat roared into the room from her wand and swirled around cloud with its elongated body.

A pulse of magic came from where Severus and Hermione were linked together. “Expecto Patronum!” they yelled together, and a great phoenix rose from the end of their wands in a wave of ethereal fire. It spun around McGonagall’s twisting cat and alighted on top of the black cloud, spreading its wings like the world dragon around the Earth, and Prince let out a piercing scream of power as the Patronus burst in the flames and enveloped the black cloud in a ball of cleansing fire.

The roar was deafening. The piercing scream of Prince cut through the room with tangible power and filled every one of them with righteous retribution. Flames enveloped his body, whirling around him in a living coat of fire.

The magical wind formed by Hermione and Severus began to slow, as the room cleared. The flames wicking around Prince calmed as he flapped his wings and tucked them around his body. Ron, Harry, Minerva, and Aiden dropped their wands silently, breathing heavily.
Hermione and Severus stood completely still, locked together in the magic they had summoned in order to purge Acacia of the dark taint.

She stared into space blankly, her eyes glassed over. No longer invisible, she looked like an emaciated version of Bellatrix Lestrange. Her hair was wild around her face, her long fingers were so bony that they looked skeletal. Her skin was covered in scars where she had made cuts on herself for her own dark spells. Her face was gaunt and drawn, and her eyes were sunk back into her skull like a skeletal horror.

Severus and Hermione moved at the same time, tucking their wands back in their robes, and swirled, exiting the room together without a word. Prince flapped onto Hermione’s shoulder as they moved out of the door of the room, their dark robes billowing behind them.

Chapter 61: Minerva to the Rescue

“Severus!” McGonagall called to the two sprawled professors laid out on the ramparts of Hogwart’s. “Hermione!”

Severus was crumpled against one of the rampart walls with Hermione slumped against him. Prince was perched on the rampart wall, eyes closed.

“Just leave us to die in peace, Minerva” Severus groaned, echoing the last time Minerva found them sprawled after overtaxing their magic.

Minerva thrust a potion into Severus’ pale hand and rolled Hermione over so she could give her a potion to. “Good gracious. You two are going to be the death of me. Drink. Drink!” she commanded.

The two younger professors grunted, popped the cork, sniffed it, and quaffed the potion. They grunted, slumping back against each other with the grace of a fallen bag of potatoes.

Minerva put her back to the opposite wall and slumped to the ground with them. Prince let out a tired trill and flap hopped into Minerva’s lap, rolling his head against her chest for a head scratch. McGonagall laughed tiredly and scratched the young phoenix behind the neck.

The sun shined down on the ramparts, and Severus pulled Hermione against him, his eyes closing as his head slumped backwards.

“Poppy is going to hex me,” Hermione mumbled into Severus.

“I fear I’m in no condition to save you,” Severus mumbled back.

“Can we just… sleep here tonight?” Hermione suggested.

“Moving would take considerable effort,” Severus agreed.

McGonagall sighed deeply and summoned tea tray between them with her wand. She poured tea into the cups and watched as the two groggily fumbled for the tea cups and began to drink it.

“So…” Minerva started. “What was that?”

“Banishment,” Severus said softly over his teacup. “The very opposite of Dark Arts.”
“You fill yourself with nothing the taint can hold onto while holding on to the thing that connects you to what makes you the most human,” Hermione started.

“And burn the taint away,” Severus finished.

McGonagall made a face that was both curious and confused. “Have you ever done that before?”

“That was the first time,” Hermione said sleepily.

“Severus?” Minerva asked.

“It was…” Severus answered, “Theoretical.”

Minerva clasped the bridge of her nose. “I am starting to be glad you were not in classes together at the same time. I do not want to think what spells you would have created together as allies… theoretically… as teenagers and for the next twenty years after that.”

Severus chuckled. “It wouldn’t have worked back then, Minerva.”

“Oh, why is that?” McGonagall asked.

“I would not have allowed myself to be seen with a known Gryffindor,” Severus smirked.


“May I join this party?” Aiden chimed in tiredly from the archway.

Severus gestured to the ramparts floor with his hand.

“I have to say,” Aiden said tiredly as he gratefully took a cup of tea. “That this has been the most magically intensive case I have ever been on… and I have seen a lot of cases.”

“Learn anything new from Acacia?” Severus intoned in question.

“She won’t stop talking now. She just keeps talking about everything in a stream of consciousness,” Aiden said, rubbing his temples with his fingers. “I think she’s completely mental.”

“She was always… unstable,” Severus admitted. “Her father sheltered her in his mansion, supported the pure-blood supremacy to get further in his career, and didn’t realize until it was too late that his daughter had become deeply involved in the darkest of Dark Arts.”

Severus stared upward into the clouds. “She begged to be my apprentice when I worked side jobs for her father. I refused her as I refused everyone. She became determined to prove herself better than I…”

“I lost contact with her father for a few months, and it was out of character, so went to the mansion to check on him for new orders. I found him in the laboratory, restrained, with pieces carved out of him. Yet he was still alive.”

“He begged me to kill him,” Severus said with a blank expression. “He was already dead. It was only the darkest of magic that kept him alive on that table for the use in her experiments.”

“I took her notebooks, released him from his suffering, and set the mansion to flames,” Severus said. “I left nothing for her to find.”

“I read her journals, and they were filled with rantings and formulae for potions of the darkest kind.
All of them required the flesh of blood of not just anyone. It had to be someone related to her. I set them to flame,” Severus said in a quiet tone.

“Voldemort read her mind when she came looking to join up, and he found her far more amusing broken. He unhinged her mind just a little bit more before casting her to the side on his way to domination. She blamed me, of course. She disappeared shortly before Voldemort marked Harry Potter. We thought her a casualty of the war. It would have been… kinder had she perished then,” Severus turned his dark eyes to Aiden as if he awaited some sort of response, yet his face was blank.

“She tortured the man you call Nicolas Brody,” Aiden said finally into the silence. “She cackled that he was much better this way. Tortured mentally and physically. Planted false memories in his mind and sent him into Hogwart’s to be her tool. I sent Harry to restrain him and floo him back to St. Mungos to see if there is anything we can do for him. I fear she broke him and rewrote him so completely, that he will never realize his parents were not even in the war.”

“What of Acacia?” Hermione asked.

“She will be put on trial and most likely convicted of the darkest of crimes I do not even recall because they are so unthinkable,” Aiden said. “If anyone deserves the Dementor’s Kiss… It would be her. She is too dangerous to simply imprison. I do not even wish to think about what could happen if she were allowed to slip through the cracks and escape. All of this will be in my reports, of course, and I will owl you a copy with any updates, Headmistress McGonagall.”

“Minerva,” McGonagall admonished. “After all of this, you have the right to call me Minerva.”

Aiden smiled tiredly. “After seeing you two in action, Professor Snape and Professor Granger, I think I understand why Harry and Ron think the world of you.”

Severus smirked. “Just her, most likely.”

“I think they have more respect for you after this fiasco, Professor,” Aiden said with an amused smile. “They just won’t say it to your face.”

Severus harrumphed.

“We should meet up and compare notes about those two,” Aiden suggested with a grin. “We can exchange stories over a pint and some darts.”

Severus lifted a brow, but did not deny him outright.

Minerva laid her head back against the wall and laughed, waking up Prince who was snoozing on her lap. She soothed the bird with her hand.

“Such an amazing creature,” Aiden commented. “I suppose I should head back to the office and make sure all the paperwork is done on this.” He started to get up.

“Minerva! Minerva!” Pomona Sprout’s voice broke the air like a crack of thunder, causing Severus to slouch more into the ground and Hermione to collapse into his lap. Severus placed his hand on her head and covered her with half of his robes.

Pomona was dragging a man carrying a suitcase behind her as if the hounds of Hades were chasing her. “Minerva, you need to talk to this man.”

The dusty haired man panted to keep up with Pomona and paused to catch his breath as he leaned against the archway pillar.
“Yes, what is it?” McGonagall said from her seat on the ground.

“Oh hello… Headmistress is it? Ahem,” the man puffed. “I’m sorry, I awoke a few hours ago and found myself locked in a crate down in Hogsmeade. I was on my way to Hogwarts for the fall semester. I remember getting off the train, but everything went black from there until this morning.”

“And who, may I ask, are you exactly?” Minerva asked with a sigh.

“Nicolas Brody, Headmistress,” the man said with a bow. “At your service.”

Severus, Hermione, Minerva, and Aiden put their hand to the bridge of their nose and groaned together.

“I say we all meet at the Three Broomsticks at this point,” Aiden said, throwing his hand up in the air and waving it spastically. “I’m buying.”

“Aw, I bloody give up against you, Severus,” Aiden groaned as Snape beat him yet again at darts.

Severus stood silently, dart in hand, inclining his head with a curious look.

“Teach me!” Hermione said with a laugh, standing up in front of him.

Severus looked down at her face with a sly grin upon his face.

“Oh no you don’t,” Minerva shook her fist. “None of that mind to mind teaching. That is cheating!”

Severus inclined his head, his eyes dancing with silent laughter. He put the dart into her hand and moved her arm and body into position. Pressing close to her, he whispered into her ear, using his hand to move hers into place. He stepped away from her and Hermione closed her eyes, opened them, and cast her dart.

Aiden groaned lowly as it slammed into the dart board right next to Severus’ bulls-eye. “That’s it. I’m getting you properly knackered so I can win at least one game against someone.”

Minerva laughed genuinely. “It’s no use with those two, Aiden,” she laughed. “If you want to win against them, it would have to be against Auror trade secrets.”

Aiden shook his head and waved Minerva up to play darts against him.

Hermione laughed as Aiden and Minerva kept tying against each other.

“I give up!” Aiden laughed, sitting down to finish his food. “Next time I’m taking you all out to muggle bowling or mini-golf, and we’ll see who wins!”

Severus arched a brow, and Hermione grinned. He reached into a pocket of his robe and placed a small wooden box on the table. He tapped it with his wand and it grew. He flipped the latch on the box and exposed an intricately inlaid backgammon board with sets of dice, cups, doubling cube, and two sets of checkers.

“Oh you are SO on!” Aiden slammed his fist down on the table and the games began in earnest. Minerva laughed and winked to Hermione. Hermione leaned back in the chair, absentely handing Prince random pieces of her salad as she watched the dickering go back and forth.
Chapter 58: PTSD

Hermione shot up in the bed, gasping for air. Bellatrix’s face haunted her dreams. She had flayed her parents in front of her eyes, laughing that no one like Molly Weasley could ever kill her. She would take her revenge by kill everyone Hermione knew, starting with the ones she thought safely hidden.

She clutched her head, the pain of her old wounds ached as the image of her parents being tortured echoed in her mind and her body at the time. She hissed to herself, rolling off the bed, staggering, and collapsing in the middle of one of the chamber carpets. She groaned lowly, unable to shake away the pain to even focus. She heard Prince chirping in alarm, but the sound made no sense to her. Everything was dangerous. Everything was pain.

Hands touched her, and she flailed out in retaliation, yelling in terror.

“How often do you have them?” Severus said as he handed her a cup of tea. He sat down in the chair beside her.

Hermione sipped the tea thoughtfully. “Sometimes every week. Sometimes every few weeks. If I’m lucky, a month or more.” She stared into her tea as if to discern her own future.

Severus sighed, “I used to have the nightmares like that, after Lily died. It was a good part of how I became so good at being so heartless in the eyes of two sides of the wars.”

Hermione looked at him with understanding and nodded, “Your words are what get me through them. The ones you used tonight.”

“I remember teaching you,” Severus recalled, “but as I recall it was so you would be more patient with the potions brewing.”

Hermione smiled a little. “It works for many things.”

“I am glad you were paying attention that evening, then,” he said with a curved lip.
Hermione tilted her head. “You may not believe this, Severus,” she began, “but I have always paid apt attention to what you say. Even when you hated me.”

“I think I was jealous of you,” Severus said, looking up towards the ceiling. “You were bright, powerful, had loyal friends you were willing to defend and they were willing to defend you.”

Hermione looked at him with a tilted head.

“You studied hard, retained everything like everything mattered equally,” he continued. “You were fierce. You kept stealing reagents from my stores right out from under my nose.”

Hermione giggled a little and looked down.

“Albus favored you,” he said. “The other professors adored you in their classes. They had never seen a witch who on no occasion gave up learning anything and everything they could teach, and it never changed you. You never once abused that power or trust for your own benefit, only to help others.”

Perhaps, I saw something in you I had wished for when I was in school,” he mused while sipping his tea, “and envied you for it. I could have been kinder. Helped you sooner… You would have excelled beyond seventh year skill before anyone. It would not have affected my cover with Voldemort or Dumbledore. I was selfish and cruel, and I will probably regret that for the rest of my life.”

Hermione touched his hand and gained his attention through the bond. “Severus, you inspired me.”

Severus looked at her with every doubt crossing his eyes.

“Every other professor I had encouraged me with more knowledge,” she explained, “but you encouraged me to go find it myself. I knew without a doubt that you would never give me a grade I hadn’t earned by no one’s power but my own. You taught me that some people cannot be pleased,” she said with a laugh, “and that it would not always be my fault that it occurred, but sometimes it was my fault.”

“You taught me that sometimes you don’t realize what you have until you almost lose it,” Hermione continued. “Sometimes you lose the people that you love and you have to become stronger for it. Sometimes you have to hide your true face from those you care about to keep them safe… so your own nightmares to not follow them. Sometimes… you have to sacrifice a part of yourself to give others a chance to live… happier… oblivious lives.”

Hermione squeezed his hand. “I am glad we are here, at this moment. I can sit here, drinking tea with my best friend, and know he understands. All of what you did, whatever the reason, led to this point, and will not regret any of it. I will not trade it for a few extra happier memories if it did not lead exactly to this point.”

Hermione tilted her chin up, her eyes filled with mischief. “And we have a lifetime together for you to teach me all the things you could have when I was 12.”

Severus stroked her fingers with his, “A lifetime?”

Hermione leaned in closer to him, “Four hundred and twenty-two years and beyond.”

“I will hold you to that, witch,” Severus said, his dark eyes meeting hers.

“I would expect no less of you, Severus Snape,” Hermione said with a lift of her chin.
Part Four: Christmas Time

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus enjoy some well deserved Christmas time holiday.
Ginny is traumatised.
Severus recalls what allowed him to survive Nagini.

Chapter 62: It’s Looking a Lot Like Christmas

“It’s snowing at last!” Ginevra squealed as she ran down the stairs and twirled around her mother.

“Oof! Ginny, why are you running in the house?” Molly admonished as she mashed turnips on the kitchen counter.

“Because it’s snowing!” Ginny beamed as if that was the most logical reason to celebrate.

“Oh that’s a wonderfully logical reason to run around like a crazy person,” Percy commented from the armchair.

“Oh, shut it Percy,” Ron sniped as he helped set the dinner table. “You’re just cross because George turned your hair blue. You don’t have to take it out on Ginny.”

Percy shook his head, got up from the armchair, and carried a casserole to the table for his mother.

“Stop it,” Molly chastised, shaking her mashing prongs at them both. “The both of you.”

“It wouldn’t be Christmas if we didn’t bicker at least once, mum,” George grinned as he made a shark-like circle of the dinner table.

“George, I swear to Merlin if you blow up our Christmas dinner this year, I will Hex you so fast your father won’t even know who you are when I’m done,” Molly snapped.

“It was an accident!” George placated. “I swear!”

“Almost a fatal accident,” Harry commented as he helped set out the silverware. “For you!”

Laughter broke up the tension as the Christmas table was set. Heavenly smells spread through the kitchen and suffused through the house.

A knock at the door caused Ginny to break out in a smile instantly. “Hermione!” She tore across the room, practically bowling over Harry and Ron in her haste to answer the door.

Ron and Harry exchanged looks, shaking their heads.

“Oh good, we need more estrogen at the dinner table,” George teased as he set out the drinking glasses. Molly bashed his head with her hot mitts, whapping him backwards until he threw up his hands in surrender.

There was a gasp at the door as Ginny stumbled backwards from open door, practically stumbling
over the umbrella box and falling on her bum.

Harry came over to investigate, wondering what could have caused Ginny that particular reaction.

Severus stood tall in the doorway carrying a bottle of wine in his arm and a parcel. His dark eyes met Harry’s, face expressionless. “Do I get to come in, Mr. Potter, or shall I tell Hermione we will be dining on the porch?”

Harry’s eyes bulged out of his head for a moment as he tried to gather his scattered wits that had somehow leapt right out of his brain and dispersed themselves all over the floor. He gathered up Ginny with a hug and nudged her behind him. “Come in… Sir.”

Severus stepped into the house with an elongated step. Large snowflakes fell from his black hair and robe. Prince flapped his wings from atop his shoulder, sending a whirlwind of snowflakes in random directions. The phoenix warbled and settled back on Snape’s shoulder.

Hermione bumped into Severus from behind, carrying a bundle of packages. “Oof,” she said as she ran into him. “Severus, you make a better door than a window.”

The dark wizard stepped to the side, allowing Hermione to walk past him without a word.

Hermione peaked around her stack of packages. “Ginny! Harry!” she greeted. “I’ve brought presents!”

Harry snapped out of his shock first and ran up to gather up the packages from her arms and hustle them off to set under the tree. Ginny stood in place dumbly, eyes wide.

Hermione brushed the snow off herself as she took off her snow-covered boots. She strode over to where Ginny was gaping and tackle hugged her. “Ginny!” Hermione shook her friend by the shoulder when she didn’t respond. “Ginny, stop it, it’s not the apocalypse.”

“Ginevra Molly Weasley,” Molly scolded from the kitchen. “Where are your manners?”

Ginny blinked and stammered, “Thank you for coming, P..professor Snape. W..won’t you come in?”

Hermione sighed, slumping her head and shaking it. “Come on, Gin, let’s sit down!” She herded her friend with a few playful shoves. “Hi Molly! Percy! Ron! Where’s Arthur?”

Severus knocked the snow off his boots on the mat and removed them by the door to join with the rest of the snow-attacked footwear. He glided in towards the kitchen where Molly was fussing with the food preparation. He set down the bottle of wine and extended the bundle in his arms to Molly.

Molly seemed more surprised at the bundle than Severus and took it curiously. She unwrapped the crinkly paper, exposing an inner layer of dark green tissue paper. More curious, she dug into the tissue paper and gasped, pulling out a shiny metal water kettle. Severus watched her with a slight twitch of the corner of his lip as she opened the lid and saw the steam rising from the heated water within. She touched the outside of the kettle and realized it was cool to the touch, yet the water within was steaming hot.

“Hermione said you would adore having a kettle like ours,” Severus said softly. “Was she mistaken?”

Molly’s eyes widened and a smile broke out on her face. “It’s perfect!” She set the kettle down on the counter and dug deeper into the tissue paper and pulled out a few tea tins wrapped with delicate silver ribbon. Molly laughed in delight, and immediately set out to find her teapot.
Severus’ expression was impassive, but calm. He pulled a small perch out from his robe and tapped it with his wand and whispered. The perch enlarged and he set it down, transferring Prince to it so the phoenix would have a place to watch the goings on from his own vantage point. He pulled a plum out from his robe and gave it to him to work on. Prince gave a hungry baby-like peep and attacked it with gusto.

George had slinked over as Severus had pulled out the perch. “Is that what I think it is?”

“That depends,” Severus replied dryly, “What do you think it is?”

“A phoenix?”

Snape smirked as George reached out towards Prince and got a sharp peck as a reward. “You would be correct.” Severus pulled out another plum and held it out for George. “If you prefer to keep your fingers, I would recommend bribery.”

George blinked, rubbing his hand. He slowly took the plum from Snape’s offered hand and held it out to the hungry phoenix.

Prince, having decimated the other plum into submission, grasped the secondary food offering in his beak, shoved the plum under his foot to hold it, and tore into it with his beak.

Molly was setting out tea for everyone, wasting no time in using her new water kettle.

“Dinner everyone! Ron could you go get your father from upstairs, please?”

Ron was still gaping from the chair he had been lounging in.

Severus turned his black eyes to Ron. “I believe your mother is speaking to you, Mr. Weasley.”

Ron closed his mouth and dashed up the stairs, calling for his father. Harry smirked from his seat at the table. He held Ginny’s hand supportively.

As everyone began to settle around the dinner table, Hermione sat beside him, her fingers curled around his under the cover of the table and she smiled at him. “Happy Christmas, Severus,” she said softly.

Severus inclined his head to her, dark eyes meeting hers. His fingers slowly closed upon hers in reply.

Chapter 63: Molly the Matriarch

Dinner went without a hitch, and much to everyone’s relief, no one or nothing blew up, turned purple, broke out in spots, or had to be beaten into submission by Molly’s wrath. Ginny finally found her voice again, but when she chattered on to Hermione, she kept her gaze averted from the Potion Master, as if the only way she could deal with the reality he was there was to not admit he was there to begin with. It was quite possible, in Hermione’s mind at least, that Severus preferred it that way.

When the dinner was over, Arthur dragged his “kids” off to play games in the living room, leaving Molly and Severus to clean the table. Severus helped assist without a word being said. Prince had flapped onto Hermione’s shoulder after dinner and was now draped across her back as she leaned over the muggle board game they were all playing. Laughs rose and fell as the bird attempted to “assist” with the moving of some of the pieces, much to the chagrin of whoever owned the piece at the particular time.
Molly placed the water kettle in the middle of the island in the kitchen on top of an ornate tile. She pet the handle with her hand as if it were a living thing. “It’s real isn’t it?”

Severus turned to regard her. His black eyes met hers.

“It’s not just some passing fancy,” she insisted.

“No,” Severus said softly. “It is not.”

“You will take care of her?” she asked.

“Always,” Severus replied immediately.

“Her parents would have been so proud of her,” Molly said with a slight shake in her voice. “I know I am.”

“She loves you,” Severus answered her unspoken question. “Never doubt that.”

Molly looked Severus in the face. His face was impassive as always, but his eyes held something in them that she never expected to see. Warmth.

“We treated your poorly,” Molly said at last. “We lost faith in you.”

Severus looked up, as if catching sight of something out of the window. “It was my job to foster your doubts. It was my task to take the blame.”

“And we let you,” Molly replied. “We eagerly, ardently let you take the fall… so much so we even believed it to be true.”

Severus looked Molly Weasley in the face, his dark eyes catching hers in their gravity. “Do not blame yourself for what I chose to take upon myself, Molly,” he said in a tone that accepted no
refusal. “If I had not fallen, I would not have risen from the ashes of my defeat.”

Molly tilted her chin up, reminding him of a certain Gryffindor witch. “Take care of her, Severus,” she commanded. “She deserves to be happy… and so do you.” She turned to finish washing up the dishes.

Severus stared at her back for some time before he turned to walk towards the gathering of people playing board games.

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Hours past as the gaming went on into the wee hours, until finally sleep claimed each member of the Weasley family and dragged them kicking and screaming into their rooms.

Hermione had already fallen asleep against Severus, unable to keep her eyes open for the last stretch of a particularly long game of monopoly between George and Harry. Severus had his book out, as usual, as the last of them concluding the game. George looked up with surprise as he saw Hermione draped across Severus’s lap, sleeping away obliviously. Harry punched him in the ribs and shook his head, making a shooing motion for him to go to his room.

“Goodnight, Professor,” Harry said sleepily.

“Goodnight, Mr. Potter,” Severus replied as he turned the page of his book.

Molly shuffled out a few minutes later, carrying a stack of blankets. She put them on the chair nearby, and tapped Snape’s foot with her slippers. He lifted his feet off the floor with an arched brow. Molly tapped her wand to the couch and it expanded to give the pair a more suitable sleeping space. Without a word, she unfolded the blankets and draped them over Hermione and Severus. She fluffed a pair of pillows and placed them at the end of the couch.

Molly’s hand reached over to close Snape’s book and her wand passed over the mage light he had so he could read. “Nox,” she whispered, extinguishing it in front of the confused dark wizard. “Goodnight, Severus,” she said, shuffling off to join her husband.

“Goodnight… Molly,” Severus said to the dark. He adjusted himself on the couch, pulling his legs back up and around the length of the couch. He pulled a pillow over and tucked it under Hermione’s
head, and pulled the other over to lay his own down. His fingers traced a line down her neck with a gentle brush of his fingers before he put his arm around her, pulling her closer to him under the blankets as his eyes closed.

Chapter 64: Gifting

“If you wake those two up, George Weasley,” Molly hissed from the kitchen, “So help me…”

George stared at the couch where Hermione and Severus slept. He couldn’t help but stare. After hearing about their adventures from Harry and Ron, he knew they had become close, but to see it laying there on his parent’s couch was another thing altogether.

Had they been Harry and Ginny, he would have had no problem at all teasing them mercilessly, but Hermione was tucked against the Potion Master of Hogwarts. The evil dungeon bat and the greasy git of dungeon… was sprawled on his mom’s favorite couch, tucked under his mum’s favorite afghan, with none other than Hermione Granger – the insufferable know-it-all everyone knew Snape had hated with an almost single-minded malice. They looked positively peaceful, something he never thought to see on Severus Snape’s face ever, but also something he hadn’t seen on Hermione’s in a long time. He’d seen her laugh and joke around with his family and himself, but peace had been missing from her face since the war had concluded. It had been almost the reverse of those in his family, who gained peace after the war.

He pinched himself.

Nope. Same visual.

He pinched himself again.

Still awake.

George slowly walked towards the kitchen where his mother was fussing with the makings of breakfast. He walked by Prince’s perch groggily and yelped in surprise as the phoenix pecked him squarely on the rump as he passed.

Molly glared at him for making another noise and he gestured wildly at the phoenix, who was seemingly still asleep. Molly waved her mixing spoon at him, and thrust a juice carafe into his hands to keep him busy.

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Hermione stirred against Severus as the smell of mouth-watering baked goods and eggs wafted in from the other room. “Mrmrfff,” she managed to say. “I smell breakfast.”

Snape stirred slightly, but pulled her closer to him instead of getting up.

“Mrmrfff…” Hermione said, arm flailing out from under the blankets in a vain attempt to extricate herself from his warm embrace. His fingers touched the small of her back, causing her to shudder and fall against him again. “Mmff…Se…ver…us,” she mumbled into his chest. She tried to push herself away, but he kept pulling her back in with his own gravity field. She weaved her arm out and patted around, searching for his exposed neck. She placed her fingers at the nape of his neck and
pressed them to his skin, hoping to gain herself some purchase while he was distracted from her touch.

He hissed, pulling her into a kiss, doing exactly opposite of the effect she had been trying for, and she found herself helplessly entangled in their robes and the tangible pull of his presence.

A crash came from around the family Christmas tree, and Hermione looked up, startled. Ginny was staring into the room with her mouth hanging open and eyes bugged out in a combination of horror and disbelief.

Hermione closed her eyes like she had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “Good morning, Ginny!” she squeaked a greeting.

“Ginevra Molly Weasley,” Molly’s voice snapped from the kitchen. “You pick up that mess and get over here right now!”

“Y….yes… mum!” Ginny stammered, staggering out of sight behind the extra-large Christmas tree.

Hermione slumped against Severus, mortified. “Ten points to Slytherin for mortifyingly timed entrapment.”

Snape’s rumbling chuckle answered her as he pressed his forehead to hers.

Hermione finally managed to roll off the couch and stand up, freeing herself from the warmth that kept trying to suck her back into its merciless embrace. It took every bit of willpower she had to keep from just going right back in to her inevitable doom.

She straightened out her robes with a patting motion, pulling her out robe over her shoulders and straightening her collar. Snape had pulled himself up off the couch and stood and put his robes back in order. He stifled a yawn.

He approached her, looking down at her with his black eyes. Placing his hand to her temple with a light brush of his fingers he said, “I suppose the cat is out of the bag, now”

“I get the feeling the cat is still half in the bag,” Hermione said as she looked back at him. “Kicking and screaming as it flows downstream… to a waterfall.”

Snape’s black eyes flickered with amusement as the corner of his lip curved upward. “You may be correct.”

With one last brush of his hand on her cheek, he allowed his mask to settle across his face, readying himself for the inevitable confrontation of a certain red-headed traumatized witch.

Hermione closed her eyes, banishing her own mortification to the depths of her mind. She led the way to the dining room, where the smell of food overcame all sense and reason.

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“Come on, Ginny,” Hermione prodded her friend. “Are you not going to talk to me at all?”

Ginny blushed furiously and turned away from her, staring down at her waffles.

Severus filled an empty plate with waffle, sausage, eggs, and butter. Placing it in front of Hermione, he commented. “Eat. Allow her time to blush herself into oblivion.”

Hermione let up, if only to absorb Molly’s cooking as efficiently as possible.
“I don’t know why you are making such a big deal about it,” George said with a mouth full of waffles. “It’s not like Ron and I never caught you and Harry snogging your faces off when you thought none of us were paying attention.”

Ginny blushed even harder, and Harry put his head down and scratched the back of head sheepishly.

“It’s all perfectly natural to snog the one you love, isn’t it dear?” Arthur commented, leaning down to give his wife a kiss in front of the entire breakfast table.

“Aww, ew. Knock it off,” Ron groaned, averting his eyes.

Arthur laughed as he sat down and helped himself to the food.

Hermione split her time between her food and feeding Prince, who gratefully accepted the fruit and a piece of her waffle. When he wasn’t eating what Hermione was giving him, he spent his time pecking George mercilessly until he forked over pieces of his own breakfast, much to the laughter of those at the table.

An owl was scratching at the window, hovering just outside. Ron opened the window as the owl flew in, flying over the dining room table and dropping a parcel in front of Hermione and Severus. The owl hooted softly and landed next to Prince, seemingly engaged in an intensive gossip session.

Hermione smiled as the parcel dropped in front of her, looking at Severus with a grin. He inclined his head for her to open it. She unwrapped the parcel paper and drew out a shiny silver water goblet. With a grin, she handed it to Harry. “Happy Christmas, Harry! It’s from a bunch of us at Hogwarts.”

Harry took the goblet with a confused grin. “Erm… thanks Hermione.”

Hermione bit her own lip and laughed. “Come on, Harry!”

Harry looked at her strangely.

“I swear you flushed every lick of sense out of your brain after the war, Potter,” Severus said, pulling out his wand. He tapped the goblet three times with his wand and whispered to it.

Light whirled around the goblet and it shimmered and turned into an Ural Owl. The owl hooted, turning her head around. Her facial disc was white, rimmed with smaller white and black feathers. Her eyes were a dark black that seemed to shimmer with an almost midnight blue as she regarded Harry. Her chest was barred with alternating stripes of a rich brown and shining white. Her bright orange beak moved as she hooted curiously at her new location.

As everyone started to get up from the table to shuffle towards the tree, he noticed something around the owl’s leg. There was a scroll attached to her leg, and Harry unrolled it to read it.

Thank you for your assistance in bringing peace back to the halls of Hogwarts. Happy Christmas.

There were signatures all down the scroll. Hagrid’s messy scrawl, Hermione’s ornate quillwork, the controlled and flowing hand of McGonagall, and lastly the finely controlled ornate script of Severus himself.

Harry’s eyes grew wide as saucers and he stroked the owl’s chest with his fingers. He beamed at Hermione and stood so he could tackle hug her properly. Hermione exhaled with an “oof,” and patted him on the back.
He stood in front of Snape awkwardly, not sure how to approach the dark wizard. He extended his hand. “Thank you, Sir,” he said.

Severus flicked his eyes down towards the extended hand and then back up to Harry’s face. He slowly clasped his hand and shook it, inclining his head slightly.

Harry’s new owl flew over to perch with Prince and the owl that was still waiting on a reply. The owls bounced on the perch, hooting at each other excitedly, and Prince warbled his commentary back to them. Harry was now convinced it was a gossip session and he should probably be glad they couldn’t speak to everyone.

Hermione handed Ron a small box from the parcel too, and he grinned as he recognized the package of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans. He tapped it with his wand, and the box became enormous, filled with more than enough beans to keep him occupied for at least a month, or maybe a week depending on how sick he made himself.

Everyone started to move in around the Christmas tree to distribute presents.

Harry pulled out a piece of parchment and quickly scrawled a thank you note to the Headmistress of Hogwarts and passed the envelope to the messenger owl. Giving the owl a piece of preserved food from a tin in his pocket. He opened the window for the owl and it took off with a soft hoot. Prince and the Ural Owl made hooting and warbling commentary.

As they all gathered around the Christmas tree, Ginny leapt up into the air with a squeal as one of the packages came alive and started chasing her around the tree. No one had to think hard on who had rigged up that particular gift.

Hermione gave Arthur his package and he tore into with the enthusiasm of one of his kids. He grinned as he pulled out a muggle board game and immediately began to read the rules while everyone else tore into their packages.

Molly took the package from Hermione with curiosity, having believed the water kettle was a nice enough Christmas gift. As she opened it, she beamed. Bundles of different colored yarns in tasteful colors greeted her eyes. She hugged Hermione and promised her a new scarf.

Ginny finally stopped running around the tree long enough to accept Hermione’s gift after Severus slammed a paralysis charm on it, much to George’s disappointment. Ginny whooped as she pulled out a photograph of her favorite Quidditch team, addressed to Ginny and signed by all of the team members.

Ron laughed as he opened his present and about five chocolate frogs went jumping out of the box before he could slam the lid back down. He scrambled around attempting to catch his escaping loot.

One of the chocolate frogs landed on Percy, and Ron practically tackled his brother to the floor in the attempt to wrangle the buggar under control, causing no light amount of laughter at Percy’s expense.

As the Weasleys continued exchanging gifts, Hermione peered into the parcel that Minerva had sent and saw there something else in the bottom. She pulled it out. Minerva’s ornate handwriting ordained the paper around the bundle.

To: Hermione and Severus From: Minerva

Hermione nudged Severus, and he looked down at the parcel with a lifted eyebrow.

She handed it to him so he could open it. Snape looked at her curiously, but took the parcel and
slowly put his pale fingers under the edge of the colored paper and pulled it back. He lifted a leather-bound tome out of the wrapping paper. The cover was embossed with the Gryffindor lion rampant, but around it, circled the Slytherin snake, eating its tail like the legendary Ouroboros. Snape’s hand touched the leather embossment, his black eyes met Hermione’s as he opened the book.

The first page had Minerva’s quillwork upon the page.

To Severus and Hermione.

*May your theoretical exploits carve the way to the future by your own hands and lead to the truth. Remember that once Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin were the best of friends, as I have found friends in you both.*

*Minerva*

Hermione beamed at Severus as he touched the blank parchment of the book. The bookbinder had put and extreme amount of care into its making – so much so that very pages seemed to glisten with magic of its own.

Severus closed the book and tucked it away in one of his many bottomless tome pockets for safe keeping.

Hermione realized with some belated awareness that she was being stared at. She looked up and saw that Harry and Ginny were nudging a box over to her. “It’s from all of us,” Ginny said excitedly. “We would have wrapped them separately, but… we didn’t think Professor Snape would actually show up.” Ginny blushed and stared at the floor.

Curiosity stirred, she unwrapped the elongated box. There was a layer of parchment hiding what was underneath, and she lifted it cautiously. With a small gasp of wonder, she placed her hand on two formal writing quills. There were two, placed side by side. One had the lion wrapped around the red heart base of the quill. The other had the serpent curling around a dark green burl wood. The bases were ornate, yet light, molded to fit the slant of fingers around the shaft.

Hermione lifted the serpent quill up and placed it in Severus’ hands before picking up the lion. “Thank you so much,” she beamed. “They are gorgeous.”

Severus touched the quill with his fingers, gently stroking the feather shaft and the base. His dark eyes lifted and stared at each of the Weasleys one by one and finally settled on Harry. “Thank you.”

Chatter began again as Arthur brought out his new game board for everyone to play, filling the room with constant laughter and conversation. Molly had already called her knitting needles to her in order to get to work on her next project.

Hermione got up and snatched the piece of parchment off the top of the box and went to the dining room table, snatching up the ink well off the writing desk on the way. Dipping her quill into the ink, she wrote a thank you note to Minerva for the journal book.

A touch on her neckline caused her to close her eyes. Snape’s fingers gently traced the edge of her ear as he looked down to see what she was writing. She smiled up at him and pushed the parchment towards him.

Dipping his quill in the ink, he wrote upon the parchment under her and signed his name.

Hermione signed her own and cast her hand over it to fix the ink. Folding the parchment into a letter, she tapped her wand to it with a whisper and created molten wax to bind the edges together. She
pulled her mark out from a pocket on the robe and smashed it into the cooling wax. Tucking her mark back into her robe, she stood and transferred Prince to her arm.

Slipping on her boots, she walked out into the snow. She gave him one of his favorite gooseberries before giving him the letter. “Take this to Minerva, my Prince,” she said softly. “And stay with her if she is lonely tonight. I’m sure she’ll spoil you rotten just like you prefer it.” She scratched him under the chin and set him aloft, and he flew steadfast in the direction of Hogwart’s with a trill of excitement, happy to be flying again.

Severus was beside her and she silently walked into him, wrapping her arms around his waist under his outer robe. He enfolded her with his arm, wrapping his robe around her.

There was a jingling sound above them, and Hermione and Severus looked up at the same time. A sprig of mistletoe dangling above them, suspended in the air by an unseen hand. The pale white berries contrasted against the green oval leaves.

“George,” Hermione said.

“Undoubtedly,” Severus replied.

“He doesn’t think we’ll do it,” Hermione said with a smirk.

“Perhaps, he should be more concerned,” Severus said as he leaned down close to her, “in whether we stop before Ms. Weasley… loses… her… mind.” The last of his words ended with his lips meeting hers.

There was a crash inside the Weasley Burrow as the sound of George giving a woot was joined by the sound of Ginny strangling her brother with her own hands.

Chapter 65: Reconciliation

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Ginny seethed at Hermione, beating the ever-living daylights out her with a pillow.

“It… just,” Hermione said with her hands up to block the incoming attacks, “happened!”

Ginny paused in her pillow beating of her friend and sighed, “Couldn’t you have at least... wrote me or something?”

“Oh right, that would of gone well,” Hermione answered. “Dear Ginny, I almost died a week ago due to a raving lunatic dark witch who had it out for Professor Snape and took it out on me. Oh by the way, somewhere between me almost dying and Harry and Ron poly-juicing themselves, I kind of kissed Severus. Yeah Ginny, that makes a great letter. I would have had an angry red-headed witch coming to curse me to death on top of all that other stuff.”

Ginny sighed and fell backwards onto the bed. “This all happened after I visited?”

“Yeah,” Hermione replied with a sigh.

“I should have seen this coming,” Ginny said.

“How’s that?” Hermione arched a brow.

“Back when I visited you and you two where dueling each other in the courtyard,” Ginny explained.
“He didn’t murdinate you. It had to have been love.”

“Murdinate? Is that even a word?” Hermione frowned, staring at Ginny. “And what does dueling have to do with love? I told you we were just dueling.”

“Uh huh,” Ginny said.

“I swear to Merlin, Ginny,” Hermione said, ribbing Ginny with her toe. “I liked you better when you just blushed and didn’t speak to me about him.” Hermione proceeded to tickle Ginny mercilessly until she squealed and surrendered.

About the time that Ginny collapsed from her tickle torture, the hallway door opened. Snape walked out with a dark green terrycloth towel wrapped around his waist as he was towel drying his hair. He had a loose black robe on that he had also tied around his waist, leaving the two women a flattering view of his chest. Ginny gasped audibly.

Severus turned at the sound and frowned into the room.

“It’s just Ginny and me, Severus,” Hermione said with amusement.

Snape approached tiredly and placed his hand his hand against her neck and shoulder. Hermione’s eyes half closed. “Molly left us towels and amenities in the bath,” he said softly.

“Mhrrrh,” Hermione said with a nod. “Bless her.”

Severus picked feathers out of Hermione’s hair with his pale fingers. “Are you attempting to transfigure my apprentice into a goose, Ms. Weasley?” His pale face turned to her as he plucked the down out of Hermione’s hair. His dark eyes met hers unwaveringly.

Ginny gaped at him, “W…what…. I…no, Sir!” Ginny looked abashed that anyone would suspect her of transfiguring her best friend into a waterfowl.

“Probably for the better,” Severus said deadpan, “Christmas Eve dinner was yesterday, after all.”

Ginny’s eyes grew even wider at the thought that Snape would think Ginny capable of serving up her friend as Christmas dinner. “N…n…no! Never!”

There was a minute of pure agonizing awkward silence before Hermione busted up laughing, slumping over as her shoulders quaked and tears rolled down her face. “Ginny…” she cackled into her own lap. “He’s teasing you.”

As Ginny sputtered to come up with some sort of coherent reply, Snape leaned down and pressed his forehead to Hermione’s. “I will be joining the owl naming party that seems to be forming downstairs,” he said softly. “If you wish to join me.”

“You shower first, I think,” Hermione said with a smile.

“Yes,” Severus replied, “You are positively noisome.”

Hermione shoved Severus away from her with an indignant laugh. She grabbed the pillow in front of Ginny and proceeded to whap him with it.

Snape’s expression remained pokerfaced as he turned on his heels and glided out of the room.

Ginny stared at Hermione with wide eyes. Hermione smiled back at her innocently.
“He… joked?” Ginny asked with a hushed tone.

Hermione smiled back at her as she stood up to go use the shower herself. “I’ll meet you downstairs, Gin,” she said as she exited the room, leaving her friend to digest the enormity of the knowledge she had just acquired.

“Herbert!” George yelled at Harry.

“I am not naming her Herbert, you git!” Harry yelled back.

The Ural Owl hooted softly from the perch they had moved in from the dining room. Everyone had gathered around it like a Christmas tree, trying to help Harry come up with a good name for her.

“Fine, fine, Nigel!” George recommended.

Molly slapped George upside the head with her hand before going back to her knitting.

“Ow!” George exclaimed, rubbing his head.


The owl yawned from her perch, unimpressed.

“Moondance,” Ginny tried.

The owl turned her head away. Ginny sighed. Apparently her luck with Pigwidgeon was not going to work with Harry’s owl. A thought occurred to her. “Ron, where is Pig, anyway?”

“Oh he’s upstairs, trying to charm the pants off Errol and Hermes,” Arthur said, gesturing with a wave of his arm. “They were at it all night before your mum threw a pillow at them.”

Ginny giggled.

“Amyntas?” Harry asked the owl.

The owl blinked, but didn’t seem overly impressed.

“Diana!” Ginny recommended, and sighed as the owl blinked at her.

“Gerhild,” George said.

“Gudrun,” Arthur tried.

“Lisbeth” Molly said over her knitting.

“Periwinkle,” Ginny said.

“Sophia,” Harry attempted.


“Bina!”

“Jora,” Ron tried and failed.

“Ramona.”
“Odella.”

“Marcia.”

“Kali!”

“Audhild.”

“Utari.”

Name after name went by with no response from the owl on the perch.

“Give up already,” Percy groaned from the armchair.

Harry placed his palm to his forehead. “I didn’t think it would be so hard to find a name she liked.”

“Eirian,” Severus said from behind the book he was reading.

The Ural Owl hooted excitedly and bobbed her head.

Stares focused on Severus.

“It means ‘bright’ and ‘beautiful’ in Welsh,” he said without even bothering to look up from the page he was reading.

Eirian hooted softly from the perch, flapping her wings.

“Alright then,” Molly said, standing up after setting her knitting down. “Time to set the table for dinner. Harry, you might as well take your new friend up to meet Errol and Pigwidgeon upstairs.”

Harry grinned and transferred the Ural Owl to his hand. “Come on then, Eirian,” he laughed, shuffling up the stairs with bird in hand.

“Hope she doesn’t learn any bad habits from Errol or Pigwidgeon,” Ron said, stratching the back of his head.

“Hermes hasn’t picked up any bad habits from either of them. She should be fine,” Percy commented.

Hermione made her way down the staircase, toweling her hair dry as she came down the stairs. “I seemed to have missed out on all the fun,” she said with mock sigh of disappointment.

“You didn’t miss anything, ‘mione,” Ron said in defeat. “None of us could come up with one she liked.”

“’ey now, that isn’t entirely true,” Arthur said, patting his son on the back. “Severus did us proud.”

Ron slumped further as being outdone by Snape was not something that made him feel the slightest better about the entire situation.

Hermione raised a brow. “What name did she decide on?”


“Oh! That’s welsh for ‘bright’ or ‘beautiful’ isn’t it?” Hermione asked cheerfully.

Ginny and Ron face-palmed as Arthur let out a loud guffaw.
“Figures you’d know what it meant, Hermione,” Ron said into his hands.

Hermione gave him a puzzled look as Severus snaked one arm around her waist and dragged her down on the couch, not even bothering to look up from what he was reading. She flailed as he pulled her against him until she finally gave in and sagged against him. “We need to get going, don’t we?” Hermione said a little sadly.

“We are expected to attend,” Severus answered her.

“Oh!” Ginny piped up. “You have to be there for the Christmas Day Dinner at Hogwart’s don’t you?”

“There are quite a few students that did not go home for the holidays this year,” Hermione said softly. “More so than I remember any year we were there.”

“I’m glad you could make it to see us, Hermione,” Ginny said. “And you too, Professor Snape. I… promise to not be so shocked the next time you’re here.”

Severus closed his book and looked Ginny directly in the eyes. “And what would be the fun in that, Ms. Weasley?”

Ginny’s eyes widened as the silence grew in the room. Arthur laughed whole-heartedly as Ginny realized she was being teased again. Blushing furiously, she turned her face away.

Even Ron smirked and chuckled at her, causing her to launch herself on him, beating at him with her hands.

George attempted to separate them, but ended up in the middle of their whapping each other with their hands. Percy looked towards the ceiling as if appealing for divine intervention.

Hermione leaned over and breathed into Snape’s ear, “You did that on purpose.”

“Of course I did, Ms. Granger,” he replied flatly. “I am a Slytherin, after all.” His hand had found its way under her hair and slowly ran across her skin, perfectly hidden in the mass of her hair.

Hermione’s eyes rolled back into her head and she shivered, sagging against him as her arms attempted in vain to push herself away. “I will get you for this,” she hissed against his body.

“Promises,” he said whispered as he watched Arthur wade in to separate his children from killing each other. “Promises.”

Chapter 66: Departure

Molly Weasley was capable of many things, but allowing Hermione and Severus to leave the house without a basket of baked goods was not going to happen. In fact, the mothering didn’t stop there. Even after everyone had hugged and bid farewell to each other, or in the case of Severus, given a stiff handshake, Molly followed the pair out into the snow covered lawn.

The flakes were coming down again, covering them all with a thick coat of flakes, which gave the view of the Weasley Burrow a fittingly bucolic appearance. Hermione looked up at the towering remade Burrow with a small smile. It was good that the Weasleys had a place to call home again, and nothing was more agrarian and reassuring to as many people as the Burrow.

Molly wrapped a new scarf around Hermione’s neck with a pat, sporting the old colors for
Gryffindor. Then, in a surprisingly natural action, wrapped a green and silver scarf around Snape’s neck. She patted the snow off his shoulders and straightened it. Snape stood frozen to the spot in his black robes, being struck uncertain what to do in response to the unaccustomed non-violent affront to his person.

“You two take care of yourselves now, dear,” Molly said, patting Hermione on the cheek. “And thank you for the marvelous water kettle.”

“Thank you for having us,” Hermione replied warmly.

“Psh,” Molly admonished. “You know you are welcome any time, day or night.” She stood back from them and smiled. “Off with you now.”

Severus raised his arm in the familiar gesture for Hermione to attend, and she stepped into him, placing her arm around his waist. His arm folded around her while his hand grasped the basket of Molly’s baked treats. He inclined his head to the matriarch of the Weasley family.

With a crack, the pair disapparated.

“It’s so good to be home,” Hermione confessed as walked into the gates of Hogwarts. “Not that I don’t adore the gatherings at the Burrow during the holidays.”

“Some things are best taken,” Snape commented dryly, “in metered amounts.”

Hermione looked up at him, “You tolerated them remarkably. I thank you for that.”

“I will admit to a certain pleasure at Ms. Weasley’s expense,” Severus said with a smirk.

“I was so mortified,” Hermione complained. “I didn’t mean to break it to her quite like that.”

Snape gave her a sidelong glance. “It was bound to happen. At least now you don’t have to worry about it possibly happening in the future.”

Hermione sighed in agreement. “You are correct, of course.”

As they walked past the potions classrooms, Severus saw an old assignment Slughorn had plastered onto his classroom door. His lip curled in disgust automatically.

“Fffffff,” Hermione said, dragging him by the sleeve. “Worry about correcting what he screwed up later.”

Snape forced his eyes forward, but grumbled something under his breath that wasn’t very flattering. She smiled at him, and his eyes met hers with the warmth she had come to cherish, even while his face remained inscrutable to all but the infinitesimal of tells.

When they reached the intersection that lead to their respective rooms, Hermione stopped. She stared at the portrait leading to her room as though it were a fire breathing dragon rather than a door. Her time under Snape’s protection was officially at an end. It should have been liberating, but she found herself dreading waking up in the morning without the feel of him there with her. It was silly. He did not show her any desire to be free of her company, yet nagging doubt plagued her.

His warm hand touched her neck and shoulder and pulled her to him, putting an end to her self-doubt. A rush of his energy blended with hers, recognizing her like a living thing. He held her against himself. “That is enough of those kind of thoughts,” he said sternly. “I do not plan to come to
my old senses and leave you by the roadside because I suddenly remember I am supposed to despise you.”

She looked into his familiar black eyes and smiled back at him shyly.

He soothed her cheek with his long and pale fingers, causing her eyes to flutter. “I do worry, however, that you may come to yours.”

Hermione leaned into his touch, slightly intoxicated, “Not bloody likely.”

Severus gave her a small smile, his lips curving upward slightly. “I believe we must look… presentable at tonight’s dinner,” he said with a bored sigh, leading the way back into his chambers.

“What do you even have formal robes, Severus?” Hermione asked him with mischief. “I was under the impression you had only one style to wear.”

Severus scowled down at her in indignation. “Just because I choose not to wear anything else, does not mean I do not have anything else to wear, witch.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione said, spinning on her heel and pointing upward with her index finger and placing it to her lips. “I think you cannot color coordinate.” She chose that moment to surreptitiously dive into her wardrobe to shuffle around for her formal outfit.

Severus flattened his lips as he attempted to squelch about a hundred snarky comments that he could have said, quite rudely, to her face or rather her back.

Suddenly, she was in front of him again, a brightly wrapped bundle in her hands. She shoved it into his arms and placed her palms to his jaw, pulling his face down for a kiss. She ran her tongue teasingly across his lower lip, causing every coherent thought he might have had to fly right out of his head. He pulled her closer with a soft growl, deepening the kiss until they both had to come up for air. She pulled away, eyes full of mischief, “I told you I would get you back,” she smiled flirtatiously, managing to disarm his indignation completely. “Happy Christmas, Severus.” She then dove back into her wardrobe for the evening’s attire.

Severus found himself pulling at his collar with his fingers. It was suddenly a bit warm. Saucy minx. He tugged at the cord as this throat and loosened it a little. When had he let her wiggle her way into his carefully constructed barriers? Eyeing the package in his arms, he carefully and slightly suspiciously pulled the paper back. As he pulled the paper back, he saw the shimmer of fine black silk. He pulled the fabric free from the bundle and let it drape down to the floor. It was an outer robe, but at the shoulder it was trimmed in soft down and the cast off half down half baby feathers of Prince. They fell across the one shoulder in a dignified shoulder drape. As he touched the shoulder, he realized it was reinforced underneath to be impenetrable by overenthusiastic phoenix claws. At the collar of the robe, was a golden clasp formed into an interlocking phoenix, crafted in what appeared to be the multi-colored tones of Black Hills gold from the far off lands of the Americas intermingled with fine strands of goblin silver formed into the delicate form of a coiling serpent.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

Hermione tilted her head and smiled at him.

He touched the clasp with his fingers, tracing its contours with reverence. He stood, and draped the robe on the bed before going towards the wardrobe to change into something more suitable for the occasion.

Slinging his normal robes off to the chair nearby, he changed into his formal pants.
A warm hand touched his back, causing him to stiffen with a hiss, attempting to not fall forward into his wardrobe in the most unbecoming manner he could imagine. She pressed her face against the skin of his back, wrapping her arms around his body to interlock around his chest. He could feel her taking in a breath against his skin.

“You smell wonderful,” she whispered against his back.

“I am,” Severus managed to reply, “gratified that you approve.”

She snuggled into his back with a soft hum. “I do.”

He peeled her arms out from around himself to turn around and pull her against him properly, his face pressed into her hair. “You are… a wonder,” he whispered, combing her hair with his fingers. “How can you look on this… and be anything but horrified?”

Hermione touched his chest, where scars crisscrossed across his skin. It was the last parting gift from Voldemort’s snake, Nagini. That and hundreds more scars from his life as a Death Eater spread across his chest and back, a testament that even Death Eaters were not immune to the cruel hand of Voldemort’s terrorism. She pressed her lips to one of the scars on his neck. “Any horror I may have is not for you, Severus,” she said softly. “Only for the cruelty that put them there.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “You are not helping me dress, Ms. Granger,” he scolded softly.

She stepped away from him, but gently drew her fingers down his sternum before scampering a distance away to finish dressing.

Severus forced himself to stand up straight and school his expression to impassiveness, which was becoming increasingly more difficult in the company of a certain Gryffindor witch. He wasn’t sure if it was a testament to her talents or an insult to his own. He pulled on a dark crimson dress shirt and a dark burgundy vest over it. Tucking his shirt in and his vest over it, he pulled the outer robe off the bed and twirled it around his shoulders, letting his arms slip into the sleeves in a fluid motion. He shrugged, allowing the robe to settle about his shoulders as he clinched the two halves of the phoenix clasp together.

Hermione had acquired a brush in her hand and she reached up to his hair with it and slowly drew it across his hair, moving it so it fell across his face like a dark frame. He stood perfectly still, unsure how to process the sensation of someone other than himself grooming him. She brushed around his ears, pulling some of his hair back behind it with a smile.

He narrowed his eyes at her, and snatched the brush, spinning her around. She gave a small meep, but froze as he drew the brush across her hair, bringing some semblance of order to her wild natural curls. He pulled her hair back from her face, bringing part of it together with his fingers. He pulled a hairpin off the dresser and stared at for a few seconds as it lay in his hand and it came to life as a small silver snake. The snake wrapped around the bunch of hair he was trying to hold and froze in place.

He opened a drawer on the dresser, pulling out a dark wood box. He opened it, lifting out an ornate hair comb. A phoenix perched on top of the comb, wings spread like Prince in his full majesty. Fire licked off the comb, but did not give off heat or burn. He pulled another cluster of her hair back and fit the comb in place, locking her hair in a cascade down her back.

“Happy Christmas,” he whispered into her ear, pressing his lips to her temple.

Hermione spun her head around to look at what he had placed in her hair. Her eyes grew wide and
her hand reached back to touch it. As she moved, the feathers on the phoenix tinkled as they moved, giving a soft chime. She threw her arms around his chest and buried her face into his vest. “Thank you!” she murmured into him.

His pale hand drew her head against him as his eyes closed. “You are welcome.”

Chapter 67: Up to No Good Phoenix Tricks

Prince landed on Snape’s shoulder with a trilling burble as they entered the Great Hall. He settled on his new shoulder pad with a happy warble. Severus shook his head and handed the bird a gooseberry, muttering something about overgrown turkeys with fire complexes.

Hermione laughed as they took their seats at the High Table. There were quite a few young students that seemed to be stuck at Hogwart’s this particular winter, and part of her wondered how many Harry Potters were out in the Great Hall, having no place to call home but Hogwart’s. Another sobering thought was where these same kids would go during the summer.

She leaned back in her chair. “I wonder how many of these students are using their Christmas break to invade Pince’s restricted section this year,” she chuckled.

Severus plucked a grape off the fruit bowl in front of him and ate it. “I believe the proper question, Professor Granger, is whether they survive to tell about it.”

Hermione snickered into her hand, grabbing for a glass of juice to cover up her laughter.

“Are you saying, Professor Snape,” Hermione asked as she passed Prince a strawberry, “that you have never once, as a student, attempted to peruse the Restricted Section without the properly signed permission slip?”

“Hrmph,” Snape grunted, sipping his drink. “I was never caught.”

Hermione’s grin spread all the way across her face like a sunrise.

“I will deny everything,” Severus said dismissively, passing her a croissant.

Hermione took the offered pastry with a laugh. “She’s left the table very quickly tonight,” she noted.

“Hmm,” Severus replied, “I’m sure Filch is ecstatic.”

Hermione turned to face the Potion Master, eyebrow raised.

“Oh you cannot fool me, Professor Granger,” Severus accused. “I know you speculated over it for years.”

Hermione covered her mouth to conceal her laugh.

“‘Ey now,” Hagrid said as he snatched a cookie off the pile in front of him. “’ut are you two getting on about?”

“Just,” Hermione said, cutting the roast in front of her, “some mindless speculation.”

Snape snorted, and passed the salad down.

“I wanted to say thanks for the book about rare eggs,” Hagrid said with a nod. “’opefully I can avoid the funny business we ‘ad with Prince the next time I have eggs to watch.”
“By all means, Hagrid,” Severus said with a twist of his lip. “We can start a phoenix breeding program.”

“Well I, er,” Hagrid said with a blink, “Well ‘at would be sumthin’ to see.”

Hermione laughed and patted her friend on the arm. “It’s okay, Hagrid. Now we have experience!”

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. “Goody.”

Hermione saw the new DADA professor chatting with McGonagall and Sprout. “Remind me never to take a position as the Defense Against Dark Arts professor.”

“How?” Severus tilted his head at her.

“It must be cursed,” Hermione said. “Even you couldn’t keep the position for longer than a year.”

Severus arched a brow. “There has been some avid speculation as to the former Dark Lord having cursed the position when he was not given it.”

Hermione curled her lip. “That could explain a lot.”

Snape waved his hand as if shooing a fly. “His death however, should have rendered that particular curse, if it were true, null and void.”

“Still,” Hermione shivered. “I don’t want to tempt fate any more than I already have.”

“Oh?” Snape gave her a sidelong glance. “What have you been tempting fate over?”

“Apprenticing with the Potion Master of Hogwart’s,” Hermione said flatly. “They say he’s absolutely dastardly.”

Snape stared at her silently as a quirk of his lips curved upward. “He’s mad as a box of frogs, assuredly.”

“Completely dead from the neck up,” Hermione replied.

“Ponce,” Severus replied, pokerfaced.

“Dodgy,” Hermione countered.

“Barmy,” Snape replied.

“Prat,” Hermione said.

“Greasy,” Snape countered.

“Dungeon bat,” Hermione replied.

“Salmon feet flakes,” Severus said dryly.

Hagrid’s head moved back and forth as the two exchanged insults. He’d lost track of where it started, and he definitely had no idea where it was going to end.

Hermione placed her head against the High Table, silently laughing hard enough that her shoulders quaked. Prince warbled from Severus’ shoulder and hopped onto hers, shifting his weight back and forth to settle.
Hermione felt eyes upon her, and she looked up curiously. A familiar set of eyes peered at her from the Slytherin table.

She stood, leaning down to Snape’s ear and whispered to him.

Severus nodded his head and then inclined it dismissively.

Patting Hagrid on the shoulder as she left the High Table, she walked towards the Slytherin table. “Hello, Mr. Mitchell. Are you enjoying your Christmas?”

“Most of Slytherin went home for Christmas,” he said with a shrug. “Mum and Dad had go to Germany on business this holiday.”

“Hrm,” Hermione said, pondering. “I think I know something we could do to spice things up a bit.” Mitchell looked up at her with a little more interest.

“Think you’re up to helping me teach Prince some new tricks?” Hermione dangled the bait in front of him.

Mitchell’s eyes went wide and he bobbed his head up and down excitedly.

“Well put your arm out, Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione said. “He’s heavier than he looks.”

Mitchell extended his arm, and Hermione was reminded of when Harry was bracing himself for Hedwig landing on him. Hermione stroked Prince on the head and whispered to him and then gently lowered herself down to Mitchell’s level.

“Now put your arm out just above his feet,” Hermione said. “There you go see!” Prince stepped up onto Mitchell’s arm and practically dwarfed the boy’s upper torso. Prince laid his head over Mitchell’s head and warbled curiously.

“You got him?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, Ma’am!” Mitchell announced.

“Ok, let’s go to the courtyard where there is more room,” Hermione directed. She watched as Mitchell carefully stepped forward, trying not to trip while carrying the heavy phoenix.

Severus watched as Hermione escorted the young Mr. Mitchell out of the Grand Hall, the young man desperately trying to carry the phoenix on his arm without dropping him. The remaining Slytherin students started to drop what they were doing at the table and follow the pair out, drawn to see what their fellow Slytherin was being allowed to do.

A few stragglers from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw inched their way to the door and then dashed out to follow. Finally, even a few students from Gryffindor inched their way to the door and then dashed down the hall to the courtyard, unable to resist getting closer to the phoenix of Hogwart’s.

“There you go, Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione cheered. “Now just throw the fruit in the direction you want him to go. Don’t just stand there, Mr. Godfrey, make yourself useful and transfigure us some perches. Miss Bancroft, if you could provide some lighting?”
The courtyard was abuzz with activity as students scrambled to make themselves useful, while Mitchell bribed Prince to each perch with pieces of fruit. “Mr. Daniels, Ms. Honeycutt if you could hold this ring up please, right about here? Thank you,” Hermione directed.

Each of the students attempted to get Prince to fly through the rings to fetch items and come back to them. Prince was fully capable of reading her or Severus’ intent right from their minds, but learning to do tricks from the students was an entirely different game.

Prince sometimes landed on the perches. Sometimes he landed on a student. Sometimes he just ate the fruit and sat there doing nothing. Once he landed on the ring they were holding up and swung back and forth like a swing, causing laughter amongst the students.

Prince would always end up landing on Mitchell when things got too confusing, much to Mitchell’s delight.

Hermione distributed small pieces of fruit and vegetables amongst the crowd to take their turn feeding Prince, and for once Hermione was glad his stomach was bottomless. Each of the kids cheered on each other as they attempted to get Prince to do a trick. Hermione watched as the boundaries between the four Houses of Hogwart’s blurred a little. While Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were rarely at odds with another House, the students were all patting each other on the back and laughing together…. Even Slytherin and Gryffindor. It was downright discombobulating.

As Prince started to get tired, Hermione clapped her hands. “That’s all for now, everyone. I think we have tuckered out our sweet Prince long enough.”

There was a collected “Awww” in the crowd, but all of the students began to clean up the transfigured items and put out the mage lights before shuffling off to their respective common rooms.

Severus approached from the hallway, his black robe making him almost invisible in the darkened courtyard, save for the moonlight. As he stood beside Hermione, Mitchell carried Prince against his chest. The phoenix tolerated the unseemly transportation method, tugging on Mitchell’s hair with his beak.

He walked up to Snape and attempted to hoist the heavy bird up, but somewhat failed due to both mass and gravity. Severus leaned down and transferred the bird to his wrist and then to his shoulder, relieving the young boy of his burden. “Thank you, Mr. Mitchell,” Severus said.

The boy beamed up at him. “Happy Christmas, Professor Snape, Professor Granger!”

Snape stared down at the boy with his black eyes. “And to you, Mr. Mitchell.”

“Happy Christmas, Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione replied.

Mitchell scurried down the hallway towards the Slytherin Common Room, just fast enough to not be actually running.

“That was an unequivocal nauseating demonstration of House solidarity,” Severus said as he pulled Hermione to him. “Are you sure you aren’t Slytherin?”

“Well, I do know this guy,” Hermione said obliquely, “that knows a guy... that was Slytherin.”

“Hrm,” Severus commented, hovering closer to her face in the dark of the courtyard. “I will have to have some words with this guy.”

“I’m sure you don’t know him,” Hermione said as he drew nearer.
“Liar,” Severus hissed as he pressed his mouth to hers, silencing her.

Chapter 68: Toothpaste

Hermione laid back against the pillow tiredly, listening to Severus brush his teeth. The smell of the toothpaste was strangely comforting. Why little things like that were comforting boggled her. Who the heck found toothpaste comforting anyway? Well… maybe it was comforting that Severus wouldn’t lose all his teeth anytime soon?

“Why do we brush our teeth the muggle way?” Hermione thought to herself. With all the things they did to with magic assistance, why brushing your teeth still done with a toothbrush and toothpaste? Maybe she was just a freak for doing it that way, but if that were the case… why did Severus brush his teeth that way? Banishing that train of thought before it wrecked itself upon her grey matter, she sighed. She should just accept the fact that she liked the smell of minty toothpaste.

She wiggled herself under the covers, pulling the warmer winter comforter over herself. Severus’ scent was embedded in the comforter, and she inhaled it with a smile. Somehow, over the course of the last two years Severus Snape had transformed from a horrible childhood memory to become an immutable foundation of her life. How had it changed from verbal wars and psychological glaring matches to the feeling of comfort? For that matter… how did she end up curled up under his comforter in his chambers, snuffling his pillows?

Severus had slipped into the bed with her, wordlessly snuggling into her body from the back. His face pressed into her hair as he pulled the comforter up over himself. His hand gently curved against her chest, pulling her into him. His presence wrapped around her like the comforter, soothing her thoughts.

She turned towards him under the covers, and placed her hands on his face, gently feeling the contours of his face. His eyes closed as her touch rippled through him. Her hand brushed his hair with no less wonder than the first time she had dared to touch him.

She felt her chest seize. A part of her feared she would wake up one morning and he would be gone. It wasn’t a fear that he would leave her, but that whatever miracle had allowed him to survive the last war would never have happened. She feared waking in a world where he no longer lived, but she would remember him like a lingering dream. It was completely irrational. Specious. Illogical.

“Hermione,” Severus said her name with a rumble. He touched the skin under her ear and brushed back her hair with his fingertips. She looked into his eyes with such intense relief that he felt compelled to draw her against him closely. “I’m here,” he soothed softly. “I fear you are stuck with me.”

She gripped him tightly, taking in the scent of him. “The horror,” she whispered into his chest. “However shall I escape?”

He pressed his lips to her forehead, “You shall never escape me, woman,” he whispered.

Hermione snuggled into his body. “Promise?”

“This… I… swear,” he tucked her against him and felt her relax, molding herself into his body with a contented sigh.

Severus closed his eyes, taking in the scent of the witch who had become as essential to him as the
Severus woke at dawn even though there was not a window to give a hint towards the actual time of day. The hearth was cold, having died down during the night. He stirred under the covers, his arm seeking the warmth of his stalwart companion, but the place at his side was already vacant.

Murmuring in disappointment, he forced himself to rise. He looked over to the hearth, half expecting her to be asleep next to the tea tray by the fire, but the comfy chair she had stolen from him so many months ago was empty as well. Quelling the rising discontent of her absence, he left the bed and went to get dressed.

Prince’s perch was missing from the place by the fire, and he wondered what mischief she planned on having with the students of Hogwarts. He shook his head, buttoning his shirt. He pulled on his vest and then the multiple layers of his teaching robes, falling into them with habitual smoothness. He drew the brush from the dresser across his hair, remembering her attempt to tame his hair with a small smile.

The hallways were just starting to lighten with the sunrise, casting Hogwarts with a warm orange glow. He looked out over the grounds towards the lake and allowed him some more peaceful thoughts. Peaceful thoughts? When had he even allowed himself something even hinting at peace in the last twenty years?

A shuffling and loud voices of a nearby altercation caught his attention.

“You going to slither off into the hallway with your books, W…whiney Wayne?” taunted a voice. There was a sound of books being dropped.

“Your little Slytherin friends aren’t here to back you up,” taunted another voice. “You think I didn’t know you threw that hex on me in herbology?”

“W…whiney Wayne,” taunted another voice.

Severus came around the corner like the black god Chernobog descending from atop a high mountain peak to terrorize the hapless villages below, his robes stirred behind him like the great wings of a great and terrible demon. There were three students surrounding one chosen victim of their taunts, and the three paled the moment he entered the hallway.

“I’m not sure where in the Handbook of Gryffindor Traits you pulled bullying a fellow student came from, but I assure you ample time in detention with Professor McGonagall… to… contemplate… it,” Snape said venomously. “Mr. Abram, Mr. Sharrow, Mr. Witherow. 10 points each from Gryffindor for you despicable unbecoming behavior of your House. You will report to Professor McGonagall tonight and every night for the next month. If I find you have attempted to shirk on this, you will spend… the rest… of the time… with me.”

Snape’s cold black eyes glowered down upon the three, causing them to cower. They trembled, keeping their eyes cast down to the floor as if to not provoke his ire further by meeting his gaze. “Get… out… of my sight,” Severus said with his teeth clenched together.

Snape narrowed his eyes at the fleeing students, “And five more points from the each of you for running in the halls!” The fleeing students stumbled over themselves trying to flee and slow down at the same time, failing deplorably as they disappeared down the hall.

He looked down at the boy who was collecting his books from the floor. He stood angrily in place, head cast down to the floor as to not look his Head of House in the face. Severus looked closer. The
The boy stared away from him, but his eyes were burning with angry fire. “I have no friends, Professor Snape, nor do I care for them.” His voice was bitter and angry, not at all the voice of the boy who had offered him a potion pin for Christmas or given Hermione the transfigured poppy flower in the hallway.

“Your choice,” Snape said without emotion, “however, you will go back to the Common Room until it is time for breakfast.”

“Yes, Sir,” Mitchell said curtly, walking stiffly back towards the Slytherin Common Room.

Snape watched him go, eyes narrowing. This was not the Mitchell he remembered. Did someone slip a personality reversal potion in the Christmas punch?

Severus continued his morning walk, wondering how many other personality reversals he would have to deal with if the punch really had been spiked with something. Hermione would be furious when she found out about the bullying of Mr. Mitchell. It would probably take a lot of convincing to keep her from storming into the Gryffindor tower and make Severus’ earlier appearance seem like a light cuff on the shoulder. Of that particular fact, he had no doubt at all.

He continued on his rounds, making his way at last to the Great Hall. There were more students gathered there than the night previous, perhaps having recovered from their Christmas celebrations into the night. He walked in, as usual, making his way to the High Table and sat down with a sigh.

“Come to join us at last, Severus,” Pomona sniped from her place at the table. “Too busy making potions into the wee hours on Christmas of all days.”

“I’ll have you know, I did go to bed after my patrol,” Severus snapped. “Not that it is any of your business.”

“You should get yourself an apprentice to help you with all of those orders,” Pomona said with a shake of her head.

“The one I have is perfectly adequate,” Snape growled lowly.

“The one you don’t have, you mean,” Pomona sniped.

Severus growled softly. He wasn’t sure what had crawled up Sprout’s arse and died there, but he was certain it was a troll. He pulled fruit and some pancakes onto a plate and placed it next to him. Pouring Hermione’s favorite juice in a small goblet, he placed it by her table setting, knowing she was due to join them soon.

“Oh let up, Pomona,” Minerva admonished from the center of the table. “You know he hasn’t taken an apprenticeship in all the years he’s been at Hogwart’s. Why would that change?”

Severus narrowed his eyes, his hand freezing on his teacup.

“He managed to send that lovely girl away so traumatized, she wouldn’t even consider an apprenticeship with any of us,” Pomona said scornfully. “I will not forgive him.”

“Hush, Pomona,” Minerva said sternly. “It was my mistake to put them together while she was taking her N.E.W.T.s, so if you want to blame someone, blame me.”

Severus was staring into the breakfast pastries that were stacked in front of him. What the hell was
going on with this conversation? He had no apprentice save one.

“Hagrid said she’s at the Ministry now,” Pomona said, turning her head to ignore Severus completely. “Married to that Weasley boy. I’m glad she found someone to treat her right.”

“Those two and Potter were inseparable at Hogwarts,” Minerva agreed. “I really didn’t see that ending after she came back for an official graduation.”

Severus had curved his hand into a fist so hard that his knuckles were even whiter than his normally pale skin. “What are you two hens yammering on about?”

Pomona harrumphed. “You were so adamant that there was no place here at all for a “good for nothing know-it-all” and you can’t even remember her name, Severus?”

“Leave it be, Pomona,” Septima said from down the table. “Hermione was better off not having to deal with his rancor every day. At least she can do some good at the Ministry.”

Severus’ black eyes lost all reflection as his lips flattened into a line. “I do not know what joke you think is appropriate at my expense, but you will not use Professor Granger as the vehicle to your spiteful hen peckery. You… WILL… leave my apprentice out of your attempts to take whatever grudge you have out on me. If you wish to insult me. Insult me to my face.” Snape rose to his full height and stormed out of the Great Hall, his black robes draped upon him like the wings of a great beast, causing every student to scatter out of his way.

“Severus!” McGonagall huffed as she caught up with him standing on the ramparts. “Severus, what was that about?”

Snape spun at her, his eyes glowered at her in pure fury. “How dare you ask me that?”

Minerva looked at him with concern. “Severus, we did not say anything you did not adamantly shove in our faces every day for the past two years.”

Snape glared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I knew you didn’t want an apprentice back when I forced you to work with Ms. Granger,” Minerva replied. “But, I forced you together, thinking that, mistakenly, you would come together as a team...”

Snape scowled at her. “Do you think, after all that has happened, that I would just send her off crying to the Ministry into the arms of Ronald Weasley?”

“Severus,” Minerva replied, “What are you talking about? You never showed the girl a moment’s kindness the entire time she was here.”

“Are you mad?” Severus spat. “Do you think we could have defeated Acacia without her? She is the… only one… I trust enough… with… everything.”

Minerva looked at him with more concern. “Severus, you should go see Poppy. Someone is messing with your mind.”

“My mind is perfectly fine!” Severus snapped. “Why is it that this entire school seems to have taken a personality reversal potion while I slept?” He spun on his heels and left McGonagall on the ramparts.

Snape stormed back towards the dungeon, ignoring the scrambling students in the hallway. A cloud
of anger surrounded him. He would have to make a counter potion for entire population of
Hogwart’s to put an end to whatever warped joke was being played upon him.

He sought Hermione’s presence in his mind, needing the feel of her gentle warmth to counter the
rising anger that threatened to consume him. The familiar thrum of their bond did not respond, and he
halted in the hall to his quarters. The intersection led to a dead end wall. There was no portrait portal
to her quarters. He hurried into his own quarters, rushing over to the second wardrobe in his bed
chambers, flinging open the doors. His teaching robes hung starkly on the hangers.

He staggered back from the wardrobe as if he had been bitten, falling back on his bed with a groan.
Her scent was gone from his room. Like the pain only occurring after one sees the cut, he felt her
absence like a wound. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think. He heard a groan, and was his own
voice as foreign to him as a stranger’s.

“Severus!” It was her voice. He was going mad. He fell back against the bed as his own madness
swirled around him.

“Severus! Please!” He closed his eyes, unwilling to face his encroaching insanity.

“Wake up, Severus, please!” Hermione’s pleaded.

Snape’s eyes opened widely to stare into the concerned brown eyes of Hermione. She had her hands
upon his face as tears streamed down her face. The bond snapped into place like an old friend
coming to visit, and he felt her relief flood into his mind as she stared into his eyes.

“Thank Merlin,” she said with a choked voice. “I couldn’t wake you up… You were in pain, and I
couldn’t wake you.”

Severus put his hands against her cheeks and threaded his fingers through her hair, pulling her close
so his head could rest against hers. “Hermione,” he whispered in a relief so profound that it caused
him to shudder against her. He stroked her hair as he inhaled her scent, drawing her against him.
“I…” he clasped her to him tightly. “Love you.”

Hermione weaved her arms around his back and clung to him tightly. “I love you too.”

Chapter 70: Mail’s In

Owls flew in with the morning mail, causing excited chatter in the Great Hall. New Years was
finally upon them. While the students were more excited for the upcoming return of their friends who
had been absent due to the holidays, the staff seemed to have mixed reviews as to being happy for
the New Year and dreading resumption of some of their classes.

Hermione had her head down on the High Table as an owl tumbled a landing over her head and into
a dish of jelly, sending multi-colored blocks of gelatin in every direction before the owl staggered
over to McGonagall.

The Headmistress lifted a brow as she took the letter from the catastrophic owl. The owl shook
himself off, hooted as if inebriated himself and launched himself into the air, flying somewhat
wobbly off across the Great Hall.

“And I thought Errol was the only owl that had issues like that,” Hermione mumbled tiredly.

Snape reached over and gently plucked the gelatin cubes out of his apprentice’s hair with a slight roll
of his eyes. Septima removed her pointed hat, shaking the cubes off of it. Prince pecked at Pomona’s
hat, causing a small shower of gelatin cubes to rain down from her hat. Minerva shook herself, catlike, sending cubes flying off her person.

Hagrid had managed to get cubes wedged into his beard, and he brushed his hand over it trying to dislodge the random blocks from his beard hair. Hagrid looked at Snape with a strange expression. “Uh… Professor… you uh…” he pointed to Severus’ head.

Snape’s lip curled in annoyance as his eyes drifted upward to assess the damage to his own person.

Hermione lifted her head off the table and slowly reached over to pluck bits of green out of his black hair. “At least the color is right,” Hermione said tiredly, stacking pieces of dark green jelly on the table.

Severus gave her a tired look, his black eyes meeting hers. He stared at her as if to decide if it was even worth the energy to be snarky at that given moment. He lifted his arm and started picking more of the errant bits of food out of his apprentice’s hair, giving them both the appearance of a pair of grooming monkeys at a hot springs in Japan.

Hagrid continued to brush the bits out of his beard, slightly amused by the sight of Hermione and Severus grooming each other. No one else would have dared to touch the Potion Master, even to do something as innocuous as removing the owl-induced food bits from his person. He had, as many of the High Table, come to realize that the only one who could get away with interacting with Severus with any sort of familiarity was Hermione alone.

McGonagall, who had finally shed the last of the bits off herself, opened the letter that had been so unceremoniously dumped in front of her. Her eyes darted across the letter before she gave a deep sigh. She passed the parchment down to Severus, who took the letter in his pale fingers.

Severus opened the letter and placed it down between himself and Hermione, their eyes darting across the neat quill writing.

“So, it is done,” Hermione said with a relieved sigh.

Snape folded the letter back up and handed it back to Minerva. “I am… relieved that Acacia will not be free to bring such agony to another.”

“Kingsley brought back the Dementors just for her,” Hermione whispered. “That has to be saying something.”

“Acacia died long ago,” Snape said, pouring himself another cup of tea after noticing his teacup was full of jelly. He poured tea into Hermione’s cup. “What was left… was no longer her father’s daughter.”

Prince broke up the conversation by hopping over to Hagrid and pecking at his beard. The half-giant sputtered as Prince stood on his chest and liberated Hagrid of his jelly infested beard.

“Are… they supposed to be able to eat jelly?” Hermione said with slight concern.

Severus tilted his head as Hagrid attempted to shoo the errant phoenix off himself while avoiding the business end of Prince’s beak. “I’m not going to argue with him.”

Hermione slowly turned away and made herself busy eating a chocolate pastry. “I see nothing,” she muttered, nibbling on the pastry.
Fireworks blossomed across the lake as the sky darkened into night. Severus and Hermione sat on the ramparts watching the show.

“Pomona actually volunteered to take our patrols this evening,” Hermione chuckled. “Did you say something to her?”

“Me?” Severus chuffed. “Why would I speak to that old hen?”

“It’s not like her to volunteer to help us as you know,” Hermione laughed as she leaned up against him, laying her head on his shoulder. They had propped themselves against the wall in the darkness of outlying supports.

“Maybe she’s trying to make up for that last batch of bad herbs she sent us,” Snape speculated.

“She treats me as though touching me will confer some sort of dragon pox,” Hermione chuckled somewhat sadly.

“Still?” Severus arched a brow. “Maybe she’s afraid that touching you will cause her entire wardrobe to turn black, and she will develop a sun allergy.”

Hermione bashed her head against Severus’ shoulder. “That’s not funny, Severus.”

Severus’ fingers touched the side of her neck, running up behind her ear. “Why are you laughing then, witch?”

Hermione squirmed at his touch and then yielded to it, sagging against him with a sigh of pleasure. She burrowed into his robes, snuffling his chest with her face.

One of the fireworks exploded high overhead, forming into a dragon that roared across the ramparts. Severus watched as it flew over them, shedding sparks as it whooshed over them. “I should have suspected we would never be rid of Weasley’s Wildfire Whiz-bangs.”


“At least some good came out of that despicable woman’s reign of terror,” Severus commented. A flurry of fire-crackers went off somewhere below them in the courtyards. “It seems someone has been smuggling in muggle fireworks for tonight’s festivities.”

“Isn’t this the one time of year Minerva turns a blind eye to that sort of thing?” Hermione smiled at him.

“One of the few,” Snape agreed. “It is… a very short list.”

Hermione moved to look him in the face. His dark eyes met hers with a pervasive calm. She brushed his temple with her hand and simply stared into his eyes, enjoying the reflection of the fireworks in the blackness of his irises.

“Hrmph,” Severus said after a time. “Only you.”

She tilted her head at him. “Do tell.”

“Only you would purposely look into my eyes and enjoy it,” he replied softly.

She tilted her chin up defiantly. “Perhaps if more people did it, they would learn something new about their Potions professor.”
“I do not care for google-eyed students attempting to stare me in the face when they should be listening to what I tell them, Ms. Granger,” Snape intoned in the familiar voice she associated with the classroom.

“Mmm,” she hummed, staring at him intently, her fingers playing with the hair next to his ear.

Severus slid his eyes over to glare at her, his hand stealthily sneaked up behind her back. His pale fingers slid between her hair and neck and grasped the nape of her neck and pulled her to him.

Hermione meeped, her eyes half rolling back into her head, and she collapsed upon him. Severus stroked her hair with a soft hiss, lowering his head to stare her in the eyes.

The sound of scuffling feet alerted Severus of an impending interloper, and he pressed his forehead to hers and cast the disillusionment charm upon them both with a shrewd smirk upon his face.

The two lovers crept out onto the ramparts with a giggle and a laugh. No one was here. They had a great view of the fireworks. The area was usually off limits to students, but the holiday made them more daring than they normally would be. They had spotted no patrolling professors in the halls, and most of the prefects were still on vacation. It was perfect. They curled up together at one of the corners of the ramparts, too wrapped up in each other’s company to pay attention to anything else.

“Lumos,” Snape’s voice broke the silence like a crack of thunder, his wand cutting through the dark of the corner.

The girl shrieked in surprise and mortification, and the boy sprung up like a spring rabbit out of the grass, almost toppling himself over the ramparts.

Severus’ arm shot out and caught the boy by the scruff of his shirt, pulling him from the edge of the ramparts and his painful fall below. “That will be ten points from Ravenclaw, Hathaway,” Snape’s cold voice dripped venom as he shoved the boy towards the exit. “And ten points from Gryffindor for you, Standridge. Do not think that the holidays excuse you from restricted areas.”

Both students practically fell over themselves as they attempted to leave in due haste, bumping into each other as they attempted to leave the same door at the same time. They hurried down the hallway in the fastest walk they could manage as to not incur the wrath of their Potion Master yet again by daring to run in the hallways.

“Nox,” Snape said, extinguishing his wand before tucking it away. He dispelled the disillusionment with a thought.

Hermione was covering her mouth as she laughed, her attempt to squelch herself was failing utterly now that the students were gone. She cackled, falling back against the rampart floor, her breaths coming in small gasps.

Severus stared down at her, the corners of his stern face curved upward in a barely discernable smile. He extended his hand to her.

Hermione placed her hand into his, allowing his fingers to lock around hers and pull her up. She bounced onto her feet with a laugh and slammed into him, wrapping her arms around his waistcoat and pressing her face against his chest. “Happy New Year, Severus,” she laughed into him, embracing him tightly.

He closed his arms around her, wrapping his robes around her as his hand tucked her head against him. “Happy New Year, Hermione,” he replied softly.
Chapter 71: Old Memories Amongst the New

Snape’s eyes opened in the dark of the room, and his mind quickly took an assessment of events, time, and location. His eyes darted towards the hearth, focusing on the dark silhouette of a phoenix snoozing on his perch. Closing his eyes with a sigh of relief, he thanked whatever gods were listening that he did not wake up into the waking nightmare he had suffered previously.

The nightmare, however, had been just real enough to leave a deep impression of what life would have been like had things not ended civilly between him and his stalwart apprentice. Life at Hogwart’s would have lost much, not only for himself, but in the lifeblood of the school… its students. How one act of kindness could in turn influence so many people was almost unfathomable. Yet, as he mentally retraced his steps back to when Hermione Granger had returned to Hogwart’s, he realized that she had given him the same kindness from the very start of their working relationship. She had stubbornly taken his snide remarks, cold directions, merciless potion corrections, stern methodology, and ingrained idiosyncrasies as the price of learning from him.

It wasn’t to say they hadn’t had their own share of rows. They had experienced many at the start, but unlike the Hermione in his dream, the real Hermione had stared him directly in the face as he scowled down at her, refusing to yield to his projected attitude, yet followed his instructions to the letter with unwavering faith in his instruction. She had become his counter-balance along the way, and despite any disagreements they had behind the classroom and laboratory doors that first year, she never allowed it to show in front of the other students.

When Minerva had brought in Slughorn to oversee Hermione’s Potions N.E.W.T., a part of him had been furious that anyone other than he be the one to administer such a test. Minerva had insisted, however, that the test be unquestioningly unbiased, for Hermione’s sake as well as his. He had scowled at the older witch, snarling at her for questioning his ability to be impartial. McGonagall had only smiled at him, saying he would appreciate it later that there would be nothing anyone could do to question Hermione’s placement as his apprentice. He had scowled at her, accusing Minerva of inflicting Granger upon him to being with.

Severus turned under the covers, his arms seeking the warmth of the brave, stubborn, opinionated, and unquestioningly loyal witch who had the unfortunate and miraculous failing in being all of those things to him. She murmured in her sleep, rolling close to him, instinctively seeking the curl of his embrace. Her scent wafted into his nostrils as familiar to him now as the myriad of potions he crafted. He held her against him with half-closed eyes, feeling her heartbeat against his chest and the tickle of her breath against his skin. She was his end. The end of the solitary, unquestioningly private, uncompromising, and egocentric man that had cursed the halls of Hogwart’s for decades. She was his beginning as well… none of which would have been possible had he succumbed to death at the hands of the Dark Lord Voldemort.

He closed his eyes, thinking back the time when his last conscious action had been to look Lily Potter’s son in the eyes, hoping to find redemption for a lifetime of misdeeds done for the love of her memory.

“Sev,” Lily’s voice said. “Sev, wake up.”

Severus pulled himself up from a slouching position. The shrieking shack was empty now. It was suffused with an almost white glow, looking so much cleaner than it had ever been in life. Nagini was gone. Potter, Weasley, and Granger had disappeared. The Dark Lord was nowhere to be seen.

“Sev,” Lily’s voice admonished. “What have you done to yourself?” Her voice was as he remembered before their argument and subsequent falling out. It was soft and light.
“I…” Severus spoke slowly, realizing that his throat actually worked. “I died?”

“Not quite, I suspect,” Lily said, sitting down in front of him. Her bright green eyes seemed to have their own luminescence. “You are talking to me.”

“Am I?” Severus managed to reply.

“Of course you are,” Lily said gently. “Do you doubt me?”

Severus blinked slowly. “I will… confess… uncertainty in this area.”

Lily laughed. It was a rich ringing bell of a sound that seemed to fill the shack with its resonance. “Sev, in all the years I have known you, you never fail to mistrust the most simple of things. I fear… I am to blame for this as much as anyone else that drove your emotions deep and buried them so far below the surface of your face.” Her face was serious, staring at him as he sat looking at her. He was staring at her, taking in the contours of her face and the way her hair fell about her shoulders. “You took care of my son, Sev,” she said kindly, a smile on her face. “I did not deserve such loyalty after spurning you as I did.”

Severus stared into the eyes of his childhood friend. “I said such… a horrible thing to you.”

“In anger and pain, Sev,” Lily admitted. “Something a friend should have forgiven you for. I failed you, Sev. I should have stood up for you long before then, but I didn’t. I am sorry for it. You have proven yourself a better man than all of those who walked around you pretending to be.”

Severus managed to straighten up into a better sitting position. “Not that it will do me much good being dead and all.” He looked around him at the place that was and was not the shrieking shack.

Lily took his hands in hers, the warmth that came from them was undeniable. “You don’t have to come with me, Sev. I don’t think you'd want to make nice with James, Sirius, and Remus just yet.”

Severus blinked at her. “What… else could I do?”

Her smile was like a sunrise. “You can walk out that door right there, Sev,” she smiled at him.

Severus turned and saw the door and looked back at Lily uncomprehending. “What lies behind the door?”

Lily stood up and pulled Severus up with her hands. “A chance for happiness, Sev.”

Severus scoffed, despite himself. “I deserve no happiness.”

Lily cupped his face in her hands, something she had never done in life. “No one deserves it more.”

Severus’s black eyes stared into her green ones; insecurity flickered across them.

Lily smiled softly at him. “You needn’t be alone, Sev. I promise you.”

Snape looked at her in half pain. The only one he had ever loved was standing before him, not beyond a door to an uncertain future.

Lily pressed her lips to his forehead and backed away from him. “Don’t pity the dead, Sev,” she said, “and don’t pity yourself.”

Severus lowered his gaze, conflicted. “I don’t supposed you could offer me a clue to this future?” he said hoarsely.
“Aw, Sev,” Lily said, stepping backwards in a walk. “That would be cheating… and you do so hate cheaters.” Her eyes were warm. Her head tilted as if she heard something he could not. “I have to go. Harry is ready to see me.”

Lily turned to go. “You deserve someone who can be as loyal to you in life as you were to my memory, Sev. You deserve a chance for happiness.” She walked away from him, her body fading away into the white of the shack and disappeared completely.

Severus swallowed hard as he stared at the place in the air where Lily’s apparition had disappeared. He faced the door near him with an accusatory glare that was as natural to him as breathing. His pale fingers reached for the handle, and he pulled the latch. Opening the door before him, he walked into the swirling mist beyond.

Severus opened his eyes and saw Hermione staring at him. Her brown eyes shimmered as she smiled at him, gazing into his dark black irises fearlessly and unrepentant. He touched her cheek and brushed back her hair, causing her eyes to flutter and break eye contact. “I win,” he purred, capturing her mouth with his. Their kiss deepened, causing Severus to groan into her mouth.

Hermione seemed to come to her senses, pushing Severus from her with a shuddering pant. Snape’s eyes bored into hers, looking for some reason as to her abrupt abortion to their actions. “S…staff meeting,” she said breathlessly.

“You’d rather listen to the faculty discuss the schedule for Hogsmeade chaperoning,” Severus hissed as he slowly ran his tongue around the inner edge of her ear. “Than spend… time… with… me?” He growled softly into her ear.

Hermione placed her hands on his chest in an attempt to push Severus further from her, but the sensation of her hands meeting his skin caused him to hiss in response to her touch, lowering himself to press closer to her. She gasped, wrapping her arms around his back as larger pieces of her coherency fled into the morning air. She pounded her hands on him in a futile attempt to distract him. “Pomona will give us grief if we don’t show.”

“Pomona,” Severus growled as he let his hand roam down her side to her hips, “can… get… stuff.”

Hermione gave a moan, half squirming and half rubbing against him at the same time.

He nibbled at her throat, working his way down towards her chest. He let the mask of indifference fall across his face, pulling away from her in a sudden movement. “However,” he said in an even voice. “If you insist upon going right now,” he said dispassionately. “Who am I to stop you?”

Hermione’s hands plastered themselves against the sides of Severus’ neck, her nails digging into the softer skin below his ears as she pulled him down on top of her. “Shut up and kiss me, Severus!” she hissed, covering his mouth with hers.

Snape’s arms went flying out to the sides to break his fall over her. One arm struggled for purchase on the pillow to push himself into a more dignified position but not quite succeeding. As they parted breathlessly, Severus’ eyes met hers, having gained an even darker depth to them. The corners of his lips curled upwards in a small triumphant smile. “Yes, my witch,” he rumbled, covering her mouth with his as Hermione made a laughing squeal.
It was probably a good thing they had woken up early.
Part Five: Dates, Planning, Ambush, and Testing Out

Chapter Summary

Severus and Hermione go out on a date... in PUBLIC.
Spring sneaks up on everyone, but a certain Slytherin is up to something.
The faculty are abuzz with plotting.
Hermione takes her Mastery test.
Minerva makes Hermione an offer she can't refuse.
Students are leaving for the summer, but Hermione has something for a certain Draco Malfoy.

Chapter 72: Meetings and a Date

The staff meeting, as expected, was about as exciting as watching Madam Pince organize and reorganize the same line of books until they were perfectly straight. It seemed like most of the faculty seemed to be on the same page in that regard, as Septima and Filius were nursing a cup of tea like it was their lifeline to consciousness. The visiting Muggles Studies professor, Preston Reese, was talking, but his voice was so monophonic that even Minerva was looking like she was going to doze right off into her morning tea.

“That’s an excellent idea, Preston,” Pomona said suddenly, jolting half of the room awake and the rest out of their unintentional dozes. “We could easily combine the field trip with the study of muggle herbs for my fifth year herbology students.”

“Excellent idea, Professor Sprout,” Preston agreed. “I think the students would enjoy a field trip to one of the muggle museums to see some history.”

Preston Reese continued to chatter with Pomona and the rest of the professors started to nod off again. Severus had his arms folded in front of him, pulling his outer robe around him like a cocoon. He stared down towards the table his tea was sitting on, convinced the cup would leap up at any given moment and provide better company and infinitely more scintillating conversation than he was experiencing currently.

Hermione shifted in her seat, nursing her teacup with equal displeasure. Choosing not to stare at Severus’ teacup in the exactly the same manner, she decided to stare across the room, focusing on a small bauble Minerva had placed on her desk. It was during moments like this, master and apprentice were entirely in sync, down to the bored air, flat lined lips, and acerbic expressions.

Rolanda Hooch nudged Hermione with her pointed shoe, startling Hermione out of her blank mental state. The flying instructor gave her a knowing grin, her hawkish eyes glittered. Hermione smiled back at Rolanda with an apologetic downward glance. She had often wondered when she was younger, though never out loud, if Madam Hooch was actually a bird of prey of some sort that had a human form, rather than an animagus, who could take on the form of an animal. It didn’t matter to Hermione though. Now that Hermione was no longer a student, Rolanda showed her a more warm face instead of the strictly business face her students received.

“You’re starting to even brood like him, Hermione,” Rolanda said softly. “Don’t let Pomona catch you.”
Hermione flushed a little. “It just happens,” she admitted. “I don’t even realize it.”

“It’s fine with me, Hermione,” Hooch said with a grin. “I’m glad to see it. I bet your students think otherwise.” Rolanda’s eyes twinkled.

Hermione stifled a laugh before it startled some of the semi-sleeping faculty. Severus had slid his eyes over to glare in her direction, but there was no ire behind it. He grunted something non-committal to the conversation, drawling his voice in the most bored manner possible.

It seemed like forever, but finally the meeting was over. Pomona Sprout and Preston Reese were continuing to chatter on in the corner, but the rest of the room seemed perfectly happy to slink off to whatever responsibilities lay beyond the Headmistress’ office.

Severus stood swiftly in a fluid movement and shrugged his shoulders to set his outer robe in alignment. He turned to Hermione with slightly less bored expression but not my much. His hand extended.

She took his hand, allowing his fingers to close around hers and pull her up. They walked out of the office in synchronization, both raising an arm to comb their hair back from their face at the same time as they walked. Their robes whipped behind them like folded wings.

“I fear any hope for a more lenient Potions Professor in the next few years is right out,” Hooch chuckled to McGonagall.

McGonagall shook her head. “I’m sure Severus prefers it that way.”

Hooch gave McGonagall a knowing smile. “You’re right, of course.”

“Bird,” Severus chastised. “Those are not for you.”

Severus was attempting to write instructions for one of his classes, but Prince was treating the flurry of his quill hand as a game. Snape shooed the mischievous bird back to his perch with a wave of his arm. Prince returned and playfully nipped at his quill hand again. “Ffffffft,” he hissed.

Prince seemed particularly immune to Severus at that given moment, because he just grabbed one of Snape’s fingers with his beak and mouthed it, tugging. Severus glared at the bird, but alas the gaze that sent students scrambling out of his way in the hallways did nothing to deter the antics of his familiar. He scowled at the phoenix with a dour expression. “What has gotten into you?” he questioned.

Prince warbled, snatching the quill he was writing with in his beak and carried it off back to his perch, proceeding to mouth the barbs and vanes back into order as if it were one of his own feathers.

Severus’s eye twitched a little at having his writing quill stolen out from under him. It wasn’t like he could give the phoenix a detention for being aggravating.

A hand appeared in front of him, holding a replacement quill for him. It was the quill the Weasley’s had gifted him during their Christmas visit. Hermione’s other hand slid gently against the side of his neck, dispelling his irritation as effectively as a swiftly cast spell. He took the quill from her hand and set it down, enjoying the feel of her hand against his neck.

Her hand freed from holding the quill, she massaged his neck slowly, driving her thumbs into the tense muscles of his neck. Severus grunted, his head slumping forward in pleasure from her kneading. She worked his shoulder blades despite his robes, slowly relieving the stored tension and
It took a moment to realize she had stopped, placing a soft kiss against the side of his neck above his collar. She inhaled his scent after pressing her nose into his hair. “Mmm,” she hummed into his hair. After a moment, she pulled away, “I’m sorry for distracting you.”

He turned to face her, placing his hand to her cheek. “I shall endure,” he rumbled, “your tedious assaults to my person.”

“You wound me, Professor Snape,” Hermione replied, pulling away as if affronted. “How could you be so callous?”

“Decades of practice,” he replied dryly.

Hermione held out her hand, and a chair came to her call without a word. Her ability to cast a spell without sound or a wand was becoming intuitive and instinctual. She placed it beside him on the writing desk, and plopped herself into it. “I suppose I must suffer your callous disregard for my feelings,” she said with a sniff, half-flopping herself into his lap without a further word.

Snape picked up his writing quill and dipped it into the inkwell to continue his writing. His other hand gently lay upon Hermione’s exposed neck as she draped herself across his lap, casually stroking her skin. There were worse ways to spend time writing lesson plans.

As the papers he was writing finally came to completion, he shifted his weight in his chair. Hermione stirred slightly, murmuring into his lap. “Hermione,” he rumbled, his voice seeming to hang in the air like a scent.

She stirred against him and slowly pulled herself up to face him. Her eyes were slightly unfocused and there was the slight imprint of one of his buttons on her skin where she had been leaning against them.

“Are the potion orders completed for today?” he asked with the same tone he normally reserved for faculty meetings.

“Mmph,” Hermione mumbled. “The week is done.”

“Papers graded?” he continued.

“Yesss,” she yawned, rolling her eyes at him, perhaps wondering why he had woken her up for such a boring interrogation.

“Ingredients cataloged?” he asked gruffly.

“Sorted,” she said blearily, “inventoried, and reordered.”

“Hmmm,” he said. “I fear I must punish you for being so ahead of schedule that I need to think of more things for you to do.”

Hermione arched a tired brow that clearly said, “What now?”

“Have dinner with me tonight,” Severus touched his forehead to hers, his face completely unexpressive. “In London. I know of a place… with tolerably non-fatal menu entrees.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide as the significance of their first appearance in a muggle place would be uncharacteristically public while the majority of the wizarding community had no clue as their
relationship outside of Master and Apprentice in Potions. Severus was saying, with nothing more than his invitation, that he was willing to be seen with her in public outside of the exclusive zone of Hogwarts. She beamed at him, throwing her arms around his neck and pressing her lips to his cheek.

Severus wobbled in his chair, hand going up to press against her hair. “Is that a no?” he inquired into her curls.

Her teeth met the junction of his neck where his stiff collar did not quite protect him. “Mrrfh,” he hissed, catching her by the waist. “Definitely a no, then,” he finished.

Hermione’s mouth covered his, effectively silencing him.

Hermione stood near the exit of Hogwarts dressed in her mundane muggle clothes. She shifted somewhat uncomfortably, having been accustomed to her teaching robes far more than her school uniform had ever been. She had begun to realize that while the dynamics and flows of the world of magic was vast and beyond the grasp of most muggles, muggle fashion was definitely more hard to grasp for most wizards and witches. It was quite amusing when she thought about it.

She shifted her position on the bridge, automatically reaching to pull her robes in across her chest. A moment passed before she realized she had no robe on, and her winter sweater and puffy winter jacket seemed even more out of place. She had her wand in a special holster under her shoulder like a muggle version of the travel wallet, and it felt odd being in a place she was not used to it being.

There was a meow that broke her concentration. Mrs. Norris was padding down the rail of the bridge, coming towards her with an almost haughty air about her.

“Students shouldn’t be out here. Students shouldn’t be out of uniform on the grounds!” Filch yelled from behind her. His distinctively scratchy voice was the bane of students out after curfew, but Hermione no longer felt the instinctive fear that came with being caught wandering the grounds of Hogwarts.

Her spine straightened, lips coming together in a flat line as all the emotion in her face slipped away. Her eyes lost their light, instead sucking in the light around her. She met the eyes of Mrs. Norris, and the cat skidded to a halt on the bridge, as if suddenly coming to the conclusion that a misjudgment had been made.

“And you would do what, Mr. Filch?” Hermione said caustically. “Send me to my own detention?”

The caretaker skidded to a halt on the bridge, stunned. He had expected an errant student sneaking out after dark, but had instead intercepted Hermione. Many times in her life, this man had tried to make her life excessively miserable with the help of Mrs. Norris. He stared at her with a half open mouth. For once, the man seemed completely at a loss for words.

If Argus Filch actually had anything to say about the situation, he did not get a chance, because Severus walked by him with his long strides. His winter trench coat whipped behind him like his robes because he hadn’t bothered to button it closed. His long Slytherin scarf wrapped around his black turtleneck and hung half down the front of his chest and half over his shoulder. His tailored black pants were adorned only by a thin black leather belt and a silver clasp that was simple but shined in the moonlight. He wore boots that seemed almost too dressy for the rest of his outfit, looking custom fit and tailored in a reflection of his normal dragon-hide boots.
Severus turned to Argus without a word, his black eyes glowered down at the caretaker. His roll of power hung about him so heavily that even the magically challenged Filch could feel it in the air. “Ms. Granger,” he said a tone that accepted nothing but obedience.

“Yes, Professor Snape?” Hermione said automatically, her voice deadpan.

“You will serve your detention with me tonight for being out on the grounds without permission out of uniform,” Severus growled.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied immediately.

Severus scowled at Filch, lip curling slightly. He turned on his heels and walked by Hermione as she too turned to follow him out of the gates of Hogwart’s, leaving Filch and Mrs. Norris to ponder what they had just stepped into and how badly it would end for them later.

As the two professors stepped outside of the gates of Hogwart’s, Snape lifted his arm and Hermione stepped into his side. With an echoing crack, they were gone.

As Hermione and Severus arrived in the apparete-safe zone, Hermione let the smile creep back into her face as she stared up at Snape. He looked down at her impassively, but his hand brushed the hair back from her face with a gentle brush of his fingers. “You look uncomfortable,” he said softly.

Hermione blushed a little. “I used to be so comfortable in my muggle clothes… I’m not sure why I can’t seem to get comfortable now.”

“I may be able to help in this regard,” Severus said, offering his arm.

Hermione stared at his arm a moment as if she thought it would transfigure itself as a viper and bite her. It was a public place… surely Snape would not want to bring attention to themselves in any way? She met his eyes and saw him staring her expectantly. She tilted her chin up and curled her arm around his, walking by his side arm-in-arm.

He guided her into a coat shop, pausing only to open the door for her. She walked in ahead of him, but waited for him to lead her to whatever direction he had planned. He walked back toward the back of the store to where there were racks of various long coats. His eyes darted from coat to coat, pulling out a few only to look at them disdainfully and shoving them back on their rack.

After a few minutes of scowling at various coats, he seemed to find one that he did not immediately scorn, and he thumbed through the coats with his pale fingers looking for the right size. After a few scowls at boggling size numbers in relation to the coat’s actual size, he pulled one out. “Here,” he said at last. “Try this on.”

Hermione shed her puffy winter coat and laid it over the coat rack. She put her arm through the coat Snape was holding out for her. He held the other sleeve out for her, and she slid her other arm in. The coat settled upon her shoulders much like her teaching robe did, hanging with enough heft to feel substantial thanks to the extra winter linings. She automatically shrugged her shoulders, and the fabric fell about her with a satisfying drape. “This feels much better,” she admitted with a sigh of relief. “How did you know?”

Severus gave her a small quirk of the corner of his mouth. “I know what it is like to prefer a certain way of dress,” he replied. His black eyes raked over her appraisingly. “People already think I’ve corrupted your aesthetic. Why not revel in it?”
Hermione grinned at him. She reached to find the tag on the coat, but Snape’s pale hand had already snapped it up as he headed towards the registers without a word. She flushed a little, grabbing for her cast off puffy winter coat and carried it with her.

The woman at the register smiled at her as she handed Severus his change. Hermione smiled back shyly. The woman handed her a bag for her old coat, which she took gratefully before stuffing her old one into it.

Severus turned to her a moment, his pale fingers grasped her Gryffindor scarf with a slight curl of his lip. He tugged on it, readjusting it around her neck and throwing one end over her shoulder. “Your scarf is sporting the wrong colors,” Severus observed dryly.

The attendant at the register cleared her throat and pointed to a scarf rack next to her, which had an assortment of scarves. One was disturbingly identical to the Slytherin school scarves.

“Oh no you don’t,” Hermione squeaked as Severus’ mouth quirked upward.

Snape herded her towards the scarf rack with his body, blocking her every dodge in a manner that would have made the Quidditch teams proud. He caught her attempt to dive under his arm with his one arm while he sneakily placed his bare hand on the back of her neck, sliding his fingers across her skin. Hermione wilted against him instantly as he pinned her against him.

Severus gently unwrapped her inappropriate Gryffindor scarf from her neck and cast it onto the counter. He tugged the green and silver scarf off the rack and gently wrapped it around her neck. He pulled a note out of his coat pocket and handed it to the cashier, releasing his touch on the back of Hermione’s neck.

She murmured into his coat something unintelligible.

“You are welcome,” Severus crooned softly in reply.

The walk to the restaurant was mostly uneventful. People seemed to steer around the pair much like the students of Hogwart’s did, which did not bother either of them in the slightest. They continued their conversations about the architecture around them, the strange advertisements, lurid fashions, and appalling behavior of some of the people that passed them.

They arrived at the small restaurant that seemed like it had been preserved from a time long past. The sign out front was covered in ivy so thick that had Severus not known exactly where he was going, she would never have guessed it was the place they were meant to go to. Severus held the door for her once again, bowing his head slightly as she passed within.

The menu was not fancy, but there was a different sort of quality that was evident to Hermione. The food tasted like something she would have eaten as a child growing up with her parents. There was a care put into it that made the meal feel special to her.

Severus watched her eat with curiosity. His face was calm, and his eyes were inscrutable as she had come to expect. Even so, his head was tilted slightly as he watched her.

“Now you’re staring at me, Severus,” Hermione said with a slight blush as she nibbled at some sort of beef and kidney pie variation.

He made a soft harrumphing sound. “Normally, when you are eating, I am not facing you directly,”
he said as if that explained every reason to stare at her eat.

“Is there a reason for your intense scrutiny?” she questioned. “Or is this my last meal?”

Severus’ mouth turned up slightly at the corner, and he extended his hand to her over the table. Hermione narrowed her eyes with an uplifted chin as he looked him in the eyes. She placed her hand in his, allowing his fingers to curl around hers. Her eyes closed slightly as his thumb softly brushed over her curled fingers.

Hermione opened her eyes suddenly. “Fine,” she said with amusement. “Watch me eat.” She pulled her hand away so she could pick up her cutting knife and attack her food with it.

Snape turned his gaze towards his plate and concentrated on devouring it systematically. At one point, a couple at a nearby booth was staring at them, and Severus turned his head slowly to look straight at them. The couple’s eyes widened and they immediately cast their eyes down towards the table.

“I see your glare is not limited to the confines of Hogwart’s,” Hermione chuckled as she finished off her dinner.

“Woe the day I find otherwise,” Snape replied, setting down his fork.

“I think if that day ever came,” Hermione admitted. “I would prepare myself for the eminent End Days.”

Severus gave a small twitch of his lips and stood, pulling on his long coat with a swirl of his arms. After readjusting his scarf with a few tugs, he left notes and coins in a pile next to the ticket, moving a water glass over it. He pulled Hermione’s coat off her chair and held it out to her.

Hermione stood with a shake of her head and put her arms through the sleeves, shrugging to allow it to settle across her shoulders. She grabbed her disturbingly Slytherin colored scarf and slung it on then picked up her bag with her old coat in one hand. He led the way out, opening the door for her to exit before him and then rejoined her as he stepped through. He extended his arm to her once more, allowing her to weave her arm around it as they walked together.

As they walked along a bridge leading over a lake, Hermione stopped to lean over and look down at the lake below. Her eyes scanned the water and surrounding trees with curiosity. She inhaled the scent of the lake below and its mixture of frozen and moving water combined. They continued their walk to the apparate-safe are hidden away from the casual eyes of possible passing muggles.

Severus opened his arm for her, and she stepped into his embrace, but instead of facing forward, she placed her head against his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist. His arm closed around her back, his fingers gently resting on her hair.

With a crack, they disappeared.

Hermione almost too gleefully shed her muggle clothing and stored it away in the wardrobe. She pulled on her nightgown with a large yawn. “I didn’t see Filch on the way in,” she yawned sleepily, making her words elongate somewhat unnaturally. He scratched Prince under the chin with her fingers and made sure his food bowl was adequately stocked for the night.

“He may not bother anyone for a few days,” Severus replied as he slipped under the covers.
“Well you are rather traumatizing, Severus,” Hermione teased as she snuggled in next to him, tucking her head against his chest.

“Hrmph,” he grunted.

“Severus?” Hermione yawned into his chest.

“Hrm?” he replied into her hair.

“Thank you for tonight,” she thanked sleepily.

Severus yawned, pulling her against him as he closed his eyes. “You are welcome.”

Chapter 73: Spring Encroaches

Spring had started to creep into Hogwart’s slowly at first. Hints of the season were something almost tangible in the air before the bite in the cold began to subside. As the green began to spread back across the landscape, spring flowers and blooming trees blessed the grounds with showers of light colored petals and semi-sweet scents. The gloom of late winter lifted, and spirits in Hogwart’s shifted into a more light-hearted gear. But with this subtle and no-so-subtle spring distraction amongst the students and staff of Hogwart’s, concentration seemed to be even harder to wrangle out of the many students that lived within Hogwart’s halls of learning.

As Hermione stared across the glassy eyed expressions of most of her Transfiguration students, she saw the familiar and tell-tale signs of minds wandering the grounds of Hogwart’s rather than staying cooped up in the classroom. McGonagall was draped across her desk as a dozing silver tabby. Her ears flicking back and forth and the slight twitch of the end of her tail were her only indicator of life. An idea occurred to Hermione as she stared at the glassy-eyed faces. “Hrm…” she said with a bored tone. “I was hoping to move this class outside to continue our lessons, but alas,” she baited them with a smug smile. “How… disappointing.” She allowed the familiar disappointed drone into her voice, concealing her inner amusement.

Students suddenly took an interest in the lesson at hand. Wands were being waved more enthusiastically. Some of the class had to chase their escaped mice across the classroom in order to bring them back to their desks.

One student was getting extremely frustrated by her mouse, which was making a bee-line towards the back of the room and the door. She waved her wand in rapid succession and yelled at the power word, flinging the spell towards the fleeing mouse. The mouse squeaked as it fell over itself head-over-heels and landed as a matchstick near the door. The girl skidded to a halt and picked up the mouse matchstick with a combination of frustration and relief.

“5 points from Ravenclaw for careless wand waving, Miss Hathaway,” Hermione said with a quirk of her lips.

The girl slumped as she stood, both her head and her wand hand drooped in her shame.

“15 points to Ravenclaw, however,” Hermione continued with a smile, “for steadfast determination and startling moving accuracy.”

Hathaway looked up in amazement, a smile spreading across her face.

“Your partner seems to be having some difficulties, Miss Hathaway,” Hermione smirked. “Perhaps
you can assist him before he turns his desk into a matchstick.”

The girl smiled and nodded her head, returning to her seat with enthusiasm.

Hermione walked the aisles between the desks, helping correct posture, pronunciation, and execution. Minerva’s eyes were open now, and she watched over the class with more attention. Her ears were perked forward as she watched the students work on their matches and mice.

After confirming that every student had successfully transfigured their mice into proper matchsticks, rather than disturbingly furry matchsticks with tails, she clapped her hands together. “As promised, we can continue this lesson outside by the lake, I think, unless of course, you prefer to stay here?”

Emphatic shaking of the heads answered her, causing a grin to spread across Hermione’s face. “Alright then, let’s move out to the shoreline. Your first assignment as you arrive is to find a stone along the shore and transfigure yourselves a blanket to sit upon. We shall convene on the shore in 15 minutes. Get moving!”

Students gathered their books and belongings and hustled out the door, chattering amongst themselves with excitement.

McGonagall was sitting on her desk now, pushing her spectacles up the bridge of her nose. “That was a fine inspirational tactic, Hermione. Very Slytherin of you.”

Hermione laughed, casting her head back as her face flushed. “However,” Minerva admitted, “Attempting to teach a class outside where all the students will be distracted to the extreme is very brave of you. Very Gryffindor of you as well.”

Hermione laughed again, looking at Minerva with a warm grin. “Thank you, Headmistress,” she thanked. “I do like to keep things balanced, after all.”

“The spring suits you, Hermione,” Minerva said with a smile.

“Oh?” Hermione asked as she gathered some materials in her arms to follow her students out to the lake.

“You are more resistant to Severus’ brooding influence,” Minerva teased her apprentice.

Hermione placed her hand to her chest in mock surprise. “Headmistress,” she said with a high tone, “are you saying I’m turning into Hogwarts’ second native dungeon bat? Is that you, Pomona?”

Minerva laughed whole-heartedly. “Despite how similar you can be, Hermione, I am happy to see that you have not lost your smiles somewhere in between.”

Hermione chuckled, playfully nudging the Headmistress with her shoulder. “You know,” she mused. “If it weren’t for Severus… I think I would not have felt safe enough to really smile again. How is that for irony?”

Minerva looked at her appraisingly. “We have to thank our stone-faced, snarky, intolerant, and surly Potion Master for providing a safe place to rediscover your smile?”

Hermione grinned like a Cheshire cat. “Maybe.”

“You know, Hermione,” McGonagall said softly. “We all had our doubts who would survive that first year you came back. In fact, there may have been some under the table betting who would hex
the other first and if would involve a stay with Poppy.”

Hermione made a choking sound and stared at McGonagall. “You bet on us?”

Minerva tilted her head as if she had just discussed who would win the next Quidditch game. “You must admit that it was perfectly natural to presume one of you would eventually explode. It was only a matter of which one would do it first.”

Hermione made a sound that sounded reminiscent of a snake hissing. “Who won the betting?”

Minerva’s eyes twinkled. “Well it wasn’t Professor Sprout,” she gave a laugh. Her face became serious. “The two of you have something undeniable beautiful, Hermione. We may never have believed it could exist until the two of you came together. We support you. Even Pomona does… when she isn’t busy being jealous of you both.”

Hermione looked thoughtful and then smiled genuinely. “Thank you, Minerva. It means a lot to me to know…“

Minerva touched her hand gently. “See? There is the smile of Hermione Granger. Madam Pince will have to be extra vigilant in the defense of her books in the restricted section.”

Hermione giggled, blushing.

Minerva took out her wand and waved it, muttering. “Go. Your class is waiting for you. The apparete jinx is lifted for you.”

Hermione smiled, stepping away from McGonagall so she would not be swept with her. “Thank you, Headmistress.”

Crack. She was gone.

The silver tabby cat yawned toothily and jumped off the desk, padding out the classroom door with a wave of her tail.

-Severus walked the longer path towards the lake, his dragon-hide boots making the barest of sounds as he walked across the grass. When he stilled his mind, he could sense Hermione’s presence outside of the halls of Hogwart’s and his feet brought him out towards the lake without him realizing it consciously. Prince flew high overhead, darting through the clouds around the castle’s parapets. He flew lazily through the air with barely any wing beats, held aloft by the thermals drifting up from the ground. It probably wouldn’t be long before the phoenix would dive into Minerva’s office window and butter her up for food and attention. The bird was anything but not opportunistic for either.

The students were packing up their belongings and walking the path back towards Hogwart’s. While they gave him a wide berth, as usual, they bowed their heads slightly as they passed and called him by title. He nodded silently to them as they passed.

Hermione was sitting beside one of the students, directing him to tap the drinking glass in front of him and transfigure it. She tapped his arm to position is less awkwardly and repeated the incantation for him.

The boy was having issues enunciating, and Hermione corrected him each time. She tapped him on the back to get him to sit up straight. She corrected him sternly, adjusting his position and repeating the words again. Finally, after what seemed like twenty or more corrections, the boy tapped the
drinking glass and incanted, turning the drinking glass back into a stone from the lake. The boy broke out into a wide grin and collapsed back onto the blanket they were sitting on, relieved to have succeeded.

“This is not the end, Mr. Bolton,” Hermione smiled at him. “I expect practice before our next class.”

“Yes, Professor Granger!” Bolton beamed at her, still too happy with himself for his success. He leapt up onto his feet and gathered his things. “Thank you, Professor,” he said as he started to walk back towards Hogwarts.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Bolton,” Hermione said with a shake of her head. She watched the young Gryffindor scurry down the pathway and meet up one his classmates that was waiting for him slightly up the pathway.

She tilted her head slightly as she saw the distinctive green colors of Slytherin House. The other boy ruffled the other’s hair and slapped him on the back, laughing. Bolton slammed his body into the other’s shoulder, causing a playful skirmish that was over as the two busted up laughing and running the stretch of path back towards Hogwarts together. What she wouldn’t have given to see Harry or Ron’s expressions at seeing such a thing. A grin broke over her face and she flopped back against the ground blanket with a flop. Her mind tried to imagine Harry or Ron getting along with Draco Malfoy, and her brain refused to allow her to accept the image as even a hypothetical example.

A shadow cast down over her, and she looked up.

“What have you done to my House, Professor Granger?” Severus asked as he stared down upon her.

“Nothing I haven’t already done to Gryffindor House, apparently!” Hermione challenged him with a broad uncompromising grin from her place down on the blanket.

“Breaking down the very walls of unspoken malice between the Houses,” Severus said acidly. “Causing untold amounts of chaos to meet your class agendas!”

“My transfiguration classes have much improved, I’ll have you know!” she challenged back at him.

Severus extended his hand to her wordlessly. Hermione placed her hand in his. As his fingers curled around hers, she pulled herself up and beamed at him happily. “And what am I to do with you, Ms. Granger?” he droned deeply, placing a hand to the side of her face. “Your manipulations of my House are so decidedly Slytherin, yet your audacity is so very Gryffindor.” His dark eyes seemed to go on forever as he gazed down at her.

Hermione closed the distance and kissed him softly, her face never losing the almost blindingly radiant smile as she stared at him. “I love you, Severus Snape,” She said with an upward tilt of her chin. She was proud and defiant and dared him to deny her.

Severus hissed softly, his eyes were slightly unfocused, “I suppose there is only one cure for this irrefutably nauseating tête-à-tête.” He dropped to the ground, snatching the blanket off the ground and folded it. He handed it up to her looking up at her with his pitch black eyes.

Hermione slowly reached to take the blanket with a smirk, but a glint of fire in the middle of the fabric caught her attention. In the center of the folded blanket was a ring, crafted into the delicate silver form of Ouroboros, only where the serpent would have bitten its own tail, a single diamond shimmered with an inner fire that shifted on the inside of its faucets like a living thing. Fire without heat licked the surface of the ring, surrounding it with a reddish-orange glow that wove around the
silver of the snake. The metal shimmered with its own watery enchantment, merging together the two elements of the two rival houses irrevocably as one. She stared at the ring, speechless.

Severus plucked the ring up between two of his pale fingers, “Will you marry me, Hermione Jean Granger, and do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Hermione Jean Snape?”

Hermione’s hand was shaking as Severus gently slid the ring upon her ring finger. She stared at him and the ring with wide eyes as a flood of emotions combined together into tears that slid down her cheek.

As Severus stood in front of her, his dark eyes seemed even darker. He pressed his hand to her cheek and brushed the hair back from her ear, and his thumb gently wiped her tear trail away. “Does this mean I need to get my deposit back?”

Hermione burst out in tears again. “Shut up and kiss me, Severus!”

Severus leaned in closer, his lips barely touching hers, “As my… lady… commands.” His lips sealed over hers as she melted into him, her arms wrapped around his neck and pulled him close to her, answering his inquiry with an indisputably passionate yes.

Chapter 74: Breakfast Crash Landings

Fruit salad was apparently the fashion of the morning as Errol slammed into the top of the High Table, skidding down the middle of it like a runway, flipping himself over a pile of breakfast pastries, and coming to a rest in a bowl of fruit salad. Resigned eyes peered down the length of the table to stare at the owl that had literally covered every professor seated at the High Table in some sort of breakfast substance.

Errol hooted softly, staggering as he attempted to right himself. Oddly enough, the faithful bird managed to hold onto the envelope in his beak. It was, however, covered partially in butter, jam, cream cheese, and fruit salad. Errol wasn’t doing much better, as he was covered from head to toe in all of the above and more.

“Bloody bird really is a menace,” Septima called from down the table as she wiped cream cheese off her face. “I didn’t believe you when you told me before, Hermione. I apologize.”

Minerva tapped her wand to her spectacles and vanished the butter off herself. “Remind me to start a fund to get the Weasley Family a new owl so that poor thing can retire.”

“Hear, Hear, Minerva,” Filius called from down the table as he removed a pancake from his chest. “I’ll pitch in too.”

“As will I,” Nicolas agreed as he pulled bacon out of his hair. He reached over and brushed a waffle off of Sybill Trelawney’s back. Sybill was eating obliviously, having not even noticed the crash.

Prince hopped onto Hagrid’s chest and began to dutifully and selflessly save him from the fruit that was infesting his beard.

“I think I’ll pitch in too,” Pomona fussed as she shook her hat, sending a rain of toast crumbs off of it.

Severus gave a weary sigh as pieces of fruit salad dripped off his robes. Hermione brushed pieces of
pastry off her robes and her lap. She pulled out her wand and cleaned the jelly and fruit bits off her
disgruntled fiancé. He pulled out his wand and returned the favor, removing bits of jelly, pastry, and
what could have been sugar out of her hair and robes.

Errol had managed to right himself into a proper standing position, but was still covered with
breakfast. Hermione and Severus pointed their wands at the feathered menace and cleaned him off
too.

“Might as well read the letter after that marvelous crash landing,” Hooch said with amusement,
reaching over to brush crumbs off of Madam Pince’s hat.

“I think I’ll pitch into that fund of yours, Minerva,” Aurora Sinistra said with a shake of her head.
Powdered sugar had lightly coated half of her face.

Hermione took the messy envelope from Errol with a roll of her eyes. She held it pinched between
her fingers as it dripped butter. Severus waved his wand at the envelope and vanished the breakfast
remnants off the parchment. “Thank you, Severus,” Hermione said with a sigh.

Severus grunted something and proceeded to pick up a non-owl-crashed pastry and eat it.

Dear Hermione,

He did it?! He DID it!! I’m so happy for you both! I want to know all the details as soon as you have
them. Dates! Location! Everything!

You must come to the Burrow and tell me all the lurid details, my dear. I will not accept no for an
answer! I’m so proud of you both! Oh and let me know if you need to borrow our tents!

Love,

Molly

p.s. Severus, stop scowling at this letter. I know you’re reading this, and it’s very unbecoming!

(there was a sudden shift in quill writing as someone else took control)

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I can’t BELIEVE
IT!!!!!! HERMIONE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! HARRY IS GOING TO DIE WHEN I TELL HIM!!!!!!!!!!!!
NO ONE IS GOING TO BELIEVE ME WHEN I TELL THEM!!!!!

Severus scowled down at the letter as Hermione placed it beside her so he could read it. The corner
of his lip curved up in disgust. “That is a severe abuse of punctuation and capitalization.”

“You are so positively uplifting, Severus,” Hermione snickered despite his sour face. “Molly at least
confined herself to one exclamation point per sentence.”

“Miss Weasley could not be bothered to write her own letter,” Severus remarked drolly. “As she
insisted on hijacking her mother’s.”
“With the news she just received?” Hermione coughed into her hand. “I’m lucky I didn’t get a howler.”

“Hrmph,” Severus replied. “Thank Merlin for that.” He folded up the letter with his pale fingers and reached behind Hermione to pass it to McGonagall. “You might as well read it, Minerva, before your curiosity sets you into flames in front of the entire Great Hall.”

The Headmistress took the letter with dignity, but she wasted no time in reading the contents. She had a large grin on her face as she passed it back.

Hermione had placed her head down on the High Table, exhaustion seemingly sapping the strength from her before the day had even begun.

“Severus,” Hooch called from down the table. “What have you done your apprentice other than force her to put up with your rancor for the rest of your lives? She’s practically asleep in the jam.”

Severus tilted his head to the side slightly, using one hand to pull his robe sleeve up to his elbow. He placed his fingers to the side of her neck as if to check for a pulse. “She is, I am sorry to report, still alive, Rolanda.” There was a smirk about his face.

“Barely,” Hooch made a tsking sound as she poured herself a cup of juice. “Have you decided where you plan to make it all official, Severus?”

The dark wizard furrowed his brows slightly. “I do not think the situation has settled to the point of actual planning, Madam,” he said with an almost bored air. “I am simply pleased she accepted.”

“You cannot fool us with that bored tone, Severus,” Pomona sniped as she stealthily fingered Prince one of the strawberries from the table. “If you had your way, you’d elope and drag her off to the dungeons for the next month.”

Severus raised a brow. “And miss final exams, Pomona? Who would inflict the potions exams upon the student populous if not me?”

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Severus tilted his head and busied himself by staring at Errol, who was still staggering around the breakfast table as if he was drunk.

Filius cleared his throat. “Perhaps you should have the ceremony here, at Hogwart’s during the summer. The students will be gone, and we do have quite the stunning picturesque view.”

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Smug smiles across the Head Table spread all the way down, save for Trelawney, who seemed to off in her own world, but no one really expected her to be on top of any conversation.

“It’s bad enough all of you knew before I even said anything,” Hermione protested.

Laughs spread across the table. “Hermione,” Hooch chuckled. “We’re not completely blind.”

“Betting may have started when you didn’t hex each other to death the first year you came back,” Septima said with a straight face.

“Some of us believed more adamantly than others,” Sinistra said with a grin as she sipped her morning coffee.

“All of you,” Hermione chided with a blush rising up her neck into her face. “I’m surprised it hasn’t made it to Rita Skeeter’s quill and the morning Prophet.”

Grunts went down the High Table. “We have far more scruples than that waste of space,” Pomona added to the conversation. There were murmurs of agreement.

Hermione shook her head, laughing. She pulled a tin out of her robe and plucked out a treat for Errol. She held it out to the winged menace, and he took it into his beak with a soft hoot. “Do you think you can make it back to Molly without running into anything, Errol?” she questioned the owl softly.

Errol hooted and flapped his wings a few times and launched himself off the table, managing to knock over Hagrid’s drinking cup and his bowl of cereal. The owl managed to fly out of the Great Hall without slamming into the House banners, which appeared to be a large enough miracle all on its own.

Prince warbled, hopping onto Hermione’s shoulder and offering his own commentary about the old navigationally challenged owl.

“Quite,” Severus replied, handing the phoenix a gooseberry.

Snape stared across the classroom, watching the students fuss over their cauldrons. The potion was a simple uncommon poisons antidote that any fourth year student should have been able to do had they been remotely coherent during the lectures before the winter break before Horace Slughorn had been wrangled in to substitute.

Hermione walked the aisles silently, her robes hung about her shoulders like folded wings. All the students stared intently at their books and cauldrons as she passed and found no respite looking up towards the instruction board due to Snape’s glowering gaze.

Severus began to walk the opposite side of the room and stood silently in the middle of the aisle. His black eyes smoldered, framed by his mane of ebony hair. He folded his arms across his chest, tucking his pale hands into the fabric of his robe. The students near him shifted uncomfortably, taking no security in his watchful gaze. He heard a burbling sound behind him and turned, staring down at the cauldron.

“Mr. Chalmers,” Severus growled. “You have wasted your Billywig stings too early. Start over. Five points from Hufflepuff for your inability to read written directions.”

Severus turned back around and stifled a sigh. Hermione looked up from the cauldron she was
checking and made a stirring clockwise motion to the student in front of her. Her face was, as it tended to be when checking potions work, as impassive as the Potion Master’s. When her eyes met his, however, her face softened with a small, yet tired, smile. Her presence, like a breeze, settled in his thoughts and offered him a windbreak from the frustration with his students.

Hermione walked over to a female student who seemed to be struggling with the instructions. Her head went up to the board and back to her book frantically as a sense of panic seemed to pervade through her.

“Miss Chandler,” Hermione said softly. “Do you have a question?”

The girl looked up to Hermione with emotion in her eyes. “I cannot get the potion to change color. The instructions… the book… they do not say what to do if the color doesn’t change!”

Hermione’s serious face softened as she leaned over Chandler, checking her potion. She adjusted the flame under the potion with her wand. She pointed to the edges of the cauldron where bubbles were now starting to form. She pantomimed silently for Chandler to stir her potion clockwise, pause, stir counterclockwise, then clockwise again at seemingly random points. Hermione pointed to the potion each time, pointing at some visual indicator on the surface of the potion that went unnoticed to Chandler. Then, after a series of such corrections, the ingredients finally seemed to coagulate, swirling together as the potion shifted color as it was supposed to. Hermione pointed to the fire, making a soothing motion, and Chandler lowered the heat under the cauldron, gasping as the potion changed color again into a deep emerald green.

“There you go, Miss Chandler,” Hermione said softly with a gentle smile on her face. “Not the end of the world just yet.”

Chandler’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Thank you, Professor Granger!”

Hermione’s smiled again, her eyes closing somewhat as the smile spread across her face. She nodded. “Now, decant and bottle your potion, Miss Chandler. It would be a waste to go through all of that to take a zero for the assignment.”

Chandler beamed and grabbed her ladle excitedly to complete her assignment.

Severus walked over to Chandler’s set and peered over her shoulder. His dark eyes flicked into the cauldron’s contents silently. Chandler gulped, her ladle froze in midair as she prepared herself for whatever Snape would undoubtedly say. He stared at the cauldron and then at her. “Your potion is acceptable, Miss Chandler. Continue.”

Chandler’s eyes widened and she quickly did as she was bade, keeping her eyes cast down from the Potion Master’s dark-eyed gaze.

Hermione looked at Severus, her brown eyes locked with his black ones, a genuine smile upon her face. She stared into his black irises with slight uplift of her chin. At that moment, had any of the students dared to look their Potion Master in the face, they would have seen the slight upturn of his mouth and the softening of his expression as he gazed into the face of Hermione Granger. Hermione’s smile seem to radiate like the rays of the rising sun.

Severus felt Hermione cast her radiance upon him as her eyes gained the shimmer of golden honey. She was joyful and unrepentant. Her look was for him and for a moment he could feel the phantom touch of her hand brush against his hair even though she had not moved.

Suddenly, Severus felt Hermione’s demeanor change as both she and he turned at exactly the same
time towards a student’s cauldron that had just started to burble. She dashed towards it quickly. He felt her intention and adjusted to come around the other side, flinging his hand out to catch hers. Their hands interlocked as they both slammed their free hands down on the desk next to the cauldron. Their wills combined wordlessly and wandlessly, pulling a stasis bubble over the desk as the cauldron exploded. The contents exploded outwards but slowed in the air, freezing in mid-air inches from the face of the student whose cauldron had exploded.

The student’s wide eyes stared at the frozen explosion and gulped. The classroom became deathly quiet as every student attempted to process what had just happened.

“Mr. Marbury,” Hermione hissed. Her eyes met her student’s with a glare taken from the Severus Snape Potion Master Handbook of Acceptable Classroom Expressions. “That will be 20 points from Gryffindor for almost taking out half the room with your inability to stir clockwise when the instructions clearly state to do so. You will take a zero for this potion.”

Marbury paled significantly, shifting in his seat as if to make himself smaller.

“And you will serve detention tonight with Professor Vector,” Severus growled. “Where you will write the procedure for creating the antidote to uncommon poisons until your hands begin to resemble what almost exploded all over this classroom.”

“Y….yes s…sir….ma’am…. professors,” Marbury stammered.

Both professors glared a moment longer and pulled their hands off the desk and released each other’s opposite hand. Hermione took out her wand and vanished the exploded potion with scathing whisper.

“Unless you all would like to join Mr. Marbury in failure and detention,” Severus seethed. “I recommend you complete your potions instead of gawking.”

The room suddenly shifted back into action with students attempting to not fail.

Severus crossed his arms across his chest again, tucking his hands into the folds of his robe. He glared across the room with his habitual intolerance.

Hermione was already leaning over another student’s cauldron, motioning for them to stir slower. Her face was already calm, no trace of her earlier outburst. She pointed to the potion directions in the book and then to the blackboard, whispering instructions. As the student struggled to correct his error and follow her directions, she looked up at him, a hum of her warmth trickled through their bond.

Severus’ eyes darkened as the corner of his lip curved upward, sharing with her a private look before he cast his customary impassiveness across his face and stared across the working classroom.

“I can’t believe I just docked points from my own house and,” Hermione gave a tired laugh as she flopped on the couch after the students were gone, “put the ever living fear of Merlin into poor Marbury.”

“Do not pity imbeciles,” Severus rumbled, snaking his arm around her waist and pulling her against him. “Especially ones that try to blow up our classroom.”

“After seeing all the times you dressed down Neville when his cauldron blew up, I swore there had to be a better way of getting your point across,” Hermione confessed. “But now look at me. I’m a cranky, intolerant, scowling…”
“Dungeon bat?” Severus inquired, turning his head to look her into the eyes.

Hermione busted up laughing, placing her head against his shoulder. “And I know the gossip over what we did today is going to spread just as fast as Mr. Marbury’s tale of woe.”

“You could have just allowed him to blow himself up,” Severus commented without inflection.

“Severus!” Hermione whapped the Potion Master on the chest with her hand. “That’s horrible!”

“Hrm,” he replied softly, leaning in to place a kiss on her temple. “I have never claimed to be a nice man.”

“You did help me slam that stasis spell down,” Hermione teased him. “That was practically decent of you.”

Severus harrumphed. “Perhaps, I simply did not want you to ruin yet another set of perfectly acceptable teaching robes.”

“How utterly self-serving of you, Severus,” Hermione remarked. She touched his hand, tracing the veins under his skin. She smiled. “You have such elegant hands.”

Severus lifted an eyebrow. “You are a wonder.” His black eyes met hers.

Hermione stared into his eyes with a warm smile. She placed her palm to his cheek, feeling the warm rush of his presence as he leaned into her touch. “I used to think you only had two expressions. Annoyed and inexpressive.”

Severus furrowed his brows at her. “I must have been distracted if I had two expressions instead of one.”

Hermione pressed her lips to his with a smile. “See? There’s another expression!”

Severus’ eyes had darkened as he stared at her. It was his look for her alone that spread across his face. It spoke of things that moved under the surface of his skin like a great sea leviathan moving under the surface of the ocean. It was as private as the man that wore it, but to Hermione it might as well have been a radiant smile.

Hermione picked up a shortbread cookie from the table and nibbled on it thoughtfully. Severus watched her without moving, his dark eyes tracked her face. She flushed slightly, and held out the remainder of her cookie to him. Without his eyes leaving her face, he leaned in and gently took the cookie remnant between his teeth and chewed on it.

Blushing furiously, Hermione chose to stare at her teacup.

Snape chuckled lowly, his voice rumbling in the air with a resonance like distant thunder. “You have no problem staring me in the face in front of countless spectators, yet you blush here… when there are no others to witness.”

Hermione looked up and reached her fingers out to trace his lips. “I have a confession.”

He grasped her fingers with his hand and pressed a kiss to her fingers. “Hrm?”

“I’ve betrayed my House,” she confessed. “By falling in love with a Slytherin.”

“Very brave of you,” Severus replied wryly. “Typical Gryffindor. There is only one path left for absolution, I fear.”
Hermione leaned into his shoulder and closed her eyes. “Dare I ask what would have to be done in order to atone for my transgression?”

Severus wrapped his arm around Hermione, folding his robe around her, “Marry the poor bastard.”

Hermione smiled, snuggling into his side with a giggle. “He won’t even know what hit him.”

Severus opened the book near him and flipped to where a bookmark ribbon marked a place. With a small turn of the corners of his mouth, he began to read out loud.

Chapter 75: Plans

Hermione touched the frame of the photograph on the wall, tracing the frame with her finger. Harry and Ron stood beside her in the photograph after the war. Their faces had a haggard weary relief about them. There was a sparkling life in Harry’s expression that seemed to speak of the relief of being able to move on from his life as the Boy-Who-Lived. He looked towards Ginny in the photograph with a look she recognized. George stood in the background ruffling Percy’s head and Percy looking annoyed. Ron looked battered around the edges, but he was smiling at the photographer tiredly but genuinely.

Her finger stopped as she touched her image that seemed strangely still surrounded in the movement around her. Her look in the photo was tired and weary. The Hermione in the photo was fresh out of smiles.

“Hermione,” Molly said as she caught her looking at the photos on the wall. “Tea is ready.”

Hermione turned and inhaled audibly. “Sorry, just… remembering.” She followed Molly to the comfy chairs by the window and sat down with a sigh, unconsciously pulling her outer robe closer to her chest. She grasped the teacup thoughtfully and sipped it. She blinked, recognizing the taste.

Molly smiled at her. “I thought you would recognize the tea.”

Hermione smiled, casting her gaze down slightly. “I’d forgotten we’d given you quite a selection for Christmas.”

“Enough that we haven’t had to worry about tea for a while, at least,” Molly said with a chuckle. “And that is not a bad thing at all.”

“It’s one of his favorite blends,” Hermione said with a smile. “He mixes them like he makes potions. Zealously guarded secrets.”

Molly chuckled. “That doesn’t surprise me at all.”

“The first time Severus let me try his tea,” Hermione said, “I think he weighed what my response would be. If I liked it, it meant I’d ask him about it, and the last thing he wanted was to give me a reason to talk to him more. If I didn’t like it, he’d probably have chewed me out for having no taste for tea, which basically would have forced him to talk to me more.”

“Quite the paradox,” Molly chuckled. “How ever did you break through that formidable wall of his, Hermione?”

Hermione furrowed her brows. “I… am not sure? I think it just… snuck up on us?”

“Mmm,” Molly said with a shrug. “Well it is obviously working for you both, so it doesn’t really
matter how you got there, I suppose. I know Ronald would have preferred it had happened between you and him, but I think even he’s figured out that what you have is something more than just a slight to his ego."

Hermione put her hand through her hair, stroking it back behind her ear. “I never meant to hurt Ron. That is the truth.”

“Something happened between you,” Molly replied. “Out there during the war.”

Hermione nodded. “There were hurtful things said and done,” she admitted. “When the dust cleared, they couldn’t be taken back.” Hermione looked at Molly sadly. “It’s not Ron’s fault I couldn’t let it go and move on.”

“Oh don’t you worry about Ron,” Molly said soberly. “I think he realized something when he returned to Hogwart’s over that Acacia witch incident.”

Hermione tilted her head in curiosity.

“There is something profound between you and Severus, Hermione,” Molly explained. “You don’t have to be a witch or a wizard to see it, either.”

“I was worried you’d be so disappointed in me,” Hermione admitted.

“Psh,” Molly admonished. “You will always be family, Hermione. You don’t have to be married to one of my sons to be that way.”

Hermione grinned. “I appreciate that.”

Errol hooted from a perch by the window.

“That ruddy bird is a menace,” Hermione commented. “He coated every professor at Hogwart’s in breakfast a few weeks ago.”

Molly laughed whole-heartedly. “He’s a menace for sure,” Molly agreed. “But he is so faithful and has a heart of gold.”

Their chatter went on into the afternoon, shifting from mundane to mystical back to the planning of the impending wedding.

“Hogwart’s,” Molly grinned. “Minerva must be ecstatic.”

“You’d think it was her wedding she was planning,” Hermione laughed. “I haven’t seen her in such high spirits before. She even ignored taking points from some lollygaggers in the corridors after curfew a few times. Slytherin lollygaggers at that.”

Molly grinned. “I’ve heard you somehow bridged the rival houses of Hogwart’s somehow this last year. You should receive an Order of Merlin, First Class for that alone, Hermione.”

Hermione sputtered her tea at the thought. “Surely not,” she managed to say. “It’s not like Harry and Ron are having tea and crumpets with Draco Malfoy every Tuesday in public.”

“That would be worth a few Orders, I think,” Molly chuckled.

“Quite,” Hermione coughed into her hand. “And perhaps months of muggle psychiatric therapy.”

“Oh, before I forget,” Molly said suddenly. “Arthur and I want to take you and Severus out for a
little dinner. On us. This weekend.”

Hermione raised a brow.

“Oh don’t you start giving me the Severus Snape eyebrow, Hermione Jean Granger,” Molly admonished. She reached into her pocket and handed her a box. “Port key inside. This weekend, 8pm sharp, young lady, and do wear your formals.”

Hermione looked horrified. “Formals?” She took the boxed port key with furrowed brows.

“Psh,” Molly said dismissively. “You can wear whatever fancy robes for your Hogwart’s functions, but don’t come in a T-shirt and jeans.”

Hermione managed to look just as horrified.

“You’re getting married to Severus Snape in a few months and don’t even bat an eyelash, but the idea of going to dinner with myself and Arthur to a black-tie affair horrifies you,” Molly scoffed. “You are incorrigible.”

There was a crack in the air outside, and Molly looked up to see the dark figure of Severus standing out on the lawn. He barely moved, save to turn his head to look into the window, his robes blowing slightly in the wind outside.

“Ah, your escort is here,” Molly said with a laugh.

Hermione tucked the port key into her robes and stood up, her face still twisted into something resembling horror and the need to flee into the fields screaming incoherently.

“Psh, none of that,” Molly said sternly. “If you can unite the Houses of Hogwart’s, young woman, you are perfectly capable of joining us for dinner in public. Now go meet your fiancé before he glares my windows into submission.”

Hermione gave Molly a hug and retreated out the door.

Molly watched as Hermione met up with Severus on the lawn. He looked down at her with some concern as she spoke up to him. He lifted his head and stared into Molly’s front window, eyebrow raised as he stiffened slightly. His lip curled slightly as Hermione transmitted the expectation for the weekend. Severus lifted his arm as he glared into the house towards Molly. Hermione stepped into his embrace without hesitation, allowing his arm and robe to fold around her.

With a crack, they were gone.

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Prince warbled in the steam from the shower head as Hermione lathered up her hair and rinsed it out. She patted a bottle of conditioner onto her palm, smelling it with a smile before massaging it into her hair. Prince flicked the water from the shower with his beak, flapping his wings as excitedly as he did as a chick. Hermione laughed, flicking the water back up to splatter up on the phoenix, who seemed to enjoy shower time as much as a person could. Prince made baby-like peeping noises and held his beak open to catch the droplets and snapped at them.

“Bird,” Severus’ voice broke the sound of the running water. “You are not helping my witch shower.” His arm came through the shower curtain and pressed against Prince’s feet so he would step up on his wrist. The arm and the phoenix disappeared from sight.
Hermione laughed, finishing up her shower without the distraction of a certain paradoxical water-loving phoenix. She grabbed a large and fluffy towel from the towel rack and toweled out her hair, patted the water off herself, and wrapped it around her chest. She stepped out of the tub and saw Severus brushing his teeth at the sink. He rinsed out his mouth he ran comb through his somewhat damp hair.

Hermione slipped in behind him, wrapping her arms around his chest and pressing her face into his back. Severus stiffened as a shudder went through him, his hand pausing as combed his hair. “Mmmmm,” Hermione purred into his skin. “You smell wonderful.”

Severus closed his eyes, torn between multiple responses to her impromptu embrace. He seemed to compromise by turning around and pulling her into himself, pressing his face into her hair. She snuggled into him happily, radiating contentment. After a few minutes of simply standing together in the residual warmth of the shower steam, Severus placed his palm to her cheek. “As much as I would gladly extend this moment, I do not wish to incur the wrath of Molly if we should fail to make our appearance tonight.”

Hermione mumbled into his chest but stepped away with a reluctant sigh. She placed her fingers to the side of his chin and gently traced the line of his jaw before exiting the room.

Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath, schooling his face into something more neutral to cover the multitude of thoughts that were trampling across his mind at that given moment, none of which would help him dress for the evening’s dinner. He finished combing out his hair and walked out into the adjoining room.

Hermione had already begun to dress in her formal robes that Anna had sent up for the occasion, slipping into a dark crimson dress and silken black over-dress. She pulled a sash across her waist and tied it to her side, allowing the tassels to dangle elegantly. She pulled the outer robe over her shoulders, shaking her shoulders back so it would settle across them. Unlike her teaching outer robe, the formal robe had a more satin finish and sported splashes of bright color on the edges. The shoulders, like Severus’ own, were stylishly reinforced to be a suitable and talon resistant perch for a certain phoenix. With a habitual movement, she transferred her apprenticeship sigils to her collar, displaying the crests of Gryffindor and Slytherin to upon her neck.

Severus gave a small chuckle as he buttoned up his formal vest. “Though I am happy you do us the respect of wearing your sigils out in public, Hermione, I doubt Molly and Arthur meant you to be quite that formal.”

Hermione tilted her head with a puzzled expression, as if realizing what she had done for the first time. “I,” she began, “I think I feel strange without them.”

Severus arched a brow. “I know most apprentices are happy to be rid of such formal symbols of rank in public.”

Hermione ran her fingers over the sigils automatically. “I find them comforting. They remind me of two very important people in my life.”

Severus fastened the buttons on his sleeves with a small quirk of his lips. He pulled on his outer robe with a shrug. He grabbed the brush off the dresser and beckoned Hermione over. She approached and turned around. With soft strokes, he tamed Hermione’s curls backwards and set the serpent clasp to hold the hair out from her face. He placed the phoenix comb in her hair gently, causing the dangles to tinkle slightly.

Hermione spun around and smiled up at him, her warm brown eyes meeting his obsidian black ones.
She pulled his outer robe about his shoulders and delicately clasped the two halves of his phoenix clasp together. She stood on her tip toes and placed a light and chaste kiss upon his lips. “You look absolutely handsome.”

Severus arched a brow at her.

“You trust me don’t you?” Hermione asked straight faced.

Severus’ lip twitched. “Yes.”

“Then trust me that you are unequivocally handsome,” she said with a slight quirk of her mouth.

“You,” Severus said as his eyes seemed to gain an even darker appearance, “are undeniably entrancing.” He pulled open a drawer in the dresser and took out an ebony box, opening it. Lifting a choker formed into the delicate coils of an interwoven serpent, he placed it around her neck, fastening the clasp behind her neck with his long fingers.

Hermione’s eyes widened as he clasped the choker around her neck, her fingers reaching up to touch the interlocked coils. She looked up at him in wonder, her brown eyes shimmering with her surprise.

Severus tilted his head to the side slightly. “Are you ready to face the Weasley’s Heads of House in an undoubtedly public show of unanimity?”

Hermione twitched slightly. “As ready as I’ll ever be. We could consider it practice for the wedding.”

“I’m fairly certain I am going to take Pomona’s advice and elope,” Severus replied dryly.

“You will not, Severus Snape,” Hermione whapped his chest with her hand. “Minerva would hex us straight up to the parapets and hang up by our toes.”

“A man can dream,” he replied wryly.

Hermione scoffed. She made a slightly high pitched yet strangely quiet whistle, and Prince flew off his perch and landed delicately on her shoulder pad, flapping his wings before folding them against himself. Hermione handed the bird a gooseberry with a smile.

Severus pulled out the box with Molly’s port-key nestled inside. Taking a deep breath he opened the box revealing a small polished stone. He lifted his arm, and Hermione stepped into his embrace, pressing against him as his arm folded around her. He grasped the port-key in his hand and closed his fingers around it allowing the key’s pull to yank them to its programmed destination.

As the lurching sensation faded, Hermione leaned into Snape’s body as she regained her sense of balance. Apparating was strangely more natural to her now than the sensation of being pulled by her navel to another place. Whenever she side-along apparated with Severus, her trust in him was absolute, negating any feel of lack of control.

Snape’s arm tightened around her automatically, sensing her disorientation. She took in a deep breath before stepping back from him. Prince flapped his wings, shifting on her shoulder and letting out a soft string of notes.

As she stepped back and took her accustomed place at Snape’s side a rise of applause greeted them both, startling them into taking in and re-evaluating where they were.
“Honored guests,” came Kingsley Shacklebolt’s voice from across the room. “I give you, our Guests of Honor. Professor Severus Snape, Master of Potions and his Apprentice, Professor Hermione Granger. Please help me welcome our newest recipients of the Order of Merlin, First Class, for their combined duty and service to the Wizarding community and their role in the defeat of the dark witch Acacia, whose vile practices threatened the renowned halls of learning that house our future generations. May their dedication, loyalty, and undisputed skill be an example for our allies to follow and our enemies to fear.”

A roar of more applause rose in the room and the two ambushed professors looked around the room with their eyes, yet their bodies stood perfectly still. Molly and Arthur Weasley clapped nearby, their faces triumphant. There were wizards and witches from various stations scattered around the room. Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley stood beside their mentor Aiden Gauge, clapping with smug smiles on their faces. Hagrid towered over a group of professors from Hogwart’s with an appropriately giant-sized grin on his face.

Minister Shacklebolt gestured at the pair to come closer, and Hermione and Severus slowly approached, their feet gliding cautiously before them as if the floor could give out at any given moment. The applause continued as they walked to towards Kingsley.

The Minister smiled broadly and pinned the medal upon Severus’ robe and then on Hermione’s. “Never a more suited pair, my friends, and never so long overdue.” He looked at Severus directly and bowed his head in deference.

Severus’ dark eyes were completely unreadable, but he tilted his head slightly in acknowledgement.

Kingsley grasped Hermione’s hand in his and bowed, bringing her hand up to his lips in respect.

Hermione’s eyes flickered with emotion while her face remained stunned. She slowed lowered herself into a low curtsey to the Minister.

“And now my friends,” Kingsley yelled above the applause. “Eat, rejoice, and share in this moment with our esteemed Honored Guests.”

Kingsley clapped, and the hall tables were filled with food and drink as music began to play from a small musical group. He held his hand out to gesture Hermione and Severus to the nearby table where familiar faces surrounded two empty spaces for them.

“Congratulations, Severus, Hermione,” Aiden Gauge said with a genuine and broad smile as they sat down.

A perch had been set down by the table in expectation of Prince, and a giant silver bowl filled with fruit and vegetables had already been placed for him. Prince hopped onto the perch with a happy warble and occupied himself with decimating a plum.

“Congratulations, Professors,” Harry said with a respectful bow of the head.

“Congratulations, Professor Snape,” Ron said with his eyes slightly averted. “Congratulations, Hermione,” he added with a less nervous smile.

“Well done,” Minerva said warmly, raising her glass to them both. The other professors followed suit, raising their glasses in honor.

Molly and Arthur beamed at them. “Congratulations, Severus and Hermione.”

Countless others approached the table and offered their congratulations to the pair as the feasting
went long into the night. Hermione seemed a little at a loss to all the attention, but she watched with a smile as innumerable people approached and paid their respects to Severus.

His face was impassive, and his eyes as unreadable in public as ever, but she could feel through their tenacious bond that a large weight had been lifted from him. He inclined his head to each person and nodded slightly to others in acknowledgement of their praise. He was not, at that moment, and ex-Death Eater with a list of stigmas and misunderstandings as long as his arm. He was appreciated and respected. His sins were forgiven. And while he would never be one to cheer his relief into the heavens in a loud booming voice for all to hear, his hand covered hers under the table, concealed by their formal robes. His fingers brushed against her own, curling around hers in a private embrace.

Hermione smiled broadly to her friends and adopted family, radiating her warmth in Severus’ stead. She tilted her head up, unrepentant and proud. “Thank you,” she said.

Prince sang from his perch by the table, sending out a melodious trill and accompanying warble that filled the hearts of all the guests with undisputable joy.

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Chapter 76: Identification Woes

“Dragon’s blood,” Hermione said after a sniff. “Muggle resin type.”

Severus took the jar from her and wafted his hand over the top and sniffed. “You are correct.”

Hermione quilled a label for the jar and waved her hand, sending the label to wrap itself around the offending non-labeled jar. He picked up another jar and peered into it, seeing only dried and shredded leaves of some sort. Lifting an eyebrow, she popped the lid and wafted her hand over it. Her nostrils flared. “Mint. Peppermint, I think.”

Severus wafted his hand over the jar and sniffed. “Yes, however, I think the jar is contaminated or a purposeful mixture. Smell again.”

Hermione wafted her hand over again, sniffing. “Hrm. Possible spearmint contamination. Perhaps Slughorn was using this as a tea blend?”

Severus curled his lip slightly, eyeing the offensive jar. “Dispose of it. Without knowing what else could be in there, I will not have it lurking around my laboratory.”

“I could owl it back to Slughorn with a ribbon around it,” Hermione said slyly, arching her brow at Snape with a small smile.

“Hrmph,” Severus replied. “He has bungled up my classroom stocks just fine as it is. I will not bow to returning his offensive unlabeled tea mixtures as well.”

Hermione smiled at him as she vanished the contents of the jar and returned the jar into its pristine and unused state. “Pity, I do like the occasional mint tea.”

Severus slid his eyes to the side to stare at her. “Then I will make you some. Without having used… whatever that was.” He waved his hand dismissively.

Hermione laughed, reaching out to touch his hand. His fingers curled around hers as the glare on his face relaxed into something calmer.

Hermione picked up another unlabeled jar and jiggled it. The contents schlucked against the glass with a disturbing suction sound. “Ugh, do I have to?”
Severus’ mouth curved into a half suppressed smile. “Unfortunately.”

“It’s a good thing I love you, Severus,” Hermione said with a disgusted look on her face. She popped the lid and looked inside and very reluctantly wafted the top of the jar. “Hurk,” she managed to say as she passed the jar to Snape. “Runespoor eggs. Gone bad. Very… very… bad.”

Severus snapped the lid close, squinting as the sight and odor offended him on multiple levels. “You are… correct. The stasis enchantment on the jar is non-existant.”

“I’ve figured it out,” Hermione said, looking green in the face. “You cured me from the draught so you kill me with decomposed runespoor eggs.”

Snape looked at her with amusement as he vanished the horrible jar. “Believe me, my witch,” he comforted softly, “if I intended to murder you, there would be far less odious or odiferous methods of accomplishing it.”

Hermione gave Severus a tired look and shook her head. She picked up the last unlabeled jar and peered into the glass. She cast her gaze upward and flipped open the lid, peered inside, and wafted her hand over the mouth of the jar. “Dried toad warts, probably of the giant purple variety.” She handed Snape the jar with a roll of her eyes.

Severus smirked, taking the jar in his hand and examining its contents. He wafted his hand over the mouth of the jar and sniffed experimentally. “Correct… and confirmation on purple.” He closed the lid and set it down just as a label floated over and wrapped itself around the jar. “Tell me the name of the potion giant purple toad warts are used in.”

“Dragon tonic,” Hermione replied immediately.

“Ingredients?” Severus questioned.

“Eagle owl feather, three from a peacock, and three of said warts,” she replied, looking him in the eye with a bemused expression.

“Insufferable know-it-all,” Severus said in his all too familiar classroom tone, yet his face was calm and his eyes flickered with amusement. He tugged her closer and descended upon her neck where her collar did not quite protect her.

Hermione flailed with her hands, clawing at the back of his teaching robes. “Ack! Sever… us! What are you… gah!” She groaned softly as his nibbles on her neck destroyed her ability to concentrate.

He pulled away long enough to reposition and place a kiss upon her lips before rising up from the seat and picking up the labeled jars and carrying them off to the supply cabinet.

Hermione blushed as she attempted to gather her wits about her, feeling the rumble of Snape’s laughter in her head rather than hearing it.

“You know,” Snape’s voice rumbled as he shelved the jars of ingredients. “You are more than ready to test for mastery in potions than most of the dunderheads that attempt to after years of apprenticeship.”

Hermione frowned, her hand automatically going to her neck where her apprenticeship sigils were.

“There isn’t one potion on that deplorable test that you do not know backwards and forwards in your sleep, and I am fairly certain you could craft them in your sleep better than the people testing you,” Severus droned as he closed the cabinet. “And I am certain you could craft them simultaneously
instead of one by one, as you have demonstrated to me daily when we do our potion orders.”

Hermione met his eyes with a surge of panic. She clutched her robes, her knuckles going white.

Snape sat down beside her again, enfolding her wordlessly. She clutched his robes in her rising inexplicable panic. He placed his hand against her head and pulled it under his chin, rocking her against himself. “Hermione,” he crooned softly. “You’re more than ready. Why are you panicking?”

“I,” she tried to explain. “You won’t be… angry with me?”

Severus pulled back slightly and placed his palms to her face. “Why would I be angry with you for something that will prove to them you are as competent as I know you to be?”

Hermione looked into his eyes, placing her hands on his vest and smoothing it compulsively with her fingers. “But… my transfiguration…”

“Hermione,” Severus admonished softly. “We transfigured and rebuilt an entire wing of Hogwart’s in less than an hour, complete with stained glass windows, ribbed vaults, and off-kilter planters. There is no one that can deny you mastery in transfiguration, either. What is really bothering you?” He soothed her hair with his fingers.

“I just,” Hermione tried to form the right words. “I don’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

Severus placed his forehead against hers, “The only thing that could disappoint me, Hermione, is if you didn’t do your best.” He soothed her hair with his fingers. “And if you decided to apprentice under Trelawney.”

Hermione sputtered, choking on her laugh. She wrapped her arms around Severus’ neck and held onto him tightly. “I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that,” she giggled. “Ever.”

Severus gently pressed a kiss to her lips. “Good.” His dark eyes darkened even more as he gazed at her. “And before you get any delusions of grandeur, Ms. Granger, you will always be MY apprentice,” he said in answer to her unspoken question.

Hermione’s grin spread across her face like a sunrise, and she pounced on him, embracing him tightly.

Severus found himself flat on his back on the couch with an armful of exuberant witch, and he wasn’t complaining in the slightest.

Chapter 77: Testing Out

“Master Snape,” an older wizard called from the hall. “I did not expect you to be here to observe our testing.”

Severus turned from his vigil over the testing laboratory, his dark eyes unreadable. “Good afternoon, Master Stainthorpe,” Snape greeted evenly.

“I do not believe she requires watching, if that is what you imply,” Severus replied.

“Oh no, no,” Stainthorpe chuckled. “It’s just… you’ve never taken an apprentice before. People are talking in the halls. Everyone wants to know how any apprentice of yours will do, considering how well you did back in the day.”
“Wonderful,” Severus said with a slight curl of his lip.

“I see much has not changed in you, old friend,” the older wizard chuckled. “You are still the epitome of expressive outpourings.”

“Hrmph,” Severus snorted. “Far be it for me to entertain your staff’s rumor mongering.”

“Oh, they are not that bad, Severus,” Stainthorpe chuckled. “You know very well how rare it is for one so young to take the Master’s exams. It seems you are keeping up with the tradition of your own history, hrm?”

“She is perfectly capable, Declan,” Severus snorted.

“I’ve seen her work down there,” Stainthorpe chuckled. “There is no doubt who she takes after, Severus.”

Snape slid his eyes over to stare at the other Potion Master. “Well it certainly wasn’t Kayleigh Arkwright,” he sneered.

“Oh dear,” Declan snorted. “I am still sorry for putting you together, even for the month of obligatory orientation before you just up and took the test to be rid of her. You are never going to let me forget about that, are you?”

“Never,” Severus growled, glaring at the older wizard with unforgotten malice.

Declan waved his hands in surrender. “I apologize. I apologized then, and I will continue to do so, Severus. She believed no one that young could possibly be ready for such a rigorous exam, and until you proved her wrong and the throngs of those who privately supported her. And here you are again, bringing another young and brilliant mind to our tables. You have to admit a certain cathartic justice in this, yes?”

Severus said nothing, but the corner of his mouth turned upward slightly.

“She has five potion cauldrons going on at once, Severus,” Stainthorpe commented. “I have never seen the like. All from memory…and she refused to take our word for what the ingredients were in the jars. She had to check them all. All of them, Severus. We had at least two hundred jars of labeled ingredients in there.” Declan rubs the space between his eyes. “And she found five mislabeled jars.”

Snape’s mouth curved upward slightly. “So, you admit she was justified in checking your erroneous jars?”

Stainthorpe sighed. “I will have words with the apprentice that set up the laboratory for her tests, if that is what you mean.”

Snape’s face darkened. “And if one of those mislabeled reagents caused her cauldron to explode?”

Declan waved his hands again. “No, Severus, they were all ingredients that were not meant for the potions. They were just for filler.”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “Then it is a good thing she is competent and would not pick the wrong ingredients.”

Declan hung his head, defeated. “Aye, you are correct. Oh and I am to give you this for her. She obliterated her transfiguration mastery.” Stainthorpe handed Severus a rim clip.
Severus grasped the clip in his fingers. The golden laurels of mastery were designed to be clipped around the apprentice sigil, raising her status to Master. His face softened slightly.

“Her last test was to create a chair based on a drawing,” the old wizard chuckled. “She demanded to know what type of wood, the fabric, color, texture, age of all the above.”

Snape raised an eyebrow at Declan. “And?”

“The testing assistant was so flustered, he blurted out ‘Just make the chair or turn me into a bloody ferret, will you?’” Stainthorpe stared at Snape. “That was worst thing he could have said, isn’t it? Is there some history I should have known?”

Snape’s face was impassive. “Ferret is a bit of a trigger word, Declan.”

The older wizard rubbed the area between his eyes. “Well he said it right to her face, and she turned him into this plump pristine white ferret, stared down at him, and said with this unerringly calm voice, ‘If you are going to sound like Malfoy, you might as well look like him.’ And if that wasn’t enough to convince the growing spectators, she transfigured five variants of the chair on the drawing in different woods and fabrics and sat down in one of them, pulling out a book from her robe and began to read as the ferret is running around the room hysterically squeaking. And none of us could reprimand her for it, because the idiot basically told her to do it.”

“Minerva will be proud,” Severus remarked with a smirk.

Stainthorpe rolled his eyes. “You purposely brought an overly qualified witch here to test, just to get a rise out of us.”

“Me?” Severus arched a brow. “Whatever do you mean?”

The older Potion Master glared at Severus, but his version of a glare held no candle to what Severus himself could dish out. Finally, he just slumped his shoulders and laughed. “Alright, alright, we all deserved it for what we put you through back in the day. I surrender. We surrender!” he said, waving his hands like white flags.

A young page ran up the hallway and skidded to a halt next to Stainthorpe, handing him a scroll and a box. He bowed in respect and ran back the way he came. The elder Master opened the scroll and shook his head. He handed the box to Severus. “I believe you should do the honors.”

The testing laboratory went dark, and a short time later, weary footsteps caused Snape and Stainthorpe to turn simultaneously. Hermione wearily approached, eyes reflecting no small degree of exhaustion.

“Ms. Granger,” Severus said acerbically. “It has come to my attention that you have transfigured your exam overseer into one of the Mustelidae family. Is there anything you wish to say?”

Hermione lifted her chin and faced Severus, her eyes meeting his with cool fire. “He told me to do it, Sir.”

“I suppose there is only one thing I can do for your infuriatingly reprehensible behavior,” Severus said flatly, snatching the apprentice pins from her collar with his pale fingers.

Hermione flinched, but she stared ahead, willing to take whatever punishment he deemed worthy of her transgression in public without a word said in her defense.

Severus’ hand clenched over the apprenticeship sigils, and a part of her accepted that her behavior...
had been unprofessional and demeaning of her Master. He glared at her, his dark eyes were unreadable. He held out his hand to her, and she held her palm out, fully accepting that her sigils would now be broken or tarnished from the surge of his anger.

Hermione stared at the sigils that were now surrounded with the golden laurels of a Master. She looked up at Severus in disbelief.

Severus’ face was calm and his eyes were dark, sharing the look that was for her alone. “Congratulations, Mistress of Potions and Transfiguration Hermione Granger.”

Hermione’s flicked from the older wizard she didn’t know and Severus. Finally, unable to contain herself any longer, she flung her arms around Severus’ waist and buried herself into his robes with a cry of uncontained delight.

Severus staggered slightly, but brought his arms around her, crushing her to him. One of his hands slid into her hair and brushed the skin on the back of her neck, causing her to slump into him immediately.

Declan Stainthorpe cleared his throat politely as he averted his eyes, believing himself to be witness to something inherently private.

Hermione stepped away with a blush, clipping her sigils back to her collar with habitual smoothness. “Thank you, Master Snape,” she said formally.

Severus quirked the cover of his mouth. “This is Master Declan Stainthorpe, Master of Potions,” he introduced. “He was my overseer when it was my turn to take the test.”

Hermione straightened her back and dipped into a curtsey. “A pleasure to meet you, Master Stainthorpe.”

“Declan, please,” Stainthorpe chuckled. “I get enough of the Master business from the apprentices and people around here.”

Hermione smiled tiredly and nodded. “I think I prefer Hermione, myself. Mistress makes me sound like Minerva.”

“Congratulations then, Hermione,” Declan chuckled. “You are definitely worthy of the title, regardless. Though… you may have a bit of a nickname around here for some time.”

Hermione arched a brow in perfect synchronization with Snape.

“Mistress of Ferrets,” Declan laughed.

Hermione blushed, her entire face turning red in embarrassment.

“Come, come,” Declan waved and bowed his arm out to herd the pair in front of him. “Allow me to take you both to lunch. I can share copious stories about how Severus turned this place upside down taking his tests right out of Hogwart’s.”

Severus glared at the older wizard as Hermione giggled and took her cue to exit with Declan. “You will do no such thing, or I will be forced to regale her with how you mixed up your hair tonic with carpet cleanser.”

“Severus!” the old wizard gasped.
“Oops,” Severus said, casting his eyes upward. “Did I say that out loud?”

Hermione laughed, filling the corridor with the rich sound of her laughter as the three of them walked together out of the testing hall.

Chapter 78: Last Week Unto Summer

Hermione yawned as she sipped her tea and went back to grading the stack of parchments gathered on Severus’ desk. Severus was pacing up and down the aisles with an acceptable amount of scorn plastered over his face, ensuring that none of the students considered cheating on their exams. She did wonder how anyone would even consider cheating on any of the potions classes, considering who was presiding over them, but then she remembered it had never stopped Ron or Neville or even Harry from occasionally pestering her for answers for things during class. She smirked to herself. Yet, when she thought about it, the same people couldn’t look Severus in the eye without stammering either, which made for an interesting paradox.

She had settled back into her official apprenticeship without a word, grateful in her own mind at least, that nothing had changed. She officially had a few more years under her dual Masters’ wings to learn the ropes of Hogwart’s in and out, and she wasn’t about to let her mastery qualifications hinder that. Snape treated her the same, and that was its own comfort. She had come to rely on his presence and guidance with a trust she reserved for a select few.

One of the students completed her exam and nervously brought it up to her. She handed it to her timidly, casting her eyes down yet stayed glued to the spot.

Hermione recognized the need to know how well or how horrible one did on an exam to see it written all over the student’s face. “Miss Hampton,” Hermione said softly. “Is there a reason you are hovering like a vulture?”

“Ma’am,” Hampton began. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble…”

“Miss Hampton,” Hermione addressed. “Did you study?”

“Y..yes, ma’am,” Hampton replied.

“Do you have a twin sister that you sent in to sit your classes for you, perhaps?” Hermione arched a brow at her student.

“N…no, Professor Granger,” she replied.

“Then I do not see how you could think you have the grade of a Troll,” Hermione admonished. “I take it this is your class exam for the season?”

“Yes, Professor,” Hampton replied, perking up slightly.

Hermione smirked slightly. She waved for her to sit. “Sit, then.”

Hampton sat in the chair by the desk gratefully, silently staring at her lap. Hermione reached for her grading quill and flipped open the red grading ink pot, dipping in her quill and checking Hampton’s work. None of the other students were even close to her, apparently, as they were all writing furiously on their own tests. Hermione looked up, sensing eyes upon her, and smiled at Severus who was making an exasperated face at Hampton’s back.

Prince warbled from his perch near the desk and pecked Hampton on the head.
“Ow,” she exclaimed, rubbing her head.

Hermione smirked as she continued to grade. “I recommend handing the bottomless pit some fruit from the bowl there, unless you prefer being pecked on the head.”

Hampton busied herself by stuffing the hungry phoenix with fruit from the bowl as she rubbed her head. Hermione smirked and flipped through the exam, marking the incorrect answers with her quill. Prince, as usual, found a way to distract life’s small annoyances, such as her student’s awkward silence and staring as she waited for her exam to be graded.

Hermione flipped through the marked exam, tallying the points in her head, and wrote the final grade upon the front, folding the exam in half so the grade was not immediately visible. “Your grade, Miss Hampton,” Hermione said, schooling her face into a stern mask. “Try not to let it ruin your summer.”

Hampton gulped and took the exam from her tentatively, as if she expected it to sprout fangs and chase her out the door like one of George Weasley’s pranks. She slowly opened the folded exam and scanned the paper for her grade that Hermione had made sure to circle a few extra times in the bright red ink of her grading quill. Her eyes widened as she saw the circled “E” and burst into a grin.

“Enjoy your summer, Miss Hampton,” Hermione said, allowing a grin to cross her face. “Shoo.” She waved her hand dismissively.

“Thank you, Professor!” Hampton stifled a squeal and stood up, rushing to her desk to pick up her things, and scurried out the classroom door.

Severus eyed her exit with a raised eyebrow and turned to look Hermione in the eye. She smiled at him in amusement as she went back to grading the stack of parchments gathering on Severus’ desk.

Hermione was asleep on his desk again. The stacks of graded papers were done, marked extensively, and recorded with equal fervor. The inventory binder was checked for him, and a stack of orders for new reagents lay on top. While Poppy had assured them both that Hermione was completely recovered from her experience under the influence of the Draught of Living Death and her subsequent poisonings, a part of Severus wondered if the experience had taken its toll on her in combination with her reoccurring nightmares and memories of the war and after-effects of being practically tortured to death.

While most would never have believed Hermione to be haunted by her past, he knew better. He was a master of being haunted by his own past. Recognizing it in her was not a hard leap to make. Cradling her as she recovered from her nightmares and flashbacks were only confirmation of what he already knew.

Yet, there she was, asleep on his desk, nestled between his quills, scrolls, papers, inventories, and graded papers. She had become as much a part of his classroom as the desk she was sprawled over. She had infiltrated herself into his life in much the same way. He could no more imagine his life without her in it as he could imagine their classroom without her sharing it. Their classroom… It was not just his anymore.

She had, in her panic attack before taking her Master’s tests, said to him that she preferred to be under his protective wing. She trusted him. She hadn’t said it in words, but he could feel the root of her panic and where it really came from. She trusted him so strongly that she was willing to give him the gift of control over the little things she did have control over in her life. It was a priceless gift
from one such as they, and he knew he gave her the same fervent trust.

Severus reached out and soothed her hair with his fingers, closing his eyes as the barest of touches of his fingers on her scalp sent a ripple of pleasure through their bond. She stirred slightly from his touch, her hand closed around his and pulled it closer so she could lay her head upon his arm, causing him to stagger slightly, half-sprawling over his desk from the opposite direction. Had anyone walked in at that given moment, it would probably have been one of the more difficult positions to explain. One, trying to explain what position he was actually in, and two, trying to explain how he got there to begin with… not that he was ever in the habit of explaining himself.

Severus tucked Hermione’s head against his chest as she held his other arm hostage, rumbling lowly in amusement. He inhaled the scent of her hair, which still had the trace of their morning tea caught within. “Hermione,” he whispered into her hair, pressing his lips to her head.

Hermione stirred sleepily and stretched slightly, clutching his arm like a pillow. “Mmmmph,” she managed to say.

“I need my arm, my witch,” Severus rumbled softly. “I have Slytherin to advise before summer break, and I do not think doing so in this particular position would be an exemplar one to do so in.”

Hermione mumbled something into his sleeve and raised her head, reluctantly letting go of his captive arm.

Snape touched the line of her jaw with his fingers. “You are endangering my flawlessly snarky and irascible reputation, Ms. Granger.”

Hermione raised her chin to look him into the eyes. “Mmmmph,” she said as proudly as such a sound could manage.

“How impressively articulate of you,” he replied.

Hermione pressed her palms to his face and pulled him closer. She kissed him softly, gently sliding her tongue over his lower lip as her fingers slid into his dark hair. She pulled away with a broad grin on her face. “I love you, my snarky and irascible Severus Snape.” She beamed at him, seemingly having exchanged her exhaustion for mischief. She picked up the purchase orders from the desk and dashed out the door, her robes flowing behind her. Prince, having woken up from the nap on his perch, startled and flew out the door after her.

Severus closed his eyes, staring into the back of his own eyelids as he attempted to force his expression into something dispassionate. When his eyes opened, his dark irises were once again blank, but the corner of his mouth was quirked upward slightly. A knock at the door informed him of his first advising appointment arriving. “Enter,” he growled, standing up straight and facing the door. It was going to be a long afternoon.

“Thank you, dear,” McGonagall said with a sigh. “I was hoping to get these orders out before the summer sets in.”

“It’s no problem, Minerva,” Hermione smiled at the Headmistress as Prince hopped into Minerva’s lap and cooed for attention.

“Fawkes was never so demonstrative to anyone outside of Albus,” Minerva commented as she handed the young phoenix a gooseberry from a nearby bowl. “He could be, but it was rare. Not like
McGonagall chuckled. “You are probably right.”

“Though in all honesty,” Hermione observed, “We are kind of relearning what typical behavior for a phoenix is though our spoiled Prince.”

Prince warbled happily as Minerva stroked him under the chin.

“Did Hagrid ever get the egg mix up taken care of?” Minerva questioned.

“I think he’s taking care of another egg or two in his hut,” Hermione replied. “But… this is Hagrid we are speaking of. He could have the next rare species of dragon waiting to hatch under his beard and not realize it. It will undoubtedly be the one dragon species that shares coloration, weight, and incubation times as a Frost-fire bird.”

McGonagall laughed, shaking her head. “I do not question the man’s knowledge of care of magical creatures, but I do question his bizarre and often outstandingly dumb luck.”

“Isn’t that Harry and Ron’s old specialty?” Hermione said with a quirked eyebrow.

“Oh, they still have the record,” McGonagall smirked. “Make no mistake about that.”

Hermione smiled as she thought of her once exploits with Harry and Ron. “It is quite miraculous we survived to graduate. Well… I graduated. They survived to get jobs out there.” Hermione waved her hand in the air in a shadow of her Master’s own gesture. “I fully expect Harry to pop the question upon Ginny the moment he can wrestle her away from Quidditch practices and his training is completed. I haven’t received an owl bearing horribly punctuated news to inform me of anything yet.”

Minerva gave a silent chuckle. “She does have a way with punctuation,” she agreed. “If that last letter was any example of her typical fare.”

“Unfortunately,” Hermione admitted, rolling her eyes upward to stare at Minerva’s ceiling.

“Oh, a parcel arrived for you with some paperwork from Master Declan Stainthorpe. He sent it over after your mastery testing. With all that has been going on, I never did get to congratulate you on doing us so proud,” Minerva said with a nod to the parcel on the table.

“I fully expect to serve my full term as your and Severus’ apprentice, Minerva,” Hermione laughed. “I did not expect anything to change just because I took the test early.”

“Oh, psh,” McGonagall scolded. “Allow us some proper time to gloat over the fact you turned the place upside down much like Severus did back in the day.”

Hermione laughed, picking up the parcel from the table. She unwrapped it carefully, frowning at the excessive twine surrounding it. “This package is heavy. They didn’t send this by owl did they?”

“No, that was brought by courier with the other paperwork,” McGonagall said.

Hermione peeled the brown paper out from around the parcel and gasped. “Oh…” She placed her hand on the ornate frame that housed her formal mastery certificate. “I never expected it to be so beautiful.”
Minerva peered into Hermione’s lap and smiled. “You earned it, my dear,” she said with a smile. “What is that underneath?”

Hermione frowned as she realized that there was another frame and a small box underneath her certificate. She felt her face turning red as she read the certificate in the second frame. She blushed furiously and opened the small lacquered box and blushed again, turning a very Gryffindor shade of red.

“How is it that you have something underneath?” Minerva asked, pulling the frame out of her lap to look at it. She furrowed her brows as she stared at the certificate. “Hermione Jean Granger… Mistress of Ferrets?”

Hermione was staring at the floor, cycling through a few different shades of red. Minerva lifted the box from Hermione’s hand and peered at it. Nestled on a velvet cushion was a Master’s sigil. The form of a ferret chasing his tail was formed in goblin silver, surrounded in the golden laurels of mastership. The ferret’s eyes were sparkling diamonds.

Minerva’s face twisted into a smirk as she attempted to squelch the impending laughter that was threatening to rise up. “Hermione,” she said in the best Headmistress voice she could muster. “What did you do during your testing that you haven’t told me?” She knew whatever her apprentice had done had given Master Declan Stainthorpe reason to commission Hermione a new sigil specifically to commemorate some yet unknown yet unforgettable ferret induced feat.

Hermione took a mint from Minerva’s candy bowl and chewed on it as the redness in her face began to fade. “I turned my overseer into a ferret when he told me to either make the chair or bloody turn him into a ferret. He didn’t think I would.”

McGonagall couldn’t hold back her laughter any longer and startled the drowsy phoenix in her lap. “Oh, Hermione… you never do anything half-arsed. I could have told them that.” She lifted the sigil in her fingers and grinned evilly. “Seeing as I wasn’t able to do the official honors in person, I suppose I should take it upon myself to do so now.”

Minerva reached over and clipped the ferret sigil to Hermione’s collar with an undeniably mischievous grin. “I’ll have you know, transfiguration is not to be used as punishment here at Hogwarts, Mistress of Ferrets, Hermione Granger. Despite your outstanding credentials to the contrary.”

“Yes, Headmistress,” Hermione replied automatically, regaining her blush.

“Oh, and before you panic about where you need to go over the summer, I’ve arranged for both you and Severus to have permanent quarters here at Hogwarts due to your potion orders and other work you are constantly doing for Poppy and countless others. I see no reason for you to have to floo in every day from some place to come here and do what you are already doing just fine. With your upcoming wedding, that is just one less thing you need to worry about. Eventually, I am going to retire, and you two might as well be used to being here all the time as I intend to hoist all of my responsibilities on you both before I leave. Someone needs to keep Filch and Mrs. Norris out of trouble.” Minerva gave Hermione a sly grin.

Hermione’s eyes widened as she attempted to digest what Minerva had just told her.

“Oh don’t look at me like that,” Minerva laughed. “I’m not dying of anything terminal next week, and I don’t plan on retiring soon. I’m just giving you both… ample time to prepare for the future.”

“And give me a bloody heart attack,” Hermione said, eyes wide.
“Psh,” Minerva scolded. “I have faith in you both.”

Hermione smiled at the Headmistress. “Thank you, Minerva.”

McGonagall chuckled and handed Hermione back her framed certificate. “Here you go, Hermione. I need to get these orders out before I am inundated with House advising appointments myself.”

Hermione stood up to leave, tucking her frames under her arm. “I’ll go check on Severus to make sure he hasn’t hexed his own House into oblivion.”

Minerva smirked. “Probably a good idea.”

Hermione bowed her head to the Headmistress and turned to leave. “I think Prince wants to hoard your lap to himself for a while. You don’t mind spoiling him for the evening do you?”


Hermione smiled and glided out the Headmistress’ office.

“Hermione!” a cheerful male voice called out to her from across the courtyard.

“Rupert!” she answered him back with enthusiasm. “Are you ready to leave for the summer?”

“Almost,” the young man huffed as he caught up to her. “I just finished my last exam a bit ago and my appointment with Headmistress McGonagall, so I’m a bit behind on packing.”

Hermione chuckled. “Well you do have a few days before the official end of term festivities.”

“Oh, I know. I really don’t have that much to pack,” Rupert laughed. “Anwen and Jessamine are both attempting to pack all their rooms, and they won’t let me in to help them. I got pelted with hair care products the last time I tried.” Rupert rubbed his head with emphasis.

Hermione furrowed her brows and attempted to remember who Anwen and Jessamine were. Surnames had become the standard method of address to her now, and she had a hard time associating any other names to her students that she hadn’t known closely before she had begun her apprenticeship.

Rupert seems to sense her problem. “I believe the names you are looking for are,” he said, changing his voice into a mockery of Hermione’s stern teaching voice, “Miss Ackland, I assure you that if you have time to pass notes to Miss Warmington, that you should find this next potion recipe suitably difficult to your adept level of skill.”

Hermione laughed in defeat and nodded to her once student peer. “Well, now that I remember who they are, I am sure they have plenty more hair care products to sling at you for your unconscionable offenses. I seem to recall them always having perfectly gravity-defying hair.”

“Tell me about it,” he replied, rubbing his head again. “Only have one more year to go in this place, and I’ll never have to worry about dodging jars of hand crème and bottles of Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion again!”

“I should count that as the least of your worries after your N.E.W.T. year, Rupert,” Hermione chuckled. “And who knows, you may graduate with honors to land a perfect job dodging hand crème and bottles of Sleekeazy’s Hair Potion all over again.”
Rupert groaned. “Women will be the death of me.”

Hermione laughed. “You can ask Ron for stories about his experience with girls in Hogwarts sometime. You might want to butter him up with some butterbeers or perhaps something stiffer first.”

Rupert shook his head. “I’m sure they are just as horrific as I can imagine.”

“No doubt,” Hermione said, making an amused face.

“Whoa, look at that,” Rupert said with a bit of awe. He stared at the laurels at Hermione’s throat. “A Master! Hermione, you weren’t just content to show us all up by getting O’s in every subject, you had to do that too?”

“I’ll have you know, it wasn’t my idea,” Hermione frowned. “I was roped into it by Professor Snape. I was perfectly happy and am perfectly happy just being Professor McGonagall’s and Professor Snape’s highly appreciated and overworked apprentice, thank you!”

Rupert laughed and squinted at the third sigil with interest. “What is that one? It looks like a ferret.”

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “That, my friend, is a long story that will require suitable intoxication to address. If ever. Let us just say, Master Stainthrope wanted to make sure he put his own mark upon me as well.”

“I can’t wait to hear it, eventually,” Rupert chuckled. “I’m sure any story that requires intoxication first must be wonderful to behold.”

“Ffft,” Hermione replied. Her eyes flicked to the side to see two female students skirting just outside of the pillars of the courtyard as they looked towards Rupert. “I believe Miss Ackland and Miss Warmington have arrived to accompany you to dinner, Mr. Soloway,” Hermione chuckled, switching back to the more formal method of address.

The two girls were bravely attempting to join him in the courtyard, thinking he did now know they were there.

Rupert had a look of mischief as they approached. He straightened his back, tucking his arm in front of him stiffly, bowing at the waist. “By your leave, Mistress Granger,” he said in flawless formality, startling his friends into pausing their approach.

Hermione tilted her chin up and let impassiveness wash across her face. “You may go, Mr. Soloway.”

Rupert stayed in the formal bow, walking backwards until he was the appropriate distance away before standing and turning around to leave. “Thank you, Master,” he said without skipping a beat. He walked away without looking back, his two female friends whispering to him in strained voices.

Hermione watched the three of them disappear down the corridors before relaxing her stance and allowing her eyes to roll upwards to stare at the sky. She knew she would be the talk of the dinner table in the Great Hall tonight yet again. She turned and walked down out of the courtyard and down the corridors of Hogwarts.

Standing by the entrance of the Slytherin Common Room was a gaggle of Gryffindor students. All of them were shuffling their feet and pacing impatiently.
“Come on guys,” one student pleaded. “I’m starving!”

“Alright, alright, we’re coming!” came a few answering voices from behind the portrait. “Hold your knickers on!” A few youth poured of the exit portal and playfully shoved their friends around.

“So impatient,” one of the Slytherin students said, ruffling his friend on the head. They grinned at each other as more people poured out of the Common Room to join their friends.

“Come on, Aster!” one boy groaned. “Your hair is fine.”

“Shut up, James!” a female voice yelled from within the common room. Shortly after a female student came out and whapped her friend upside the head with her hand.

Laughter and silly faces abounded as the gathering merged together on their way to the Great Hall, but ended up running into Hermione and Preston Reese carrying a bunch of items out the main door towards the lake. Prince warbled cheerfully from Hermione’s shoulder, flapping his wings in excitement. A trail of students from the Great Hall followed behind them.

Curiosity, the bane of many a student, settled in on the group of mismatched friends, and they weaved themselves into the gathering of other students.

“Ah, this looks like a great spot, Professor Granger,” Preston said as he heaved the cauldron into place and tapped it with his want to make it larger.

Hermione smiled and flung out a pile of ground blankets, spreading them out across the beach front with a flick of her wrist. She handed a bag of kernels to her fellow professor and smiled as he enchanted a large spoon to stir the cauldron as he built up a fire next to it. The cauldron began to churn out kettle corn to the delight of those around it.

“Here now, children,” Professor Reese laughed, handing out long sticks for each of the gathered students after the kettle corn was distributed. “Now we shall have a muggle style cookout. Grab a hotdog from the pile and spear it on the stick like so.” He demonstrated the spearing of the picnic food known far and wide to muggle families around the world. “Now stick it over the fire and let the fire do the work for you.

A couple of house-elves popped in, bringing in foldable tables and filled punchbowls and drinking goblets as well as miscellaneous condiments. Hermione laughed and thanked the elves profusely as she dumped a bundle of marshmallows into a large bowl.

“And for those of you who happen to be fans of chocolate, you can come over here and learn how to make s’mores. Careful, don’t let the chocolate frogs escape!” Hermione speared a marshmallow and held it near the fire, turning it into a golden brown. She waved it in the air and then smashed it onto a graham cracker, snagged a chocolate frog, and smashed another graham cracker on top. She then, slowly and deliberately, took a very enjoyable and messy bite out of her s’more.

Students rushed up to grab marshmallows and hotdogs while Professor Reese laughed and showed each student how to properly stack condiments onto their hotdogs and buns in a method he called “Chicago Style.”

Hermione laughed as students made odd combinations of edible with their condiments and flopped onto the blankets near the fire, chattering and laughing. Some of the more muggle exposed students dove right into the festivities, helping their friends with their first attempts at muggle picnicking. Many flaming attempts at golden marshmallows later, each student was busy stuffing their faces with muggle picnic foods. Professor Flitwick had arrived somewhere between the flaming marshmallows.
and charmed a branch to make perfect golden marshmallows without catching fire, causing a flood of students to surround him asking for directions.

As the general feeding frenzy leveled off, Madam Hooch came out, carrying an armful of brooms and stunt rings, which she flung out over the water. She waved her wand to create beacons over the water and set the brooms out for all comers.

Students leapt up eagerly to mount brooms and chase each other across the lake’s surface, zipping through the rings and running hand-off relay races via broom under Hooch’s watchful eye.

Pomona and Hagrid joined them soon after and took a small group of her students towards the lake to learn about some of the newly emerging summer plants of herbology interest. Hagrid told stories about magical creatures around the bonfire to the wide eyed gazes of many.

As the sky became darker, Reese started to teach the students campfire songs, and there was much laughing amongst student and teachers alike. Aurora had arrived shortly after dark to point out constellations over the skies of Hogwart’s.

A group of students that had worked with Prince over the winter break begged Hermione to allow them to work with the phoenix again. Hermione smirked in amusement and allowed Mr. Mitchell to carry the curious phoenix a short ways away where the students set up rings and perches to bribe the bird into doing tricks for them. Prince dutifully saved them from all of their fruit and vegetables, gaining cheers from all gathered around him.

Hermione watched the festivities with amusement. She stood up from her place by the fire and patted Professor Reese on the back, offering him congratulations on his picnic idea. She moved off away from the main group, watching the socialization from afar. She walked the edge of the lake, watching the ripples over the water. Rolanda Hooch met her on the shore as she retrieved her stunt rings and beacons with her wand. Hermione helped her collect her brooms with a smile.

“Thank you, Hermione,” Rolanda said with a smile. “It was a wonderful idea of Preston’s to mix a little lesson in with some fun before the summer holiday.”

“I know Prince appreciates any opportunity to butter up victims to feed him,” Hermione observed as she hoisted the bundle of brooms into Hooch’s waiting arms.

Hooch peered over to where the phoenix was performing tricks for his entourage of students. “Who is training who, I wonder,” she commented. “Look at how the Houses get along now. I wonder if such a thing would have been possible if Fawkes would have been so accommodating.”

Hermione tilted her head. “I am not sure. Would such a thing be possible before Tom Riddle was truly destroyed?”

Hooch seemed thoughtful. “Perhaps this is one of many good things that have risen from the ashes of the war, my dear. Much like the marvel of what you have with Severus.”

Hermione looked Rolanda in the face, a corner of her lips rising in an echo of the closest thing Severus showed as a smile. “Do I need to send you a formal invitation, Rolanda? Or should I just expect you at the wedding?”

“Well you could send me an invitation, so I can have it framed over my hearth at home, dear,” Hooch said with a grin and a wiggle of her eyebrows. “Do expect me, however.”

Hermione laughed and smiled at the flying instructor with mirth. “I don’t think I could keep the faculty of Hogwart’s from coming if even if I wanted to,” Hermione admitted. “Well… I don’t
expect Trelawney will remember to come if she even remembers she was invited.”

“She is a bit of an odd hen. Always has been, as you know,” Hooch said with a shake of her head. “She does have her true moments of foresight, but then again, divination was never my thing on any level.” The flight instructor looked skyward as if for divine enlightenment.

“I think I’ll leave you to flying and keep to my potions and transfiguration,” Hermione chuckled.

Hooch gasped in mock offense and made a face at Hermione, causing Hermione to chuckle. “Well I need to get these brooms and such put away. Good evening, Hermione.”

“Good evening, Rolanda,” Hermione replied as she watched the flying instructor walk back towards Hogwart’s.

The fire had already burned down to embers and Professor Reese had wrangled helpers out of the straggler students to carry the blankets and cauldron back up towards Hogwart’s as the rest of the students returned to their Houses for the night. The house elves had already snatched and vanished with the punch bowls, remaining food, and tables.

A movement caught her eye as Prince’s wings fanned outward, giving away his location atop Severus’ shoulder. He walked down the path towards her silently. She walked towards him to meet him somewhere halfway and was in his embrace the moment he was in range, sliding into his arms with something akin to relief. Prince warbled sleepily and tugged on her curly hair as Severus’ hand gently drew her head against his chest. “Time for good little potion masters to be in bed, my witch,” he purred softly.

Hermione pulled back and smiled at him, looking him in the eyes. Linking her arm in his, they walked back the longer path back up towards Hogwart’s under the sea of stars.

What’s it like to be a cat?” Hermione asked the Headmistress as they sat having tea in the courtyard. Most of the students were spending their last week packing to return home, check on their exam results, and frantically cram last minute social time in before the Hogwart’s Express took them home for the summer. Hogwart’s staff, thankful in many ways for the shift into summer, were also preparing for their summer leave, now that they were not required to stay during the break and help repair the once broken wings of the school.

Minerva chuckled. “It’s disorientating at first. So many smells and senses you haven’t had before. Human voices sound a little strange at first because you hear so much more. Scents are stronger. Sometimes good. Sometimes not so much.”

Hermione chuckled. “You probably don’t patrol down in the dungeons during class hours, do you?”

“Definitely not,” McGonagall laughed into her tea. “It was bad enough that one day when a train of goo-covered students making their way to the hospital wing passed by. They smelled like moldy bread.”

Hermione winced. “Mr. Belfry was responsible for that particular event… he’s the latest generation of Neville, only sans any respectable skill in Herbology.”

Minerva arched a brow. “That bad?”

“Probably worse,” Hermione said sourly. “He’s Hufflepuff.”
The Headmistress’ eye twitched slightly. “Touché.” Minerva seemed to contemplate something. “Have you considered studying to become an animagus, Hermione?”

Hermione shifted on the bench and seemed to ponder Minerva’s question. “I have wondered what it would be like after seeing you so often sprawled over your desk in the Transfiguration classroom. I will admit, the more I see you padding around the castle, the more curious I become,” Hermione said with a blush.

McGonagall laughed in understanding. “You know, you are technically still my apprentice. It would be easy to teach you under that mantle of transfiguration apprentice if you so wished.”

Hermione smiled mischievously. “Ooooh, wouldn’t’ that be fun!”

“There you see. Learning never stops at Hogwart’s,” Minerva grinned at her.

Hermione sobered. “As long as I don’t end up being a ferret.”

Minerva patted Hermione on the back. “I highly doubt your inner personality matches the form, dear. Though, look at the bright side, if you were to become a ferret.”

Hermione eyed Minerva suspiciously.

“Ferrets have been known to eat beetles,” the Headmistress said with a grin.

Hermione’s answering grin was both mischievous and malevolent at the same time. “You’re on, Minerva.”

“Excellent,” McGonagall said with a knowing smile. “That’s the spirit.”

Chapter 79: Train Out

Hermione stood at the train depot, watching students scurry about to load onto the Hogwart’s Express. She smiled at the familiar red train cars and the stately black engine. Hagrid shambled about the students, helping with luggage and being pounced on by various students who tried to wrap their arms around his waist. The visual gave Hermione an almost sad, wistful flood of memories of a time when Hagrid’s warm embrace was one of the few things she and her friends could count on when times were unquestionable darker.

Prince warbled on her shoulder, singing sweetly to each passerby, charming them out of their raisins, berries, and cookies.

“You are definitely Slytherin,” Hermione commented wryly to the bird on her shoulder.

Prince peeped, baby-like in her ear, rubbing his beak against her hair.

“Mmmhmmm,” Hermione replied. “I’m onto you, bird.”

Prince cooed softly, tugging on her hair.

A familiar brown-headed graduate was approaching her from down the platform, and Hermione quirked her lips upward as she recognized her former student. “Good Morning, Ms. Greengrass,” Hermione said with a small smile. “I am surprised to see you at the station instead of apparating the moment your feet hit the front gate of Hogwart’s.”

The younger woman laughed and skidded to a halt close to Hermione. She seemed to be lost in
proper protocol, her mind seemingly flipping through the Student/Professor/Graduate Handbook of Proper Etiquette. “Oh.. bullocks,” she cursed. “Hermione!” the woman dove into a hug with Hermione in the most flamboyant way possible.

“Oh!” Hermione managed to articulate, embracing the younger woman with a chuckle. “Congratulations on your successful graduation from Hogwart’s, Astoria.”

“Aren’t we all?” Hermione questioned with a quirk of her lips.

“Not all of us can be as academic as you and our Slytherin Head of House,” Astoria pouted. “Some of us have real lives.”

“What are you implying, Ms. Greengrass?” Hermione said with her classroom voice.

“Ahhh!” Astoria said waving her hands in surrender. “Nothing! Nothing! I mean just…” The young woman slumped her shoulders. “You know what I mean, you just want to see me flounder around like a fish.”

Hermione grinned at her. “Perhaps.”

“I know you were Gryffindor back when you were students with Draco, Hermione,” Astoria said with a chuckle, “But I swear to Merlin you are just as insidious as any Slytherin.”

“Are you saying you were deceptive in my classes, Ms. Greengrass?” Hermione said with an impassive face.

“Ahhh!” Astoria flailed. “There you go again! Putting words into my mouth! Between you and Professor Snape, I have to keep all of my T’s crossed and I’s dotted, lest they be used against me in the most embarrassing manner possible. Wait until I tell Draco. He will never believe it.”

“Believe what, love?” Draco Malfoy appeared beside Astoria as if summoned by his name. He gave Astoria a light kiss in greeting.

“Hermione,” Astoria wailed, pointing at her ex-potions professor with mock tears. “She out Slytherined me!”

Draco Malfoy tilted his head, looking at Hermione as if for the first time. His eyes moved over her appraisingly, noting her robes, her familiar, and the sigils on her neck. His eyes widened as he saw the laurels. “You’ve been busy, Granger,” Draco said in a neutral voice.

Astoria kicked Draco on the shins.

“Ow,” Draco said, glaring at Astoria. “Professor. Ow! What the hell, woman?”

Hermione’s lip quirked upward. “I’ll make you a deal, Mr. Malfoy. You can call me Hermione if I can, in turn, call you Draco. That way both of us can avoid being shinned to death by Astoria.”

Draco Malfoy seemed to think on this as he rubbed his sore leg. “Done.”

“Excellent!” Astoria grinned, clapping her hands.

“I think your fiancée just out Slytherined us both, M… Draco,” Hermione smirked.

Draco rubbed his hair in a gesture that reminded Hermione of many years past. “It should make me
proud, but I’m feeling more of a smarting pain in my shins over it.”

Hermione pulled a small vial out of her robe and dangled it in front of Draco. “Here. Drink this.”

Draco eyed the small vial with curiosity. “Are you trying to poison me, Gr…Hermione?”

Astoria whapped Draco on the leg again with a completely serene expression on her face.

Hermione quirked her lips. “Believe me, Draco, if I wanted you dead, there would be far less public places and methods in which to do so.”

Draco took the vial, uncorked it, and drank it down without even sniffing the contents. He made an odd face. “Tastes like peaches… and the pain is gone.” He handed her the empty vial back.

“Imagine that,” Hermione commented, taking the vial.

“Professor Granger!” a voice yelled as a Wayne Mitchell ran across the platform towards her.

“Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione greeted with a smile. “Don’t be late boarding the train.”

“I won’t!” he said as he huffed, carrying his suitcase and an owl cage with him. He set down his suitcase and the cage and pulled out a pristine owl feather from his suitcase pocket. He held it out to her. “This is from Hermes,” Mitchell said proudly. “Thank you for helping me this year. I’ll never forget it.” The owl in the cage gave a soft hoot in agreement.

“Thank you, Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione said warmly as she accepted the gift. “And thank you, Hermes,” she said with a small bow to the owl.

Mitchell beamed as a cluster of young Gryffindor and Slytherin students yelled to him from the train ramp. “Come on, Wayne! Marshall is eating all of our chocolate frogs!”

Mitchell laughed and picked up his suitcase and owl cage, rushing off to meet his friends.

The students piled into the train, helping Mitchell with his suitcase and owl as one of the Gryffindor lads tossed him a chocolate frog and ruffled his hair. They all laughed themselves into the train, disappearing from sight.

Draco stared towards the Hogwart’s Express as it pulled away. Hermione waved to the students as the train pulled away. Hagrid waved from down the platform. Astoria waved and blew kisses to her friends who were leaving on the train. Prince let out a string of warbles and happy notes towards the leaving students.

Hermione looked at Draco, who was still staring after the train after it left. “It’s a little discombobulating, isn’t it, Draco?”

Draco looked at her with wide eyes. “I’ll say. If I hadn’t seen it myself, I would have hexed whoever told me it happened for lying.”

“You both are horrible,” Astoria admonished the two of them. “There is nothing wrong with having friends wherever you may find them.”

Draco seemed to struggle with something in himself a moment as he digested his fiancée’s words. He looked at Hermione and they locked gazes. He saw something familiar in Hermione’s eyes that he couldn’t quite place. He straightened his collar and put out his hand. “To friends.”

Hermione flicked her eyes down to Draco’s extended hand and back up to his face. Slowly she
placed her hand in his and shook it. “To friends.”

Astoria placed her hand on top with a grin. “To friends. Let’s go eat!”

They both dropped their hands somewhat awkwardly and stared at Astoria.

“Come on you two!” the younger witch said, tugging on Malfoy’s sleeve and half dragging him off the platform towards Hogsmeade. “I’m starving!”

Draco looked a little lost as Greengrass dragged him along. Hermione laughed and followed after.

“Here you go, dears,” the waitress clucked as she set down the food on the table in front of the wizard and witches. She set down three butterbeers for the each of them and trundled off to wait other tables.

Astoria dove into her salad as if it were the last meal on Earth, causing Draco and Hermione to exchange worried glances.

“Um… love?” Draco asked softly. He was dutifully ignored as Greengrass proceeded to devour her salad with gusto.

“I thought Prince loved his greens,” Hermione said, trying not to stare.

“Prince?” Draco asked, averting his eyes to look at Hermione.

“This guy,” Hermione answered, pointing to the phoenix roosting on the nearby chair back. She handed him an apple, and the phoenix chirped before carving into it with his beak. “When he was a chick, he had this bunch of feathers on his head that looked like a crown.”

Draco smirked in amusement. “However did you manage to get your hands on a phoenix Gr… Hermione?” he corrected himself.

“In a word?” Hermione asked.

Draco twirled his hand in a go forth gesture.

“Hagrid,” Hermione replied.

Draco’s jaw dropped a moment and then closed. “Bloody Hagrid. Let me guess, it was completely unintentional.”

“Isn’t it always?” Hermione said with a small smile.

Draco wrinkled his nose. “He’s not hiding dragon eggs in his hut again is he?”

“Not intentionally,” Hermione replied dryly.

Draco stared at her silently and then busted into laughter. “I suppose little changes for Hagrid, even when the world around him does.”

“Honestly,” Hermione said softly. “I do not think I’d want him to change. There is so much that has…”
Draco furrowed his brows and bowed his head a little, staring at Hermione for a moment. Emotion flickered across his eyes. “I understand,” he said finally, chugging a good portion of his butterbeer before moving on to tackle the food on his plate.

They sat in quiet contemplation as they tended to their meals. When most of the food had been transferred into their no long empty stomachs, Draco stared at Hermione’s collar with renewed interest.

“I haven’t seen formal apprenticeship sigils in a long time,” Draco admitted. “I used to see them more often when I was really young. Never saw them at Hogwarts until now.”

“From what Headmistress McGonagall told me, they haven’t had a formal apprenticeship since around the time of the first war,” Hermione recalled. “I don’t remember any of the professors having assistants, let alone apprentices.”

Draco nodded in agreement. “Father never told me about apprentices. Even back when he was on the Board of Governors for Hogwarts. Formal apprentices are kind of a big deal. So what is that third one on your collar there? Is that an otter?”

Hermione slumped in her chair, grasped her butterbeer, and drained it empty. “No, it’s a ferret.”

Draco gave her a look. “A… ferret?”

“When I went in to take my Transfiguration Mastery test, the overseer had me do all these transfigurations, right?” Hermione began.

“Go on,” Draco said, staring at her intently.

Hermione took a deep breath. “Well,” she started. “One of the last things he wanted me to do was transfigure a chair from a drawing. It was a very bad drawing. So… I asked him all these questions. How big was the chair? What was the fabric color? Was the wood cherry or oak? How old was it? Did the bottom of the legs have iron castings?”

“You would ask him all that,” Draco smirked, gaining an elbow into the ribs from Astoria. “Ow. Please… continue.”

“Well,” Hermione continued, “He became frustrated with all my questions and started yelling at me. ‘Just transfigure the chair or turn me into a bloody ferret, won’t you?’”

Draco gaped at her. “You… transfigured your mastership overseer… into a ferret… in front of Merlin knows how many people watching you.”

Hermione slumped. “Yes.”

Draco closed his eyes and his mouth flattened into a line. All of the sudden he burst out laughing, grabbed his butterbeer and drank it down completely, slamming it down on the table. “You are brilliant… but scary. Wait so… how did you end up with a sigil over it?”

Hermione leaned back in her chair. “Master Stainthorpe gave me his mark to commemorate my new title amongst the Masters and staff.”

Draco leaned in with curiosity. “What name?”

Hermione took a deep breath. “Mistress of Ferrets.”
Draco’s look of complete astonishment and horror washed over his face.

“Draco, why are you gaping like that?” Astoria poked Draco with her elbow. “It’s rude, you know?”

Malfroy shook his head and attempted to regain some of his lost dignity. “So you, uh, apprenticed to Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape at the same time?”

“Yes,” Hermione chuckled. “They get to share.”

Draco frowned. “I’m trying to imagine my godfather with an apprentice or even an assistant while we were in school, and my brain refuses to allow it.”

“I would not have tolerated it,” Severus’ voice broke into the conversation, causing Malfoy to double take and Astoria to scoot over from the empty chair and get closer to Draco with a soft squeak.

“Severus?” Draco managed to greet his godfather with an even more stunned tone.

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“How many Severus’ do you know, exactly?”

Draco frowned and shook his head. “I just wasn’t expecting to see you.”

Severus smirked. “Bird, you are hogging my chair,” he fussed at the phoenix, transferring him to his shoulder and sitting down on the chair. He pulled a scroll out from his robe and handed it to Hermione without a word.

Hermione unrolled it and read it quickly. She placed it on the table and pulled out a quill and travel ink from her robe. Flipping open the inkpot, she dipped in her quill and elegantly quilled her signature at the bottom. She rolled up the scroll, pulling a piece of ribbon from her inner robe pocket and wrapped it around the scroll. She pulled out her wand and placed it to the parchment and ribbon and whispered, releasing a pool of dark crimson sealing wax from her wand tip. Wordlessly she pulled out a seal from her robe and held it out to Severus, who met it with the other half of his own, and they pressed the signet together with their joined fingers and smashed it down into the wax. There was a flash of magic as the scroll was marked and preserved exactly as it was.

Severus retracted his hand, tucking his signet back into his robe.

Hermione hefted the sealed scroll in her hand and held it out for Astoria.

Astoria looked extremely puzzled.

“Your reference letter, Ms. Greengrass,” Hermione said in her softer but more official tone. “Unless you have changed your mind about apprenticing with St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries?”

Astoria’s fingers traced the imprint of the lion rampant of Gryffindor side by side with the Slytherin snake in the wax sealing the scroll. “Thank you,” she said after a few minutes just staring at the seal. She seemed to realize something. “How did you know I was going to be here, Professor Snape?”

“I did not,” Snape said. “She did.” He tilted his head towards Hermione.

Astoria looked at Snape and back to Hermione and then back to Snape. She hit her forehead with the end of the scroll a few times. “I must be utterly daft. I missed something here, didn’t I?”

“Most likely,” Hermione said with a small smile.

“And neither of you are going to let me in on it anytime soon?” Astoria complained.
“Not likely,” Severus said with a quirk of his lips.

Draco waved his hand dismissively. “Desist the ruffling of my fiancée. If anyone is going to be ruffling her, it will be me.”

Hermione and Severus watched in amusement as Astoria huffed at Draco and chewed him out over his choice of vocabulary in public, which of course, attracted the strange looks from every table around them far more than his original comment ever did.

Hermione handed Prince a strawberry and said to Severus, “You did that on purpose.”

“You bet your hippogryphs, my Lady,” Severus answered her with a purr.

As the four of them left to return to their respective abodes, Draco reached out a hand to Severus. “I will tell father and mother you are well. They will be glad to know it. It was good to see you.”

“It is appreciated, Draco,” Severus replied softly, clasping Draco’s hand briefly. Severus reached into his robe and pulled out an envelope, sealed with the joint seal they had only just placed on Astoria’s reference scroll. He handed the envelope to Draco.

“What is this?” Draco asked curiously.

Severus stepped away from Draco and Astoria, lifting his arm for Hermione to attend. Hermione stepped into Severus’ embrace, allowing his arm to pull her against him. “An invitation,” Severus answered.

“Invitation to what?” Draco asked, puzzled.

“Our wedding, Draco,” Hermione said without skipping a beat.

There was a crack and the couple were gone.

Draco Malfoy’s jaw didn’t leave the ground for a good ten minutes after that.
Part Six: The Wedding and the Parents

Chapter Summary

The Wedding and the Meeting with the Parents

Chapter 80: Beloved, Thou Art

“How do you even move under all of these layers”? Hermione complained as Minerva and Rolanda assisted her in wearing her formal gown. Minerva laced up her back as Rolanda laced up the cords on the opposite side, leaving Hermione to stand still with her arms out like a scarecrow. “Now I feel totally inept dressing myself.”

“Psh,” Minerva chided. “These gowns require team effort.”

There was a commotion outside the room as Snape’s voice roared, “Unhand me, you despicable woman! This is my chambers. I have every right to come and go as I please.”

“You will not, Severus Snape!” Molly’s indignant voice bellowed back at him. “Not today. You’re not allowed!”

“Allowed?” Severus growled. “Merlin’s britches, woman! I’ve seen her every day for the last three years and countless times before that since she was eleven! I need my pants!”

There was the sound of a scuffle outside the bedroom chamber.

Hermione shook free of Minerva and Rolanda and grabbed the set of dress pants on the bed. She ran towards the door as Minerva and Rolanda failed to catch her.

“Severus!” Hermione cried. “Close your eyes!”

Hermione burst from the bedroom and thrust the pants into Severus’ face as he stood frozen in place, eyes closed as he was bidden by the one woman he was willing to answer to without question. Hermione hugged him fiercely, pressing her lips to his as she kept his pants covering his eyes.

Minerva and Rolanda dragged Hermione back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind them.

Molly scoffed as Severus’s dress pants slid off his face and into his arms. “Honestly, the two of you. I hope Ginny and Harry have more self-restraint than the pair of you.”

Severus shook out his pants and opened his eyes to glare at Molly. “It took me over forty years to get to this point, witch. I should hope it doesn’t take them that long to figure out they want to get married.”

Molly scowled at Severus a moment and then burst out laughing. “I’m proud of you, Severus,” Molly fussed as she slapped his hands away from his own suit coat buttons and helped him button them. Severus sighed and looked up at the ceiling as he silently recited the numbers for muggle pi and the ingredients for the antidote versus uncommon poisons.

“Merlin, woman,” Arthur said as he popped his head around the door. “Let the boy put his pants on
“Does everyone have the password to my chambers?” Severus grunted in frustration.

“Now, Now, Severus,” Arthur placated. “This is a memorable occasion.”

Snape mumbled something under his breath that was not repeatable in polite company as he shimmied into his dress pants and buttoned them up.

Arthur slapped Severus on the back and smiled. He held out his long formal cloak, which seemed to redefine the term elegant and flowing. Snape schooled his face into impassiveness and put his arms through the cloak. He narrowed his eyes at Arthur and Molly and whooshed out the portal of his chambers, robes fluttering behind him.

“Most men would be nervous about now,” Arthur said wistfully. “I know I was.”

“Most men are not Severus Snape, love,” Molly chuckled, putting her arm around her husband. “Even if he was nervous, he’d probably give us the same scowl.”

“True enough,” Arthur agreed as the door to the adjacent chamber opened. “Ahh, what a sight to behold, Hermione.”

Hermione blushed as she glided into the room with Minerva and Rolanda.

“Ready, dear?” Molly cooed.

Hermione took a deep breath and strode out the exit portal.

Guests were seated haphazardly rather than by separating them by association. Hermione had thought it appropriate considering the shape of affairs between Slytherin and Gryffindor over the past year, and even Severus had agreed it was strangely fitting.

When the Malfoy family had come to be seated, Lucius, Draco, and Narcissa looked at the Weasley family like two ancient feuding families who long since forgotten what they disagreed over but were too proud to admit it. Harry stood with the Weasley family looking a little unsure as to how to handle the unexpected confrontation between with two of the oldest pureblood wizarding families.

At this point, Wayne Mitchell of House Slytherin and Rupert Soloway of House Gryffindor walked between them, wearing the formal robes their Houses. Their arms were linked, cradling a certain notorious fruit-loving phoenix between them to share the weight. They sat down confidently in a cluster of mixed House friends who dutifully fed and coaxed the phoenix from lap to lap as they waited for the ceremony to start.

Draco Malfoy extended his arm out with a twirl, bowing at the waist to the Weasley family, gesturing for them to go first down the aisle, much to the chagrin of the Weasley family. When Astoria Greengrass went down into a formal curtsey, Lucius bowed his head and his wife bowed slightly, doing a light curtsey.

It was Harry who broke the frozen stares of the Weasley family by bowing back to the Malfoys and walked down the aisle to take a seat followed by Ginny, who gave a short awkward curtsey. Ron, too flustered to bow, hurried after Harry and Ginny with his head cast down. Percy gave a formal bow before following his sister. George seemed more torn as to what to do in the face such
unaccustomed deference and finally decided to bow clumsily and take his seat with his family. Bill and Fleur bowed and curtseyed respectively and followed George. The Malfoy’s took their seats shortly after, seeming somewhat lost in the mixed company.

Aiden Gauge and a gaggle of his fellow aurors including the elusive Neville Longbottom trailed in, picking seats middle, causing a few murmurs amongst the crowd in speculation as to expected violence during the ceremony. The murmurs died down as the faculty Hogwart’s filed in, sitting with Aiden and his aurors. Argus Filch shuffled in gracelessly, cradling Mrs. Norris like a shield, taking a seat next to Madam Pince. He seemed as uncomfortable in his formal suit as Severus would have been in pure white robes. Master Declan Stainthorpe and a handful of his staff filled in some of the seats towards the back. The Lovegoods shuffled and seated themselves by the Weasleys as other friends of the invited walked in to fill in the empty spaces.

Up front, however, there were two seats that were purposely empty with small bouquets left upon the seats. When Ron whispered to Harry asking who the chairs were for, Harry glared at him.

“What?” Ron questioned obliviously.

“Mr. and Mrs. Granger, you git,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

Ron felt the familiar cutting gaze of his ex-potions professor boring down at him from the dais and shrank in his chair. “Ugh,” Ron apologized. “I’m a dolt, sorry.”

As Arthur Weasley led Hermione Granger up the aisle, he couldn’t have been more proud. Hermione was a beacon of light that seemed to shine with her own radiance matching the sun. The phoenix hair ornament in her hair flickered with flames that spread down her hair, giving her the impression of being rimmed in fire. Her neck was covered in a woven choker imitating the coils of a snake. Set in the middle was the interwoven effigies of the lion and the serpent intertwined around a fiery dragon’s breath opal that shifted color as though it were alive. Her outer robe hung about her shoulder like gossamer wings, flickering in the wind off the lake.

Severus stood as still as a gargoyle at the top of the dais. His obsidian eyes missed nothing as he watched Hermione and Arthur walk towards him. His pale face shone in the sun against the black of his robes. Kingsley looked at them both as they stood before him, smiling. When the couple had submitted their request for a Ministry Official to preside over the wedding, Kingsley had stated in no uncertain terms that if Severus Snape and Hermione Granger were getting married no one but he would preside over it.

Severus’ voice seemed to rumble with an almost bass rumble as he repeated his vows. Kingsley wrapped ribbons symbolizing the elements between Severus and Hermione’s joined hands with each vow. Hermione answered each vow, repeating each one with her clarion voice. With each vow, Severus’ eyes seemed to gain an even darker depth to them while Hermione’s seemed to gain a stronger flame that burned from within like a signal beacon on a darkened shore lighthouse. Kingsley tied the cords between them together.

When Kingsley called for the rings, Wayne Mitchel loosed Prince into the air and the phoenix glided in, landing on the couple’s joined hands. Kingsley smiled as he took the rings off the bird’s curving talons and continued with the ceremony.

As the vows completed, Kingsley bid the couple kiss.

At first, neither Severus nor Hermione moved, but after a moment they placed their foreheads together, raising their hands together on one side, raising up Prince. Their opposite hands pulled out their wands and pressed them together. A wind seemed to rise up between them, swirling their robes.
Their lips met together in a kiss, and a rush of wind rose up between them and blasted outwards in a wave. Prince warbled and gave a cry, flapping his wings and outstretching them, flames flickering off his body.

“Expecto Patronum,” Severus and Hermione whispered. The energy from their wands bounded out as a doe and an otter, bounding in the air with graceful leaps and bounds. They dashed around the gathered guests and then made their way back up the dais, joining together in the form of a phoenix that rose up between then, flicking its wings around the couple like the all-encompassing embrace of the world dragon. Prince and the patronus leapt into the air simultaneously and flew wingtip to wingtip over the guests back towards Hogwarts, riding on the wake of power summoned between Hermione and Severus. Prince sang as he flew over, filling every attendee with undeniable heartfelt joy.

Severus and Hermione parted, their faces calm, but their eyes spoke of the depths of their emotion, their bond, and their vows to each other. They dropped their wands and tucked them away and then dropped their hands as Kingsley placed his hands on their shoulders and turned them to face the crowd.

“I now present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Severus and Hermione Snape,” Kingsley announced with a radiant grin.

Their hands still clasped together and bound by the cords, Severus and Hermione sank into a deep bow and a curtsey, flinging their far arms outwards like wings of their own. The gathered guests all stood, clapping and cheering as the couple rose up from their bows and glided down the aisle together towards the reception tents.

Ron was pretty positive that someone was going to die in the next few seconds, and it was probably going to be the newly named Hermione Snape. Hermione had a mischievous look in her eyes as she held a piece of chocolate cake in her hand.

Splat.

Severus Snape had chocolate cake smeared across his lower face, and his dark eyes glared at his wife through the icing.

The gathered crowd was instantly silent as almost everyone contemplating running for their lives, diving for cover, or putting up shielding wards. Some seem to complete all of the above at the same time.

Hermione giggled at Severus and then squealed as his hand shot out and grasped her behind the neck, his long fingers touching the bare skin. He then slowly and very deliberately took his own cake and smashed it into his wife’s face. She stared at him through a mask of cake and icing and giggled. “Love you,” she giggled through her icing mask.

Severus sneered at her as pieces of cake dropped off his face, and he covered her mouth with his in a sudden heated kiss. As he released her and stood up, he wiped two fingers across his face and licked his fingers. “At least it wasn’t lemon meringue this time, Mrs. Snape.” Suddenly, they both had their wands out, pressed to each other’s necks with an accusatory glare. Then, as if a switch was flipped, they cleaned the cake and icing their mate.

Aiden Gauge barked laughter and the tension around the cake covered newlyweds went back to a
more celebratory tone. There was a squeal from one of the tables as a piece of cake came to life and
started to chase Ginny around the table. Accusatory glares at George came from all directions.

“What?” George cried. “Why does it always have to be my fault?”

Prince flew over and pecked George on the head.

“Ow!” George said, trying to shield his head from the business end of the phoenix. George fended
off the phoenix with his cake.

Hermione threw her bouquet at one point during the night. It landed squarely in Astoria’s hands, and
the young witch blushed profusely at Draco Malfoy. Lucius and Narcissa looked smugly at their son
and his fiancée.

When Severus removed the garter from his wife’s leg, he flicked it over his shoulder without a
backward glance. There was a gasp and a roar of laughter as Harry Potter held the garter with much
embarrassment. Severus turned and raised an eyebrow at Harry, causing Harry to blush even harder,
turning away so he didn’t have to face Severus’ dark eyes.

At one point, Wayne Mitchell and his parents approached Hermione and Severus before they
excused themselves from the celebration.

“Wayne has told us much about you both, Professor Snape,” the woman said, giving Hermione a
hug. “Congratulations and to you as well, erm… also Professor Snape.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said with a smile as Severus tilted his head in acknowledgement. “You son
does honor to the House of Slytherin,” Hermione said with a smile, watching Wayne blush from
beside his parents. “It is my honor to teach. Thank you for coming.”

“How could we not accept such a gracious invitation?” Mr. Mitchell asked with a slight bow.

“It’s not every day our son gets to carry a phoenix and rings down the aisles of his professors’
wedding,” Mrs. Mitchell agreed.

“True,” Severus commented dryly. “I doubt I will be getting married again so he can experience the
pleasure twice.”

Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell looked back and forth at each other and then Severus, obviously not quite sure
how to take his comment.

“He’s joking with you, mum,” young Mitchell said, tugging on her sleeve.

Wayne’s parents burst into laughter after an awkward silence. “Indeed, Professor Snape, I should
hope not.”

Severus’ expression was impassive, but he arched a brow at them. “Have a safe journey home.
Thank you for coming.”

“We will see you again in the fall, young Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione said with a smile.

“Yes, ma’am,” Wayne replied with a nod of his head.

“Prince will be waiting for his gooseberries as well,” Hermione said with a chuckle.

Young Mr. Mitchell beamed at her.
Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell herded their son away with them.

Hermione stared Severus as a frown crossed her face.

Severus reached out to touch her cheek. “What is bothering you?”

“I just wish,” Hermione said softly as she turned her face to kiss his hand. “I just wish that mum and dad were here to see this.”

Severus pulled her against him, tucking her under his chin. “They would be proud of you, Hermione.”

She hugged him tightly. “I wish they could have met you and you them.”

He stroked her hair. “I see them every day in you,” he said softly with a slight upturn of his lips.

Hermione smiled at him, staring into his dark eyes. “I love you, my husband.”

“And I you, my wife,” Severus replied, leaning in to place a kiss on her lips.

The festivities went long into the night, but Hermione and Severus spent most of it apart from the others overlooking the shore of Black Lake. They stood unmoving, communing in silence on the multitude of small events that happened in the past decade to lead them to exactly the same place. It had been a long and not entirely smooth journey, but the end result neither of them would trade.

Chapter 81: Unto the Wind, I Cast Thee Upwards

Hermione yawned and stretched under the comforter. Severus’ arm snaked around her waist and pulled her closer, causing her eyes to flutter and she curled up closer to him. “Severus,” she whispered, placing her palm to his cheek and smiled as the ripple of energy snapped taut between them. His dark eyes opened drowsily and his hand covered hers. She stared into his eyes with a dreamy look about her face, smiling as his brow furrowed as she explored the depths of his eyes. She trailed her finger across the bridge of his nose with a smile. His eyes darkened as he looked at her, and his opposite hand grasped the bare skin of the nape of her neck.

Hermione’s eyes rolled backwards and she flopped against him with a shudder, managing only a soft groan of pleasure. She snuggled against him with a happy sigh.

Severus chuckled lowly, the sound rumbling like the purr of a great cat. “Good morning, Mrs. Snape.”

Hermione murmured into his chest. “Good morning, my husband,” she purred with a resonance all her own. “Have I told you that I loved you yet today?”

Severus chuckled. “I think you covered all the preverbal muggle bases last night to carry over for today.”

“Pity,” Hermione complained as her hands slid down his chest and mischievously lower.

Severus’ eyes rolled backwards as he shuddered involuntarily. “However,” he swallowed slowly. “I could be convinced of a certain desire for… a reminder.”

Hermione made a humming sound and proceeded to remind her husband of anything he may have forgotten the night before in detail and perhaps in triplicate, just in case there was any doubt.
Severus exited the newly transfigured bathroom to find his wife surrounded in a pile of wedding gifts, letters, parcels, and ribbons. “The new chambers are going to be hard to get used to,” he commented as he crossed the bedroom to his wardrobe as he simultaneously towed his hair.

“Be sure to thank Minerva for her wonderful work,” Hermione chuckled as she fussed with the wrapping paper on one of the gifts.

“I will,” Severus replied, “If I can find which door to use.”

Hermione laughed and grinned at him. “You have to admit, she gave us a beautiful place to live. I didn’t even know you could connect places in the castle together like that.”

Severus slid on his pants and fastened them. “Headmistress’ prerogative,” he smirked. “At least she left my clothes in the same place, insufferable woman.”

“It did take me a moment to find the toothpaste this morning,” Hermione admitted, “But that bubbling bath is beyond heaven, and she even put in perches for Prince to steam himself into a fluff ball.”

“As if the bird needs any more of an excuse to turn into a steam induced fluff ball,” Severus retorted as he buttoned up his shirt. “He’s still in there, singing away in the steam.”

“Not very phoenix-like behavior,” Hermione chuckled. “But our Prince has never been typical.”

“Nor are you, my Lord,” Hermione giggled.

“Or you, my Lady,” Severus answered immediately, pulling his vest on.

“So we are both to blame for his un-phoenix-like behavior,” Hermione replied.

“Most likely,” Severus said, pulling on his outer robe with a habitual shrug of his shoulders. His hands pulled his outer robe about himself with an equally habitual cross of his arms.

“Mr. Ollivander sends his heartfelt congratulations on our wedding,” Hermione said, reading a letter. “And his apologies for missing it, as he was busy securing… Merlin.”

Severus raised a brow at the uncharacteristic sentence. He lifted the letter in his pale fingers and sat down beside Hermione. “My sincere apologies upon not making it to your wedding, my friends, but I believe you will find my reasons justifiable. I have transferred into your joint account at Gringotts’ an appropriate sum for the phoenix feathers you so kindly allowed me to have for my wandmaking. The tail sheds and the fluffs are the most pristine and highest of quality I have ever seen and will be enough to supply Ollivander’s Wand Shop well into the next generation of wand crafting. The fact they come off a phoenix that has not yet burned makes them even more priceless, and I am sad I could not give you more as proof of this. That being said, I have set you both up for a joint account at Gringott’s, and you will both receive ample compensation for every wand that is sold bearing the sheds from our beloved Prince. He was a joy to meet, and I will always have a bowl of fruit waiting for him in case you visit. Also, from this time forward, know that any wands you require for any future children will be waiting here for them. The wands pick the wizard and the witch, but no wand crafted by me or my kin for any child of yours will ever be charged. Of this, I do solemnly swear. I have not forgotten those who did me the honor of rescuing me from the torture at the hands of the despicable dark wizard I will not even write his name. It is not that I fear to anymore, but his name does not deserve to be remembered in the same breath as those who fought against him. It has been a privilege and an honor to work with and serve you both. I remain, your most humble servant and...”
friend, Garrick Ollivander.”

Severus let his hand drop as he attempted to digest the contents of the letter.

“We have a joint account at Gringott’s?” Hermione asked softly.

“We do now,” Severus replied with a blink, his hand pulling out the second sheet of parchment that detailed the new account information on the seal of Gringott’s official letterhead. His eyes widened as he saw the opening sum. He quickly handed it back to Hermione and used his fingers to loosen his collar a little.

Hermione peered at the letter and exchanged a stunned glance with her husband. “He’s forgiven for not coming to the wedding.”

Severus nodded silently.

Hermione stuffed the envelope into the drawer near her and took a deep breath. “Well, now that our retirement fund is taken care of, help me open some of these packages, Severus,” she said with a deep sigh as she tossed a parcel into his lap.

Severus shook his head as if to clear it, still reeling a bit from the tremendous gift Garrick Ollivander had given them both. “Hit me,” he said finally.

Hermione looked at him funny. “What?”

“Hit me, woman, before I realize that I’m in another dream!” Severus snapped.

Hermione dropped the present she was holding, grabbed Severus by the face, and planted a kiss on his mouth, running her fingers through his satin black hair.

As she pulled away, Severus’ eyes had gained that glassy far-away look. “Or that,” he whispered.

Hermione prodded the parcel in his lap. “Help me with these, you snarky bastard,” she teased, working on the one in her lap.

Severus set about freeing the box from the wrapped paper and opened it. A selection of rare herbs and tinctures filled the ornate box. “Neville Longbottom sends his heartfelt congratulations to… the only people who could ever get Ronald Weasley to wear a dress.”

Hermione choked slightly. “Pomona had him cornered at the reception. I wonder if she’ll ever get him lured into an apprenticeship in Herbology.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “Give it time. Pomona is nothing if not tenacious.”

“She should at least wait for him to figure out if he likes being an Auror first,” Hermione observed.

“I doubt she wants to give him the chance,” Severus replied with a smirk.

Hermione chuckled. “You are probably right,” she agreed. She fussed with the wrapping on her package and pulled out a small lacquered box marked with the wax seal of Animagus Registry. Hermione clutched the box in her hand and smiled.

“What is that?” Severus asked with an arched brow.

Hermione pushed herself up onto her feet and stood, extending a hand to Severus. “Do you trust me, Severus?”
Severus met her eyes. “Always,” he replied, placing his hand in hers and pulling himself up.

Hermione pulled Severus to her, wrapping her arms around his body with a crushing hug.

CRACK.

They were gone.

They were on the roof of Hogwart’s, and that was the only thing Severus managed to register in his brain as wind blew up from the lower courtyards in a strong gust of thermal updraft.

Hermione stepped away from him as they materialized, but smiled at him broadly. She opened the box in her hand and clipped another sigil on her collar, increasing her count to four. She took another out of the box and clipped it to Severus’ collar.

Severus looked at her with puzzlement.

She raised her hands out for him to take. He placed his hands in hers as she pulled closer, pressing her forehead to his. “Clear your mind,” she whispered to him both in his mind and out loud, an echo of his own directions to her when he was about to teach her something directly to her mind.

Severus obeyed, allowing his mind to still. A flood of images and the memories of her learning to become an animagus from Minerva was shared between them. He felt the flow of her energy as she learned exactly how it would affect her, how it was triggered, and the very feel of how it did. And as she pulled away from him, he felt the power of her faith. She had complete and utter faith in him and what his form would be.

“I could be a spider, you know,” Severus said dryly as she stepped away from him. “Or a bat. Or a very flat snake as I smash myself upon the rocks below.”

Hermione smiled at him, radiant as the sun. “You won’t be,” she said with more faith in him than he had in himself.

Severus threw his head back, arms spread in the winds that kicked up from below them, and fell backwards, allowing the surge of magic to envelope him as the power of Hermione’s faith held him up and he cast off the shape he had worn for upwards of forty years.

Hermione took a running leap and flung herself off the top of Hogwart’s as she cast off her human shape and took to the skies, giant black wings out furled to catch the thermals and fling her body upward to join her mate’s.

Minerva McGonagall walked alone along the shore of Black Lake, enjoying the warmth of summer and the smell of the water in the air. The summer was usually the time when she was allowed to escape the confines of Hogwart’s for a well-deserved break, but she had come to see Hogwart’s as more of her home than her actual house. The gods themselves knew that she spent more time there than she did at her actual residence, and she was perfectly happy using Hermione’s apprenticeship as a legitimate reason to stay over the summer.

The piercing cry of an eagle caught her attention, and she ducked her head as strong wing beats whooshed over her head, the outstretched feathers almost touched her head. The large raptor gave gurgling cry that sounded like laughter as the black and white striped wings carried the eagle aloft over the lake. She saw the bird’s dark black beak, golden honey-amber eyes, and silvery grey head...
feathers. As the bird banked, the back of the eagle’s feathers were as black at pitch, contrasting against the white under belly and striped under-wings. The eagle’s legs were striped back, contrasting against the golden yellow of its feet and obsidian talons. The crown of the eagle’s head sported long and elegant silver-gray feathers that tufted like a crown. The eagle called out, in a piercing cry that echoed back off of Hogwarts’ walls. Minerva barely had time to register that a tropical species of Harpy Eagle wasn’t seen in Scotland in the history of… ever… as the answering call of a second eagle broke her concentration.

A second eagle flew over her head giving an answering clarion call. Its wings were darker shade of black, sharply contrasting against the white bars of its underwing feathers. It flew so low that she could see the silvery grey crest of feathers on its head, severe black eyes, and dark black beak. Its golden yellow feet splayed outward as its tail fanned outwards and propelled the bird upward on a thermal after the first eagle.

The two eagles caught a harsh thermal upwards over the lake and they circled each other, locking talons together as they engaged in free fall towards the lake. As Minerva watched entranced, the birds parted only feet above the surface of the water, their strong wing beats carrying them back upwards to catch another thermal to propel them upwards towards Hogwarts.

The eagles cried out over the lake, scattering the smaller waterfowl that were trying to make themselves inconspicuous, reminding McGonagall of how students stumbled out of the way of a certain pair of Potion Masters. As if to provide a clue, an orange and red blur of feathers joined the eagles in flight, flying lazy loop de loops around the pair of eagles, sending a warbling string of happy notes across the lake.

Minerva’s hand went out to her chest as her eyes widened as a wide grin spread across her face. She threw her head back and laughed across the lake, waving her arm in the air to the air of eagles as they circled in the air overhead.

The eagles called, one sounding like bird-like laughter, and the other answered with what seemed like scolding. Minerva laughed whole-heartedly and watched the trio of unlikely birds spin and circle overhead with a warm heart.

Chapter 82: Back in Session

Summer past as summer often does, in a heated blaze of glory that bakes a person one moment and then rains on you as if to apologize. The mountain of wedding gifts and corresponding thank you notes were sent in a flurry of overworked owls. Strangely, however, the owls had a few excess treats waiting for them on their return, so the owls weren’t complaining in the slightest.

Severus had baffled slightly at the outpouring of considering wedding gifts, some of which seemed to be trying to outdo Ollivander’s outstanding gift towards their future. The greatest gift to him, in his mind at least, was one bushy-haired Gryffindor witch that had the moment of failing to say yes to his proposal. He wasn’t complaining, however.

Students flooded back into the halls of Hogwarts once again, with a new round of Sorting. This time, however, the table segregation seemed to have blurred a bit, as the mixed friends between the Houses welcomed each other’s new inductees with back patting, head ruffling, and obligatory release of countless chocolate frogs.

When the Headmistress introduced the faculty and staff to the new House members, there was a roar of clapping and whistling as Professor Snape and the new Professor Snape were introduced. Slytherin House attempted to outdo their traditional rivals in cheering and clapping, but Gryffindor
was not about to be outdone either. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff seemed ambivalent, but clapped anyway, respectfully, of course. If a winner was declared in the cheering, no one was really paying attention, as McGonagall declared the Welcome Feast officially started. Mr. Mitchell waved towards the Head Table, and Severus tilted his head in silent acknowledgement. Hermione, however, beamed at him and launched Prince off her arm to tackle the friend he hadn’t seen since the wedding. Prince glided across the Great Hall and slammed into Wayne Mitchell’s chest with an audible “Oof!” and his fellow Slytherin laughed and lured the phoenix down the table with fruit from their plates. Prince, ever dutiful, saved them from their excess fruit and vegetables. It was for their own good.

Then, much like the year previous, Prince melted down the barriers between the rival houses, and students began to mix amongst the tables to get a chance to be closer to the fruit-loving phoenix. Later, when Prince flew back up towards the High Table, Hermes had flown up with him, perching next to Prince and chattering with him. They warbled, hooted, chirped, and bobbed their heads excitedly, seeming as though they were just as excited to catch up on the news as the returning students.

“Percy has an owl named Hermes too,” Hermione commented, smiling at the owl gossiping it up with Prince. “At least they don’t look the same.”

“It is an appropriate name for an owl,” Severus commented, watching Prince beak-pass Hermes an owl nut from the table. Hermes took the treat in his beak and made it disappear within seconds. More hooting and warbling ensued afterwards.

A second owl flew up towards the High Table and landed on the perch next to Prince and Hermes, and the birds took up to engage in more bird gossip. Hagrid looked at the trio of growing bird gossips with curiosity. “’ey now,” Hagrid said as he buttered his roll. “When did you two get owls?”

“Not our owls, Hagrid,” Hermione laughed, passing Prince a berry and two owls pieces of her roast.

“Could of fooled me, agh, here comes another,” Hagrid said, ducking as another owl landed on Prince’s now very crowded perch and began to gossip with the others.

Severus and Hermione exchanged glances.

“I believe our Prince is holding an audience,” Severus commented dryly.

“Seems like a faculty meeting,” Hooch said from down the table.

Hermione grinned back at her. “You may be correct, Rolanda.”

“Look, the dark, grumpy owl to the left is Severus,” Hooch teased.

Severus shot the flying instructor once of his trademarked glares. Hooch flung up her hands in surrender, but continued to grin broadly as she went about eating her meal.

Hermione placed her hand on Severus’, gently curving her fingers around his. His glare relaxed and he turned his eyes to hers before going back to eating his own meal.

When the number of gossiping birds began to encroach on the High Table itself, Severus shooed Prince off his perch to fly outside and take his clingy owl followers with him. The professors laughed as they watched Prince wing his way over the Great Hall and out of sight, trailed by a cloud of following owls.

The start to the school year, went surprisingly smooth, and as if to commemorate the strangeness of the year’s start, no cauldrons blew up in any of the classes the first week. It didn’t last, however, but
it was a strangely surreal experience for both of Hogwart’s Potion Masters.

Hermione had begun to take her older year transfiguration classes out onto the greens more often for lessons, and they seemed to respond well to the change in scenery, perhaps knowing that the scenery would immediately shift indoors if they did not pay attention as they were required to do. Hermione did get to channel her own inner Minerva for her beginning first years, as a silver tabby and a large Harpy Eagle watched the students file into their first class. There were stragglers, as was to be expected, but it did not happen twice. After the class, Minerva had given Hermione a high-five and laughed with her over the lessons having come full circle.

The potions classroom often gained a slight awkwardness as students attempted to address Professor Snape and had both of their Professor affix them with silent stares. In fact, gossiping about “Snape” gained a new level of confusion in the hallways of Hogwart’s that often led to a new level of awkwardness if Severus or Hermione happened to walk by at that given moment. Severus sent them packing with his choice of 101 Characteristic Severus Snape Glares, while Hermione usually sent them off with a wave of her arms, shooing them down the hallways with her own smirk.

Even stranger, Rita Skeeter did not publish any smut or slander in the Daily Prophet about Severus or Hermione. Even with as much gossip that traveled through Hogwart’s, it seemed that the illegal animagus had kept her antenna out of their business. Whether it was because of their combined reputation in the Wizarding community or by some threat by another party, neither of them were sure. Hermione did wonder to Severus if some other person may have captured a certain beetle and kept her in a jar for the past two years. Neither of them were complaining in the slightest. Severus had commented, off-handedly, that if Lucius wanted to keep bugs in jars in his cellar, it was of no concern to him. Hermione coughed at his comment and did not bother to ask her husband what he meant by that.

“Professor Snape!” a student yelled down the hallway.

Two darkly robed figures halted their walk down the corridor of Hogwart’s and turned simultaneously. “Yes?” they chimed simultaneously.

The student walked briskly down the hallway to catch up to the two waiting professors. Both stood still in the corridor as still as gargoyles. “Professor Snape, Headmistress McGonagall asked me to fetch you when the Aurors arrived.”

Dual eyebrows raised, one for each professor. “Did she happen to mention…” Severus began lowly.

“Which Professor Snape?” Hermione finished.

The female student stood still, her mouth slightly hung open as she realized the Headmistress had not specified that particular bit of information.

“You imitation of a fish is noteworthy, Ms. Treadwell,” Severus commented dryly.

Both Professors continued to stare at the poor student as she gaped.

“A sly grin spread across Hermione’s face as she stared at Treadwell. “She didn’t specify, did she?”

“N…no ma’am,” Treadwell managed to stammer out, keeping her eyes averted from Severus’ dark gaze.
“Very well, Ms. Treadwell,” Hermione said dismissively. “You may go.”

The student flushed and hurried back down the hallway.

“I think Minerva purposely sends them when she knows we are together,” Hermione noted with a sniff. She looked up into Severus’ eyes and smiled.

“I have no doubt,” Severus replied, looking his wife in the eyes. He lifted his hand to touch her hair. “I suppose we should greet Potter and Weasley before Minerva starts sending out search parties.”

Severus touched her neck, causing her eyes to roll backwards. He lowered his mouth to hers and gently placed his lips over hers.

A student skidded to a halt in the hallway upon seeing them, giving a small cry of surprise and concern for her own welfare as she realized who she had just run into.

Severus straightened his posture and turned his head to glare at them as if they had just been caught casting an unforgivable curse on a fellow student.

The girl back-peddled with a terrified look on her face, about facing and scampering back the direction she came.

“Five points from Hufflepuff for running in the hallways, Fredricks,” Severus snapped.

There was the sound of a crash in the hall shortly after.

Hermione looked up towards the vaulted ceiling for patience or at least something that didn’t require walking down the hallway and cleaning up whatever just happened moments earlier.

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“Aiden!” Hermione greeted the Auror with a hug. “What brings you to Hogwart’s? When the message came, I figured it would be Harry and Ron.”

“Sorry to disappoint, Mistress Snape,” Aiden said with a small bow, knowing that Hermione would realize that he had a new trainee with him that did not have permission to call her by her given name.

Hermione and Severus immediately looked at the new trainee with curiosity, their dual piercing gazes raked over his new trainee with the same evaluating gaze they gave first year students. The poor trainee shrunk under their evaluating scan, causing Severus to chuckle in Hermione’s mind.

“Merlin’s eyeteeth, Mistress Snape,” Aiden said with exasperation. “How many pins do you plan on stopping at?” He eyed her latest one with a shake of his head. “Is there anything else I need to know? Have you completed Auror’s training overnight?”

Hermione laughed at Aiden. “No, I have no intentions of apprenticing as an Auror.”

“Do you have a side job as a Curse-Breaker?” Aiden asked.


Aiden shook his head. “Master Snape, Mistress Snape, I give you my newest trainee, Trevor Redwing. Trevor, they aren’t going to hex you, these are two good friends of mine. Professor Snape Master of Potions and Professor Snape Mistress of Potions.”

“Pleased to meet you, Professors,” Trevor said quietly with a small bow.
Severus inclined his head and Hermione smiled. “What brings you to us, Mr. Gauge?” Hermione asked, switching back to more formal modes of address.

“Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley were working on a little pet project of mine after the bloody mess with Acacia,” Aiden explained. “It has finally come to a head and given us some results I think you will be interested in.” He pulled an envelope out from his jacket pocket and handed it to Hermione.

Hermione furrowed her brows but accepted the envelope, pulling out a piece of parchment. Her eyes widened as she handed the parchment to Severus. “You’re sure it’s them?”

Aiden nodded. “It took some time to confirm. There were actually a hundred-some Wilkins in Australia and fifty of them were involved in the medical field. We had to do a little back rubbing and poking of our muggle contacts to narrow it down, but that is for sure the right address.”

Severus stared at the paper, his dark eyes seeming to memorize every feature. Hermione’s past deeds to protect her parents had been done with the best of intentions, but he knew that there was a chance, even with the best of reversal spells, that the relationship between Hermione and her parents would not end well. She had accepted, from the moment she cast the memory charm on her parents, that she would most likely never be her parents’ daughter again. She also knew that if their memory was restored, the very knowledge of knowing they had been mentally rewritten would most likely not be taken well. A part of Hermione, he knew, had already weighed the options of whether ignorance was bliss… even if it meant her memories of them being the only things that remained.

Hermione’s emotional control began to crack, and Severus pulled her to him immediately, lending her his own walls to keep her composure in front of the Aurors. He felt her weave herself into his shields and pull on them for strength, grateful for his aide. She would have her emotional breakdown later, when the eyes of people she did not even know were not upon her.

“Thank you for doing this for me,” Hermione said, her voice stable. “I appreciate the work you have done.”

Aiden seemed to realize that Hermione’s inner conflict was simmering underneath her expressed calm. He held out a box. “I had a port-key authorized and made for you. The goto key is “bunyip” and the return is “pegasus.”

Severus took the box in his pale hand and nodded to Aiden silently in thanks.

Aiden nodded and smiled in understanding. “If you need anything, do not hesitate to contact me,” he said. He shooed his trainee towards the exit.

The moment the Aurors left and the door closed, Hermione sank into Severus’ body and wept. He closed his eyes as he rocked her against himself, supporting her as all of the what-ifs crashed into her.

When Hermione had finally gained sufficient control over her own emotions and released the tight grip on Severus’ borrowed shields, she took a deep breath. “Will you come with me?” she asked quietly.

“Of course,” Severus replied.

Hermione smiled at him. It was all she needed to know.

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**Chapter 83: Meeting the Parents**

The night air was slightly frigid despite the earlier heat of the day. Hermione sat in the outdoor chair
and stared off into the Australian landscape. Her eyes were dark, no longer the almost golden honey brown of her more open self. Her face was impassive as she watched the shadows move in the night. No emotion marred her face. It was if her entire face was carved in unfeeling stone. All of her thoughts were shoved deep into the recesses of her mind, buried in obscurity and countless doors, and shielded by Occlumency.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins were no more. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had returned to the world, but they were not happy with their daughter’s betrayal. The look of disgust and fear of her reminded her that as much as her parents had once tried to be accepting of there being an entirely hidden world of magic under their nose, there were some things that could not be easily digested. Having their daughter erase their memories of her and send them off to Australia with entirely new identities had been too much.

As Hermione Granger stared off into the dark of the Australian night, she accepted that doing the right thing did not guarantee happy endings.

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“Mr. and Mrs. Granger,” Snape said in the same tone that scared first year students under the desks, out of the way in the hallways, and back into their common rooms without a backward glance. “You believe your daughter has done you a great betrayal for her actions, but you will not even give her the chance to explain why.”

“She has always had the highest of praise for you and your… upbringing. She stated that you are fair, nonjudgmental, and willing to learn about her very different world. She remembers you sending her birthday cakes every year of her life with a fondness that brings her to tears. Yet, on the flip of a coin, after she has risked everything, you will not give her benefit of the doubt when she tries to explain to you why she did what she did,” Severus growled at the couple staring at him from the couch.

“If proof is what you need to drive the truth into your grey matter,” Severus said with a steely voice. “Proof is what you will have.” Severus pulled out a book from his robe and his wand and tapped it, enlarging it in front of Hermione’s wide-eyed parents. He threw it down on the coffee table in front of them. “There is your proof, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Proof of a war that killed countless numbers of innocent people. A war that destroyed men, women, and children, all in the name of pure-blooded supremacy in which people like you were killed by the score to get to people like Hermione Granger.”

Mr. and Mrs. Granger tentatively reached over to open the album and began to scan the clippings from the Daily Prophet and gasped as she read the reports of the attacks. Pictures of wailing parents cradling their dead adorned the clippings. Pictures of broken families, haunted survivors, dead children, injured fighters, and the barest of survivors were pasted in the book. Severus had kept them all. Every article that had ever related to the war was bound within the pages of the album. More importantly to the task of convincing the Grangers of the need for Hermione to do what she did, there were multiple articles detailing the death of those connected to helping the resistance under the banner of Harry Potter, whose two steadfast allies Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley were well known. That Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks, who had died leaving their child an orphan, the great Albus Dumbledore, Sirius Black, Fred Weasley, Alastor Moody, Cedric Diggory, and others had died for the “greater good” was only more icing on the bitter cake of reality of the Second War. All of them had been connected in some way back to Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and the infamous Harry Potter.

“Your daughter loves you,” Severus said in a quiet, dangerous voice. “She loved you so much that
she was willing to send you off to a far-away continent with no memory of her so you would remain alive. She knew, in heart, that evil existed, and that evil would find you, torture you, and cast you aside just to get to her. What she did, she did to save you from that agony. She sacrificed her innocence for yours, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. She will never get it back, and she will live with that the rest of her life. My question to you is... can you harbor so much anger against her for what she did that you ignore the depth of her love and sacrifice for you?"

Severus’ eyes were darkest black, taking in all light and reflecting nothing.

“You are this Severus Snape?” Mr. Granger said, pointing to a clipping of the article declaring him the Headmaster of Hogwart’s. “You are the Headmaster?”

“No, I am not any longer.” Severus narrowed his eyes, annoyed that of all the things they would focus on in the entire album was that particular clip. “I have been many things, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I have been Headmaster, Master of Potions, confidant, executioner, student, professor, savior, betrayer, spy, and hero. In war, we are often called many wonderful and horrible things. When the dust settled, we were all stained, and we cherished the few things that remain to us.”

“Why is it that you come here with our daughter and not her friends from the war?” Mr. Granger spoke up at last.

“When you read about me in that book, you will see the face I wore protecting people like your daughter, while unable to trust the people closest to me,” Severus replied. “When the war ended, the friends Hermione Granger had for almost a decade, moved on, leaving her to her own lonely and changed life. She was too different to fit into their lives anymore. It was there, at the end, she was apprenticed to me and became a professor at Hogwart’s. She became my apprentice, my colleague, my stalwart companion and defender, and my truest and most cherished friend.”

Severus straighten his posture and glared. “You ask why I came with her? I swore to stand by her in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, and in joy as well as sorrow. I will stand with her until the skies burn and after, Mr. Granger. I will fight tooth and claw from the very depths of the Abyss to return to her side if only to see her smile. This... I... swear.”

“Your daughter is one of the most courageous, brilliant, persistent, loyal, compassionate, trustworthy, and inspiring witches on this world. Her footsteps have left wakes that are still rippling across the land and transforming it right under our feet. And if any of those traits she gained from you,” Severus said in a controlled voice. “You will walk out that door once you have read that book from cover to cover, prostrate yourself before her, and beg forgiveness for your weakness.”

Severus turned on his heels and stormed out of the living room to the porch door where Hermione had exited previously, leaving the newly rediscovered Grangers to ponder both the words they had been told and the archive of a war they hadn’t even known they missed.

Severus found Hermione with her back up against the garden wall staring out into the dark of the bush. He pulled out a folded piece of fabric from his pocket and flung it outward with a whisper, turning it into his normal outer robe. Shrugging his arms into it and over his muggle clothing he lowered himself down to the ground beside her and pulled her against himself, wrapping his robe around her with his arm.

She yielded to his touch, sagging into him with a sigh, a trickle of her emotions flickered through their bond. She buried her face into his chest and clung to his body, inhaling deeply to bask in the
warmth and scent of him.

He felt her shields drop, layer by layer, as she took comfort in his presence and his physical closeness. He pressed his lips to her head, kissing her hair. Her body relaxed against him as she allowed herself to be vulnerable under his protective embrace.

“I love you, Severus,” she said, pulling back slightly to look him in the eye.

He touched her cheek with his hand, his eyes darkening into the private look he reserved for her alone. “I love you, too.”

“Sometimes, I don’t feel worthy of that look,” she said, smiling sadly. “Like it deserves to go to someone else. Someone… less… me.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed slightly and he used his fingertips to bring her head up so he could look her in the face. “Hermione,” he said softly. “Do you consider me a fool?”


“Brainless perhaps?”

“No!” Hermione shook her head adamantly.

“Then believe me,” Severus said softly, “When I tell you there is no one else that I would bestow that look upon. Even hypothetically.”

“I trust you, Severus,” Hermione looked him in the eyes as she smiled at him. “Forgive me my jaunt into self-pity?”

Snape’s eyes regained the darker private look as he pulled her against him, tucking her head under his chin. He pressed his nose into her hair, inhaling her scent. “You are forgiven, Mrs. Snape.”

She snuggled into him with a purr, her hand found a patch of his exposed skin on his back and she ran her hand against it.

Severus hissed sharply, pulling her against him. “Mrs. Snape. We are in your parent’s garden. Why are you taunting me with your highly inappropriate behavior?”

“Mmmm,” Hermione purred. “Because you smell delightful.”

“That is hardly a valid enough reason for such lack of decorum,” Severus complained half-heartedly.

“Decorum be damned,” Hermione pouted, pressing her lips to his. He shuddered against her and pulled her tighter against himself.

Severus came up for air first, glaring down at his mate. “Mrs. Snape. We are in your parent’s garden. Why are you taunting me with your highly inappropriate behavior?”

“Mmmm,” Hermione purred. “Because you smell delightful.”

“That is hardly a valid enough reason for such lack of decorum,” Severus complained half-heartedly.

“Decorum be damned,” Hermione pouted, pressing her lips to his. He shuddered against her and pulled her tighter against himself.

Severus came up for air first, glaring down at his mate. “Someone must guard the propriety of this relationship and the sanctity of your parent’s innocent garden, Madam.”

Hermione beamed at him mischievously as she regained some of her impish personality.

Severus touched her cheek and tilted his head; his dark eyes softened. “You are a wonder.”

Hermione smiled at him just before the sound of the sliding door broke the silence. Her eyes darkened as she pulled her shields around herself in self-defense, pulling away from Severus to lean back against the garden wall. Severus banished his emotion from his face, stiffening his posture as he prepared himself for an inevitable confrontation.
“Hermione,” Mr. Granger said as he pulled his wife to him. He slowly, awkwardly, went down to his knees and bowed his head. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you had a legitimate reason for what you did. All I could think of was that you did something beyond horrible to us, but I did not stop to think of why you would believe you had to.”

Mrs. Granger went to her knees as well. “All I could see was my baby. My baby who scuffed her knees climbing trees… and threw flower pots when she was angry. Somehow… my baby grew up while I wasn’t looking. She fought in a war that most of the world will never know about. She was tortured, and I never knew. She grew up in a blink of the eye and lost her innocence fighting in a battle where she almost died. I’m sorry, Hermione. I should not have said the things I did. They were the words of a fearful, weak human being. Please forgive me.”

“Forgive us,” Mr. Granger said sullenly.

“We want to be a part of your life, Hermione,” Mrs. Granger entreated. “We don’t want to miss any more than we already have.”

“We love you,” Mr. Granger said awkwardly. “And it’s about bloody time we started acting like it.”

Hermione looked between her mother and her father with dark, guarded eyes. Her expression was still and impassive. Slowly, her face softened and she placed her hands on her parent’s knees. “I love you too,” she said softly. “I forgive you. Can you forgive me?” Hermione used the wall to stand up. She extended her hand automatically to Severus and pulled him up beside her.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger pushed themselves off the ground and stood. “Of course we forgive you, Hermione.” They extended their arms to her.

Hermione squelched her inner disbelief as she slowly stepped into their arms as they hugged her.

“Let’s go back inside, Hermione,” her mother said. “It’s freezing out here at night. I’ll make tea.”

Hermione allowed herself to be herded by her mother back into the house after giving Severus a private look.

Mr. Granger touched Severus’ shoulder briefly to gain his attention, smiling uncomfortably as he noticed him stiffen from the unaccustomed and uninvited touch. “Thank you, Severus, for bringing us to our senses and our daughter back to us.”

Severus tilted his head slightly and then nodded slowly. “You… are welcome,” he said slowly.

Mr. Granger met Severus’s gaze. “I won’t ever have to ask you if you’ll take care of my daughter, Severus. I know you will.”

Severus seemed to take a moment to digest Mr. Granger’s words before he nodded to him silently.

Mr. Granger smiled. “Come on. Let’s go in before the hens start talking about us.” He walked back towards the house.

Severus lifted an eyebrow but followed Hermione’s father back into the house.

Chapter 84: Family and Potion Mishaps
Mrs. Granger touched the photograph on the table of her daughter and Severus leaning down for a kiss as a brightly colored bird flew towards the camera. She looked at it with both joy and sadness, touching the photo with Hermione and Severus glaring at each other from behind a mask of cake icing with equal reverence. Mr. Granger had retired for the evening, spouting apologies that he had appointments he had to keep in the morning.

“My baby,” she said at last, a tear running down her cheek. She looked at Hermione, who had fallen asleep on the couch, sprawled in Severus’ lap. He had tucked her against him, covering her with the drape of his teaching robe. “Grown up and a professor even… where did all the time go?”

“You can keep the photos,” Severus said softly. “They are charmed to freeze so only you and Mr. Granger can see them move, in case you have unexpected company.”

Mrs. Granger smiled at him. “Thank you,” she replied, not quite sure what me meant by charmed, but willing to accept the gifts. Her eyes widened as she realized something. “Oh… we don’t even have a guest room here. We made the spare room into a library.”

“I’m sure, had Hermione been awake, the irony would not be lost in that,” Severus said with a lifted eyebrow. “This is, however, strangely normal for us.”

“She seems so tired,” Mrs. Granger noticed with a sympathetic expression. “I remember when you couldn’t keep her still unless you bribed her with a story.”

Severus looked down to the woman draped across his lap as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Perhaps I would have been, if it weren’t his lap in particular with a woman draped across it. “She has… survived much more than she lets on.” He wove his long fingers through the curls of her hair, soothing it gently. “Such burdens… can be… exhausting,” he attempted to explain without truly detailing.

Mrs. Granger seemed to realize she was getting more of an explanation than Severus would normally offer and nodded. “I’m glad she has someone that can understand what she’s been through. I know I can’t even begin…” she tapered off and shook her head. “What you showed us was enough.”

Severus stared at Mrs. Granger silently, his black eyes moved across her face as if to scan it. He broke off the gaze as the woman began to fidget like a student under his regard. “It is fine if you do not understand it all. Nothing is war is truly comprehensible.” Severus attempted to soften his expression to look at Mrs. Granger again. “Unfortunately our time here must come to an end. We must return to Hogwart’s. We are on the schedule for late patrols this evening.”

Mrs. Granger wrung her hands slightly. “You will… keep in touch?”

Severus smirked. “I doubt that will be a problem.” Hermione’s mother looked relieved.

“She said you taught potions?” Mrs. Granger said curiously.

“Technically, we both teach potions,” he replied with a crinkle of his lip. He saw the confusion on the woman’s face. “We… create… medicine for various purposes,” he attempted to explain. “We attempt to teach to teach… varying levels of aptitude… the skills in which to do so.”

“So,” Mrs. Granger attempted to clarify. “You’re like a pharmacist that teaches pharmacology.”

Severus decided nodding was the better side of valor. While he had no doubt Hermione’s parents were perfectly sane and mentally unchallenged, explaining the art of potion making was probably not something he should engage in on the first night meeting his wife’s memory un-charmed parents. He tapped Hermione on the back. “We need to get going,” he said with amusement.
Hermione did not even stir. Severus rolled his eyes slightly. “Hermione,” he said sternly.

Nothing.

“Ms. Granger!” he said in his teaching voice. “Your potion is about to explode. Are you always so insufferable?”

Hermione shot up straight with a curse, eyes wide, “I’m sorry, Professor Snape. It won’t happen again.” Hermione’s eyes darted around the room as her face turned a lovely shade of Gryffindor.

Hermione’s mother burst out laughing, causing Hermione to turn an even darker shade of crimson.

Severus stood up, the corners of his mouth quirked upward as his eyes glinted. He placed his hand out for her, and she took it without even looking at him. He pulled her to him, placing his hand to her neck and guiding her to his embrace as if in apology.

Hermione mumbled something that may or may not have been acceptable in mixed company. She beat her head against her husband a few times before looking up at him with a tired smile. She pulled out a small box from her pocket and handed it to her mother. “We have to go, but perhaps sometime in the future, you will want this.”

Mrs. Granger took the box with a puzzled look. Hermione watched her mother as she opened the box. She pulled out a key set on a keychain shaped into one of London’s clock towers.

“The house is still there,” Hermione said softly. “Should you choose to return to it.” Hermione’s eyes were dark and guarded.

Mrs. Granger let the key drop on the floor as she rushed over to hug her daughter, catching Severus in the all-encompassing hug. Severus stiffened from the touch of someone other than Hermione. His eyes and his face went from expressionless to something resembling a sneer as he slammed every mental shield he had over himself in instinctive protest. “We’ll write you as soon as everything is settled, Hermione,” she said with a smile, stepping back.

Mrs. Granger noticed Severus’ stone-faced mask and stiffened posture with amusement. “Don’t let me keep you from your duties at Hogwart’s,” she said with a smile.

“Thanks mum,” Hermione smiled back at her mother. “Please tell father that we had to go back to the school.” The pair of them walked back out the garden-side doors and stepped into the chilly Australian night air. They walked together past the garden wall away from the house.

Mrs. Granger watched her daughter and Severus leave with a wistful expression.

Severus lifted his arm, and Hermione stepped into it. Within a few seconds, theportkey yanked them to its crafted destination.

“I feel like I’m back in my time-turner days,” Hermione confessed as they arrive back at Hogwart’s. “It’s in the middle of the night in Australia, and here it’s back to teaching our last class before dinner.

“How long did you use that particular piece of work,” Severus asked with a lifted brow.

“Only a year,” Hermione confessed. “It was useful, but, it was like the more time I had, the less I
had, if that makes sense.”

Severus nodded grimly. “Time is often its own paradox. Some believe it to be just one larger glamour.”

Hermione tilted her head as she considered her adventures with time. “A confusing one, if that is true. There are some muggle hypotheses that say something similar, but they don’t call it a glamour.”

“It must have taken a toll on you,” Severus said with a frown.

“I did give it back after a year,” Hermione said softly. “That year felt like three years at once. At least I didn’t have any accidents and bump into someone and end up in in the 70s having to explain to Dumbledore… or Minerva… that would have been worse.” Hermione shuddered after a moment.

Severus’ face was thoughtful. “The seventies were… not a pleasant era for me.”

“Did you mean what you said to Minerva?” Hermione asked with a sad smile. “That you wouldn’t have ever been caught working with a Gryffindor in the seventies?”

Severus turned to her and placed his hand to her hair. He met her eyes as he placed his forehead to hers. “You would have turned my horribly painful world upside down… if Potter and his Marauders didn’t get their claws into you first.”

Hermione leaned into him. “Sometimes I wish I could have been there for you back then, Severus.”

Severus pulled away for a moment and then gently placed a kiss upon her lips. “You are here for me now, Mrs. Snape, and I will never… let you… go.”

“I will hold you to that, Mr. Snape,” she smiled at him warmly as they continued to walk back into Hogwarts.

“Unless you have suddenly gained the ability to read without opening the covers of your textbooks,” Severus drawled, “the book must be opened for you to read it. Turn to page two-hundred and sixty four.”

“Today you will be working on the Befuddlement Draught,” Hermione continued. “It is a potion that causes those that partake of it, purposely or not, to become irresponsible and confrontational. If you intend to pass this class, I recommend not drinking it.”

There was a light murmur of chuckles through the classroom.

Severus continued for Hermione. “Three of the most common ingredients in this draught are scurvy grass, lovage, and sneezewort. Not that expect any of you to actually read ahead in your books, but can anyone enlighten their peers as to the reason scurvy grass was named such?”

A hand flung up into air with haste, practically waving like flag.

“Do enlighten us, Ms. Elderberry,” Severus droned.

“People used to get sick because they didn’t have enough of the right nutrients. Mostly people like sailors on long sea voyages. They called it scurvy. Eating it cured it, so people just ended up calling it scurvy grass,” Elderberry answered enthusiastically.
Severus eyed the girl with a penetrating gaze.

“Very good, Ms. Elderberry,” Hermione chuckled from the other side of the classroom. “Five points to Ravenclaw.” Hermione walked by one of students in the back that was too busy chatting with his friend to notice her being there. She reached into her robe, pulled out a paperback copy of A Treatise on Sneezewort and whapped the errant student upside the head with it. “Five points from Hufflepuff for your disturbing lack of situational awareness, Mr. Atkinson and five more for discussing Quidditch during class. By all means, do give me another reason to keep taking off points.” Hermione gave the young man a calculating look. After staring at the boy for about a minute of awkward silence, he turned his head down and stared at his book. Hermione shook her head and continued her walk around the class.

As she walked away, Atkinson hissed quietly to his friend “Yes, Mrs. Snape. Hell, she’s just like him.”

Hermione was about to turn around and give the boy a piece of her mind, but Severus was already towering over the boy with a glare that would have either boiled water or frozen it instantly if such a thing were possible. “You, Mr. Atkinson, will address your professors with the respect due their station. This means, if you can wrap your feeble mind around it, to address Professor Snape as Professor, Madam, Ma’am, or, if you prefer to appeal to her academic prowess, Mistress of Potions. That will be five more points from Hufflepuff for your cursing and five more for disrespecting your betters. Is there anything else you would like to add, Mr. Atkinson?”

The boy made a funny face at Severus, his head rolled back and he laughed like a hyena.

Hermione sensed that Severus was seconds away from using a very creative spontaneously made up hex involving stinging nettles and poison ivy when she saw Atkinson’s friend shrink down in his chair as if he was going to die a horrible death. Hermione nudged her husband with her mind to get his attention.

Severus flicked his eyes over to look at her questioningly. She pointed her eyes towards the student attempting to crawl under his desk and then back to Atkinson.

Severus narrowed his eyes at Atkinson. “Are you inebriated, Mr. Atkinson?”

“Psssh,” the boy burbled.

Severus pulled out his wand and pointed it at the boy, mumbling a few diagnostic spells. “Congratulations, Mr. Atkinson, you are a fine example of what happens when someone doses you with the Befuddlement Draught.” Severus gave Hermione a tired look.

Hermione walked towards the door of the classroom. “Follow me, Mr. Atkinson. We will have to put you in detox with Madam Pomfrey.”

Atkinson attempted to stand up and ended up pushing all of his books to the floor before he staggered after Hermione. He grunted, spewing random things about other students, their hair, their breath, and how they obviously dressed funny.

Hermione closed her eyes and opened them, sharing a look with Severus as the student wobbled his way towards her.

Severus watched Hermione and Atkinson leave before he turned back to his class. He glared down at the student that had tried unsuccessfully to hide himself under the desk. “I will speak to you after class, Perkins. Five points from Slytherin for your blatant misuse of a potion on a classmate and five
more for being caught.” He glowered over his class. “Now, unless someone else feels the need to spout off at the mouth and gain themselves detention, turn to page four hundred and fifty two.”

Hermione returned after the class had already been dismissed. Her face was weary and when Severus met her eyes as she entered the emptied classroom, his eyes met hers with something akin to sympathy.

“What is the fate of our inebriated Mr. Atkinson?” Severus asked with a sigh.

“Overnight stay,” Hermione replied with a shake of her head. “He tried to beat up Mr. Clemens in the hallway on the way to the hospital wing, punched a wall, broke his fingers, and fell on Miss Devereux. She’s in the hospital wing too, with a twisted ankle.”

Severus arched a disbelieving brow. The next time Minerva questioned him on the strictness of his classroom, he was going to bring up this particular incident as proof that potions work was a serious matter.

“So,” Hermione began tiredly. “Did you speak with Mr. Perkins about his spiking his friend’s food?”

“Had to take points off my own house,” Severus growled lowly. “The least he could have done as a Slytherin is not look so unacceptably guilty over it.”

“You do inspire such love and compassion in your House, husband,” Hermione said with a grin.

Severus shot her a look that was both amused and annoyed wrapped into one package. “Just wait, wife, when Minerva hands you the Head of House for all of her Gryffindor cubs. I will be there to remind you of your incessant teasing of me and mine.”

Hermione gave him a look that was both affronted and warm rolled into one. “She has been hinting that she was going to hoist that particular responsibility upon me. I should have known she was up to something when she transfigured that connecting office in our chambers to portal out into Gryffindor Tower.”

“Minerva is many things,” Severus agreed as he finished graded the stack of parchments on his desk. “But not always subtle. She hovers like an old hen.”

“You love Minerva,” Hermione ribbed her husband. “Admit it.”

“I shall not, Madam,” Severus denied her vehemently. “I will not have my reputation sullied with rumors of soft feelings for that damnable meddling hen.”

Hermione had approached him from behind and wrapped her arms around his neck, flopping over his back so her intermingled with his. “Will you at least admit to soft feelings for me, then?”

Severus slumped slightly and spun his chair around to gather her up into his arms. “I admit to finding your companionship… less disagreeable than most.”

“Hmm,” Hermione murmured, rubbing her cheek against his. “I suppose that is… acceptable.”

Severus felt a surge of mischief through their bond, but it was too late. She snaked her arms tighter around his neck and proceeded to stick her tongue into his ear, sending every coherent thought and plan to counter her screaming down the halls of Hogwarts.
He groaned, prying her damnably enticing mouth off his earlobe and guided it to his mouth. She purred against him passionately, drinking him in like an exotic beverage. They parted, panting slightly, as Hermione gave him a very private and dark look. “Madam Snape, this course of action is highly inappropriate on top of our teaching desk.”

“And where exactly would you prefer such highly inappropriate actions to occur, Professor?” Hermione leaned into him, pressing her nose to his a little breathlessly.

Severus stared at her with his darkening black eyes for what seemed like an eternity. With a swift movement, he stood, picked her up, and slung her over his shoulder, heading directly out of his classroom and down the hall to their private chambers, barely even stopping to close and ward the classroom as he did so.

Hermione squealed in indignation as her feet left the floor, but she was unable to free herself from his iron grasp. In fact, when she did try, she found one of his hands very stealthily pressed against the small of her back, making her completely incapable of concentrating on anything but the feel of his hand against her skin.

As Severus and Hermione disappeared into the portal to their private chamber, a certain silver haired tabby cat jumped down from one of the hidden nooks in the dungeon wall and trotted happily back up the hallway, tail waving in the air behind her like a flag.
Part Seven: Building a Family

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus find themselves building a family in more ways than normal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 85: Green Around the Gills

The moment Hermione wafted the contents of the potion she was grading towards her, she knew she was in trouble. Her brain registered all the things that were wrong with the potion in systematic detail. The smell however, unsettled her in a manner that caused bile to rise up in her throat. She felt a wave of nausea hit her like boulder. She quickly capped the potion, quilling the result on the parchment in front of her in a blur of writing.

As she placed the quill back, another wave of nausea hit her and she paled, stood up from the desk, and bolted out the classroom towards the private chambers.

Severus forced his gait to be less frantic as he followed the hasty retreat of his wife back towards their shared quarters. She had not said a word as they had graded the last hour’s worth of potions together, but it was not anything overly disconcerting. They often spent hours in silence as they graded just as often as they spent hours making sarcastic commentary while they graded. Her face had gone an extremely disturbing bloodless color, matching his own skin tone than hers.

As he entered the chambers, he heard Prince cheeping in distress from his perch in the bathroom, reverting to his more baby-like calls. Something was undoubtedly wrong. As he walked towards the open bathroom door, he found his wife worshiping the porcelain throne with devout praises. Her arms were trembling and her hair was scattered in every direction but down.

Severus kneeled beside her with concern, pulling her hair back from her face as her body convulsed against her control. His pale hand covered one of hers and her fingers clutched his automatically with an iron grip, her knuckles whitened with the strength of her grasp.

Eventually her body gave her a reprieve, and she groaned softly.

Severus, wordlessly, turned her to him, wiping her face with a warm and damp face towel, and pulled her against him. She slumped into him, trembling in his embrace. Prince landed on his shoulder as he held her, trilling a concerned but no longer frantic string of notes. He laid his head across her hair, giving a soft baby peep.

“I’m sorry, Severus,” she whispered into his chest as he cradled her. “How embarrassing.”

“Not on my top ten list of romantic evenings with my wife,” Severus replied dryly. “You have nothing to be sorry for. However, I think we should move to somewhere more comfortable. My knees are unhappy with my choice of positions.”

Hermione chuckled weakly and struggled to stand. They washed their hands in the sink, and she grabbed a corked bottle from counter, opened it, sniffed, and gargled with it. She followed Severus
into the adjoining room. He was already sprawled on the bed in his full robes, and she curled up next to him gratefully, allowing his arm to pull her against him. The scent of him was comforting, mixed with the floral scent of heliotrope.

“Why do you smell like heliotropium today?” she asked into his chest.

Severus harrumphed. “Blame Pomona.”

“I don’t really want to know, do I?” Hermione chuckled.

“She would not relinquish her hold upon the mandrake root until I pruned her damnable flowers,” Severus grumbled softly, stroking her back in comfort.

“My poor Severus,” Hermione chuckled, her mood lightening.

Severus grunted, clearly not happy with being coddled. “Hermione,” he said in a rumble. “Are you going to enlighten me as to your gastronomic distress?”

Hermione looked up at him, eyes locking. “Well… when a witch and a wizard love each other very much…”

Severus’ eyes widened significantly even as the rest of his face remained impassive. “Are you sure?”

“Three weeks late,” Hermione said with a shy smile.

Severus placed his hand on her belly and stared into her eyes with wide eyes. “Truly?” his voice was almost too soft to hear.

“Yes, my disbelieving and grumpy Potions Master,” Hermione said, placing her palms to his cheeks. “I just confirmed with Poppy today. I was hoping to tell you over a private dinner instead of after hurling my guts out, I will admit.”

Severus stared at her and then placed his forehead to hers, a flood of his hidden emotions flowed between them. “You are forgiven your disgraceful timing for such exultant news, my witch.” He planted a kiss upon her mouth, weaving his fingers with hers as he pinned her back upon the bed and reminded his witch just how much forgiveness he could lavish upon her.

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It is here, my dear readers, that we give our couple a few years together without us hovering over them with a lens of magnification. We can deduce that their lives were filled with all the things true partnerships have: ups and downs, sickness and health, and sorrow mixed with joy. Rest assured that our couple persevered through the worst and best of times, coming out stronger for it. Through their trials they had gained respect, through respect a friendship, through friendship love, and through love something greater than themselves. It is the product of their love, however, that draws us back into their lives once more.

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“Mr. Argusssssssss!” came a clarion call as a bushy haired child slammed into the caretaker of Hogwarts. “We’re going to watch dee ten shun together tonight, correct? Mummy and Daddy are teaching. I’m not allowed in because students are… thunderheads.”

“I think you mean dunderheads, Miss Rosie, but you didn’t hear that from me.” The grizzled looking caretaker gave the child an uncharacteristic smile. The child caught Mrs. Norris in her arms and
picked her up by the waist, causing the cat to protest slightly, but she did not wriggle free. Filch hoisted the child and Mrs. Norris up in his arms and squinted as she pet the cat and his face with opposing hands.

“Most children are not excited about detention, Rosie,” the caretaker mumbled into her frizzy black hair.

“I’m not most children, Mr. Arr guss,” Rose pinched his nose with a scowl learned from a certain dark-haired brooding potion master. “I’m a proper lady. Auntie and Nana Malfoy says so.”

“Indeed you are, Miss Rosie,” Filch agreed. “Did you have fun with Scorpius today?”

Rose wrinkled her nose. “He pulled my hair. I punched him.”

“Miss Rose,” Filch admonished in the best growling tone he could muster. “That is not the action of a proper lady.”

The child wilted slightly. “But he pulled my hair, Arrguss. Besides, James told me not to let him yank my hair.”

“He’s just jealous of your curly black hair, Rosie,” Argus said, hoisting her into his arms to adjust her position. “You have to be better than that. Don’t be letting James tell you what is proper when it comes to punching someone, either.”

“We had a picnic out by the lake afterwards and fed the squid,” Rose beamed, attempting to redeem herself.

“I’m sure he appreciated that,” Argus nodded to her. “So, what shall our detentions be tonight, Miss Rosie?”

“Clean cauldrons with toothbrushes!” she answered decisively.

“That was last time, Miss Rosie,” Argus chuckled.

“String them up by their toes?” Rose asked curiously.

“Alas, still frowned upon,” Filch replied.

“Clean the chandeliers!” she exclaimed with a clap of her hands.

“Sounds good, Miss Rosie,” Argus transferred the girl to his shoulders and carried her down the corridors as she draped the protesting Mrs. Norris over Filch’s head.

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“Weeee!” Rose squealed as she clung to Buckbeak’s feathered scruff. The hippogriff walked around the grounds with Rose clinging to his mane of feathers, making no attempt to go airborne. In fact, even when the exuberant child almost lost her balance and grabbed his head crest feathers, Buckbeak simply nudged her back into place with his shoulder and continued walking.

Hagrid chuckled as Fang followed the unlikely pair around the grounds, keeping his eye on the girl as he tended his pumpkins. Caught somewhere between academic and athlete, Rose had a book out and was reading to Buckbeak as he carried her around, balancing on his back as she balanced herself and the book at the same time.

“What are you reading, Rose?” Hagrid yelled the question to the girl as she romped with the
“Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,” the girl announced, squealing slightly as Buckbeak broke into a trot. Rose had her two favorite stuffed animals with her, a stuffed green and silver snake she had named Salazar under one arm and a white ferret she named Uncle Draco under the other. Somehow she managed to hold onto both the plush toys, the book she was reading, as well as keep her balance on Buckbeak, which didn’t cease to amaze.

Hagrid shook his head in resignation. “’ere now, did you take that from my bookshelf?”

“I didn’t take,” Rose corrected him with a lift of her chin. “I borrowed.”

“Said like a true Slytherin, m’dear.” Hagrid’s head drooped slightly in defeat. The girl wasn’t even the age to start at Hogwarts and she had already read most of the standard textbooks from every professors’ bookshelf at the school, most of which were heavier than she was. Hagrid was certain that Hermione and Severus read their child One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi instead of fairy tales and fables from the moment she was born. She had already accompanied him into the forest to gather herbs and had an eerily accomplished talent to track down and corner leaping toadstools before he even noticed they were there. She had managed to come back from a day of flower picking with a handful of moly flowers for her proud parents, and she had already managed to assist Pomona Sprout with pruning her shrivelfigs in front of a baffled class of second year students.

Hagrid saw a tall young man hustling towards him from the direction of Hogwarts and he smiled in recognition.

“Hallo, Wayne,” Hagrid greeted. “Here to pick up Rose?”

“Aye, Hagrid. The Professors Snape have their hands full at the moment,” Wayne Mitchel laughed as Rose and Buckbeak skidded to a halt in front of him. The young man bowed politely to the hippogriff with a smile as Rose slid off Buckbeak’s back and gave the creature her own curtsey.

Rose jumped up to Wayne’s waist and locked her arms around him, looking up at his face. “Hello, Mr. Mitchel,” she greeted, attempting a good impression of her parents’ classroom voice. She beamed up at him with a laugh and stuffed Salazar the Snake under his arm and proceeded to make her stuffed ferret bounce up and down on Wayne’s arm.

“Hello, Miss Rosie,” Wayne smiled down at her. “It’s time for dinner in the Great Hall, and we are missing our honorary Slytherin.”

“Just a minute, Mr. Mitchel,” Rose said, spinning on her heels to dash into Hagrid’s hut. Wayne and Hagrid watched her climb onto one of the bookshelves and return the book she had “borrowed” back in place.

“What was she reading this time, Hagrid?” Wayne asked with a chuckle.

“Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,” Hagrid replied with a shake of his head.

“Let it be known,” Wayne mused. “No Snape in the History of Hogwarts was ever accused of being uneducated or a hater of books.”

“Congratulations on being made Prefect, Wayne,” Hagrid said. “I heard through the grapevine.”

Wayne Mitchell smiled. “Thank you, Hagrid. It’s hard to believe I’ve been here long enough to be.”

“You’ll be Head Boy soon enough,” Hagrid assured him. “If anyone can keep Slytherin in line, it’s
you…well and Professor Snape.”

“Both Professors Snape, Hagrid,” Wayne chuckled. “There isn’t a Slytherin in my House that would raise voice or not listen to either. In fact, if we even attempted to dishonor Slytherin House, Prince would peck us all into submission.”

Hagrid laughed and nodded. “He does the same to Gryffindors.”

“Blind justice,” Wayne said with a grin. “Both of our Houses know who not to piss off and where the business end of a sharp beak is. Did you know that Prince herds Rose around with his wings and beak? If she tries to get into mischief, he’ll herd her down the corridors right back to a staff member, or a prefect, or one of the Heads.”

Hagrid chuckled at the mental image. “I didn’t know. I’m rarely in the castle, to be honest.”

“Pay attention next time Prince is around and she’s with you,” Mitchel suggested with a smile. “It’s worth it.”

Rose ran back towards them and leapt up into Wayne’s arms with a giggle. “I’m ready now!”

“Oof!” Wayne grunted. “You’re getting too big for me to carry me around, Miss Rosie.”

“I am not!” Rose said, sticking her chin out in protest. “Salazar gained weight from eating too much figgy pudding.”

“I’m sure that’s it,” Wayne replied with a straight face.

“Yes,” Rose said decisively, making her stuffed ferret dance on Wayne’s head before sticking him under Wayne’s Slytherin tie. “There, now you look proper,” she announced.

Mitchel raised an eyebrow in Slytherin fashion. “Time to go to dinner, Miss,” he chuckled, hoisting her up in his arms and carrying her back towards Hogwart’s.

Hagrid stroked his beard and shook his head. The lass had everyone wrapped around her pinky finger already. She was going to be a right terror when she turned eleven and wielded a wand. Thankfully, they had years to go before that became reality.

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“Rose Lily Nightingale Snape,” Molly Weasley yelled. “You come down here off that broom and give me a hug goodbye, young lady!”

The bushy-black-haired haired child zoomed down from the sky and landed with a flourish and slammed into Molly Weasley with a hug. “You’re leaving already, Nana Molly? I wanted to show you my new trick!” She looked up at Molly with her black eyes adoringly.

“Fine, fine, show me your trick,” Molly acquiesced, crossing her arms as she looked at Hermione and Severus accusingly.

Severus lifted a brow as Hermione lifted her hands up with a shrug.

Rose beamed and snatched up her broom and shot off into the air and did figure eights with Prince. Prince gave her a peck on the rump, causing her to squeal and chase after the phoenix with her boom, trying to grab at his tail feathers.

“Whose idea was it to teach that child how to use a broom? She’s not even ten, and I’m pretty sure
she can fly circles around Harry and Ron both.” Molly asked with her arms crossed.

Hermione waved her hands. “Don’t look at me, I don’t get along with brooms!”

Severus narrowed his eyes at Molly. “Don’t look at me like that, witch, I don’t even use a broom to fly.”

Molly scoffed. “I know very well that the both of you fly without brooms. You cannot fool me, either of you! One of you made the mistake of introducing her to a broom before she was even five, and I want to know who it was! You don’t see James Sirius Potter trying to chase a phoenix over Black Lake from astride a broom.”

“I fear that I am to blame for that, Molly,” Rolanda Hooch said with a laugh as she approached the gathering beside Hogwart’s. “I was babysitting while teaching a class. She didn’t try it in front of me, no. She did it later after sneaking a broom out from under one of my students with a stealthy accio. When I caught her, she managed to get me to teach her how to fly properly, lest she try it when I wasn’t around and crash.”

Molly slumped her shoulders. “Headstrong, stealthy, crafty, brave, manipulative, and intelligent. I wonder where those traits came from.”

Hooch grinned at Hermione and Severus.

Severus tilted his head, looking bored. Hermione smirked.

“Look at the bright side,” Hooch chuckled. “Whatever House has her will have a born seeker for Quidditch, if they can pry her out of the library.”

“It’s bad enough that Harry and Ron have taken turns teaching her Quidditch rules already.” Molly put her face into her palm. “The both of you. Whatever genetics have gone into the making of that child has multiplied from the both of you, and I’m not sure the world is ready for it. She doesn’t even have a wand yet, and you have her accioing brooms out from under Rolanda.”

“I’ll have you know,” Severus stated flatly. “That I never once encouraged our daughter to accio anything.”

“And you don’t have to, you just accio everything without even thinking your daughter might be picking it up from you,” Molly admonished. “Next time I visit, she’ll be spouting arithmancy equations and brewing Antidodes to Uncommon Poisons.”

Hermione coughed, and Severus chose that moment to focus on one of the far parapets of Hogwarts.

Molly glared at Hermione as Hooch bustled up laughing. “Now, now, Molly, we all let her sit in with our classes while we watch her. She has her books and such to keep her busy, but she can’t help but overhear things. It’s only natural for her to pick up… things.” Hooch grinned. “Rose has Septima wrapped around her fingers. Even Madam Pince smiles at her, if that tells you anything. Filch actually twirls her around and plays hide-and-go-seek with her and Mrs. Norris actually sits in her lap. Sprout has her reciting all of the different types of plants in the greenhouse too. She’s actually embarrassed a few third year students with that too.”

Molly shook her head. “That’s it. You are going to allow me to take her for the weekend for the next few weeks, and teach her how to be a child for at least a few days at a time.”

Severus lifted an eyebrow.
“No buts, Severus Snape,” Molly scoffed. “It’s about time I had some quality bonding time with my granddaughter, anyway.”

Prince whooshed down from the sky and landed on Severus’ shoulder with a warble. Rose flew down shortly after and flung herself off her broom and skidded to a halt in front of Molly. “Prince cheated. He shook me off in the trees.”

“Well, young lady,” Molly huffed. “Would you like to stay with us at the Burrow this weekend?”

Rose’s face lit up. “Oooo! Can I?” She turned to stare appealingly at her mother and father.

Severus tilted his head, impassive. “Is your homework finished?”

“Yes, father.”

“Are your chores finished?” Hermione asked, her brow arched.

“Yes, mum.”

Hermione and Severus exchanged looks. “Very well,” they said together.

Rose gave a whoop taken out of the George Weasley Handbook and leapt up to give her parents a hug, wrapping her arms around their waists tightly before turning around and latching onto Molly.

Molly grinned at them and herded Rose with her out the gates of Hogwarts.

Hooch chuckled as she watched the pair go. “You two knew she was going to ask for Rose this weekend.”

“Why ever would you think that, Madam?” Severus purred in a velvet voice just before he moved around to kiss his wife solidly on the mouth.

“Because I remember your anniversary date, Severus Snape,” Hooch said with a grin, patting Hermione on the back as she walked out the gates of Hogwarts towards Hogsmeade. “I took your patrols for the weekend, by the way. Happy Anniversary.”

Hermione blushed.

“Fly with me,” Severus purred to her, turning towards the lake and extending his hand.

Hermione took Severus’ hand as they both leapt into the air, gliding on ebony wings towards the lake.

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Chapter 86: Family Lessons

“No, no, no” Rose stood over her brother’s bubbling cauldron. “You have to stir it anti-clockwise.” Rose gestured with her hand in a counter-clockwise direction imperiously and then stood over him with her hands on her hips.

“I haven’t even added anything yet, you bossy nuisance!” snapped her brother in a biting tone. He scowled at her with his dark eyes, blowing his black hair out of his face.

“There now,” Severus yanked his female child up by the waist. “That is enough of that, Miss Know-it-all.” He carried his bossy daughter with him and plunked her down in front of her own cauldron as Hermione knelt beside her son and whispered to him, point at the book he was frowning at with a
dour look on his face.

“See if you can follow this recipe,” Severus in his teaching voice. “Preferably without blowing it up.”

Rose stared intently at the recipe and went to work, trapped in her own potion-making world.

Severus smirked. None of the recipes he allowed his children to craft at such a young age required a wand, so large scale potion explosions were thankfully, impossible, but training to follow directions was not something he was going to shirk on. He gazed over to Hermione and his eyes met hers as she looked up from instructing their younger son on the basics of potion craft. She smiled at him warmly before going back to reading the instructions.

He watched with amusement as his son’s dour face relaxed as his mother guided him through the steps. Much like his father, there was only one woman on the earth that could change his expressions from sour to relaxed in a second’s notice. His mother, well versed in the art of smiling in the face of the other Hogwart’s Master of Potions, showed her son no mercy. There were times when their son would beam at them so genuinely that Severus wondered if he had ever seen a sour expression on his face at all. Part of him wondered, if his mother had been as strong willed and genuinely loving as Hermione, how much that would have changed his future.

Julius Sebastian Nightjar Snape had been born in the fall with a dour expression and loud wail to announce his coming into the world in the dead of night. Pomfrey had commented that only owls and nightjars would be around to witness such a late night birth, and so Julius Sebastian Snape became Julius Sebastian Nightjar Snape within minutes of his birth.

Unlike his sister, Julius took in much of the world with an intense gaze and quiet determination. He was not easily startled, did not announce his intentions with a blow-by-blow commentary, and took every bit of praise as though it were the last crumb of kindness on the Earth to be given. Also, unlike his sister, he was steadfast in his beliefs, turning his chin up to take either punishment or praise with equal bravery. Once he decided on something, Julius stood by it for better or for worse, yet was not above admitting fault and accepting correction. Severus wondered, again, if the influence of his wife’s firm hand -- with no amount of love lost – that was what molded the boy into something both like and unlike him.

His son, at the tender age of five, had already mastered intricacies in speech and etiquette that his sister was still learning. He already knew to call his mother and father Professor Snape in public under the roof of Hogwarts, knew to call his father “Master of Potions” and his mother “Mistress of Potions and Transfiguration” in formal situations outside of Hogwarts, to call Minerva “Auntie Minerva” only when in private company and “Headmistress McGonagall” in public. He also knew to call his parents “mum and dad” when traveling in muggle public. His sister mixed up titles and called Hermione and Severus mum and father in all situations and called Minerva “Mrs. Headmistress” or “Headmistress Minerva,” making her brother roll his eyes with the same disgusted expression his father was infamous for. He knew courtly etiquette with a grace and execution that impressed even the Malfoys. Lucius had even, privately to Severus at least, admitted that maybe Scorpius could learn a few things from Julius.

Julius, despite not having a wand yet, executed flawless pronunciation of many power words, charms, and counter-curses. He had never engaged in baby talk or babble nicknames, despite hearing them often with his sibling and the Potter children.

Severus’ lips curled up slightly in a small smile. The Snape children would take Hogwarts by storm in their time, probably giving Scorpius Malfoy a run for his money for influence of Slytherin House. Let him try. As it was, Slytherin had already adopted the Snape children into their ranks at the table.
in the Great Hall. Hermione was strangely accepting of it, stating that, “there are far worse things than being Slytherin, Severus, and I don’t mean Gryffindor. Besides, the greatest love of my life is Slytherin. Who am I to argue with fate?”

Julius, Severus noted, also had one other superpower that his sister did not. He could cuddle Minerva in her cat form. Ever since he first learned to walk, he had embraced Minerva and followed her around wherever she might lead him. Even now, when he knew his Auntie Minerva and the cat were the same, he would pick up Minerva and cuddle her in his lap. Severus wasn’t sure what was more horrifying: that his son was cuddling with Hogwarts’ Headmistress like a regular cat or that Minerva seemed to enjoy and encourage it. He would catch Julius sitting out under the tree in the courtyard reading a book with Minerva in his lap, petting her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. At least, Severus thought to himself, his son would never lack protection with McGonagall following him around like a familiar.

“Father,” Rose addressed Severus. “Check my potion.”

Severus arched a brow at his progeny and stared at her with unwavering dark eyes.

Rose crossed her arms and glared at him, uncomprehendingly.

“Say please, Rosie,” snapped Julius from up front, as he threw a handful of herbs into his cauldron and stirred it. “He’s our father, not a doormat.”

Rosie made a face and stuck her tongue out at her younger, yet ironically, more mature, brother. “Please, father. Check my potion.”

Hermione chuckled in his head and Severus flicked his eyes to meet his wife’s warm honey brown eyes. Severus crossed his arms in front of his body, pulling his robes over his shoulders as he peered over the cauldron. “That is acceptable,” he said with the same tone one would use to address pondweed. “You may bottle it.”

Rose Snape, oblivious to her father’s form of address, clapped her hands together and gleefully went about bottling her potion, ignoring everything around her in favor of what was occupying her at that given moment.

“Mother,” Julius addressed his mother. “I think this is the proper color. Could you check it please?”

Hermione peered down into the cauldron and noted its color and viscosity. “Excellent, Julius. Good job. Please bottle it. You can give it to your Aunt Minerva for her hands, if you like.”

Julius beamed proudly and proceeded to bottle up his cauldron. Any opportunity to give something to his favorite Aunt was a reason to be cheerful.

When the cauldrons were properly cleaned and put up, Hermione shooed her children out of the laboratory. “Your Uncle and Grandparents should be arriving soon to take you both to the zoo with James and Albus. Hurry and go put on your muggle clothes.”

“Yes, mum,” Julius and Rose chimed together in a rare moment of solidarity, rushing off to the quarters to find their change of clothes.

“Do not run in the corridors,” Severus growled at his children as they started running.

“Yes, Father!” his children answered, slowing their pace just enough to not be running.

Hermione came up behind Severus and wrapped her arms around his waist, snuggling into his back
and his outer robe with a purr. He turned and pulled her into his embrace, tugging her under his chin
and wrapping his robe around her. “They grow up so fast,” Hermione said, her eyes glistening with
emotion. “Next thing you know, we’ll be teaching them in class.”

Severus looked down at his wife’s face with his dark and private look. “If the can survive an outing
with the Potters, Molly Weasley, and your parents at the zoo. Perhaps we should come up with a
contingency plan?”

“Ginny is my first line of attack. Molly Weasley is my contingency plan,” Hermione said, looking
into Severus’ black eyes with mischief. “That failing, my parents know muggle life-saving
techniques.”

“Touché, my witch,” Severus said with an uplift of the corners of his mouth before he gently placed
a kiss upon her mouth.

Hermione purred into his kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him closer. “Have a
mentioned how wonderful you smell, today?”

“Mrs. Snape,” Severus murmured into her mouth. “Are you propositioning me?”

“If I say yes,” Hermione purred into his face, “will that affect the results?”

Severus pulled his wife to him into a heated kiss. “Not bloody likely,” he rumbled his reply. “In fact,
I’m fairly certain your research results will be biased.”

“Hrm,” Hermione hummed, nibbling softly on his exposed neck. “Perhaps more testing is required to
confirm this bias.”

Severus hissed softly and enveloped Hermione with his arms completely, placing his hand on the
back of her neck. She meeped, sagging into him, as her legs practically buckled out from under her.
“Just wait until our children leave for the zoo, Mrs. Snape. I will show you exactly how biased your
results will be.”

“Promises,” Hermione managed to say as she regained some coherency. “Promises.”

-Hermione!” Ollivander greeted as Hermione and Severus stepped into the shop. “And Severus.
How good to see you, my friends.”

Hermione flicked her arm up, dislodging Prince. The phoenix flew over to Ollivander with a happy
warble and clung to his shoulder.

Ollivander laughed happily, petting the phoenix under the chin and passing him a large strawberry
from a bowl on his counter. The phoenix preened Ollivander’s head with his beak and then attacked
the strawberry with gusto. After gulping down the berry, Prince flapped his wings excitedly, sending
papers swirling on Ollivander’s desk. He fanned his wings out like a thunderbird and whapped
Ollivander on the head with one wing, one loose feather falling into Ollivander’s face. “Oof,” the
elder Ollivander grunted and grasped the feather between his fingers. “Is this a hint, my Prince?” He
chuckled as the bird head-bumped his face and warbled.

“That one has been freshly steam cleaned, Master Ollivander,” Hermione chuckled. “He was singing
in the shower only an hour ago.”
“Psssh,” Ollivander grunted. “You two can call me Garrick and you know it.” He waved his hand dismissively to any protest. “Julius, your parents are here,” he said over his shoulder.

“Coming, Master Ollivander,” the boy called from somewhere in the store, shuffling up to his parents with a bit of excitement plastered across his face.

“’ey now there, boy,” Ollivander said with a smile. “Let’s see what you’ve made.”

Julius dropped something that looked like a glowing splinter into Ollivander’s hands with an expectant and hopeful look on his face.

“Ahhh,” Garrick said with raised brows. “You made a dragon heartstring core and wove it with unicorn tail hair. Very intuitive, young Julius. Oh, but you didn’t seal the ends together. Here let me show you how.” Ollivander placed the core onto the counter and guided Julius’ hands over it. “Here, apply pressure there and pull over here with your other hand. That’s it. See how it merges together like one piece?”

Julius nodded excitedly and did has he was told. There was a slight flash of energy as the core snapped together as one unified existence.

“Now, young Julius,” Garrick said with a serious tone. “What type of wood will be best for this?”

Julius furrowed his brows as he concentrated. “Ebony would work,” the boy pondered, “but it would be very unyielding for the unicorn hair. Tamrind wood would be supple, but not durable enough for the heartstring…” Julius frowned.

Hermione and Severus watched as the gears turned in their young son’s head.

“Redheart, Master Garrick,” Julius said at last. “Dense enough to support the heartstring and resonate enough for the unicorn hair. If we had some, burl would be best. Aged would be preferred, for stability.”

Ollivander set his hand on Julius’ shoulder and smiled. “Very good, young Julius. Your task for tomorrow will be to find a suitable piece of it in the stores. Now if you could please put this back on the work table, I think your parents wish to feed you before you expire.”

Julius beamed and snatched the wand core and dashed into the back rooms.

“He doesn’t even have his own wand, and he’s helping you make them,” Hermione said with a wistful look upon her face. She looked up at Severus with a warm smile.

“Oh don’t you worry about that, Hermione,” Garrick grinned. “He’ll be making his own by then, just like I did at his age. Until then all the wands here will allow him to “borrow them” as it were. Much like wands do for me when I check them for tournaments.”

“You crafted your own wand before you even wielded your own wand?” Severus asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course, Severus,” Garrick chuckled. “My father expected great things from me. Much like you do for young Julius.”

Severus’ lip curved upward slightly. “I suppose I must agree.”

Hermione nudged Severus with her elbow, and he gazed down at her with his dark eyes. She beamed back up at him.
Ollivander fingered the feather Prince had kindly donated by whapping him in the face. “Beautiful and flawless. Until you two introduced me to Prince, I never thought I’d see the like. You can tell he has thrived beyond measure. Has he had a burning day, yet?”

“No,” Severus answered. “He sheds feathers here and there, but hasn’t even shown signs of being mopey like Fawkes did before he finally burned.”

Garrick smiled. “Astounding. You really have a very healthy specimen on your hands. Oh that reminds me. Master Goodfeather at the Rare Bird Sanctuary sent me an owl. He said he would be more than willing to send you both a female egg since the first one turned out so well, with one condition. He gets his first choice of the resulting first clutch for the Sanctuary.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “So Prince’s egg originally came from Master Goodfeather? How astounding.”

Ollivander grinned. “Yes, it was supposed to go to a sanctuary up north somewhere in Iceland. They ended up with a blue firebird. Apparently, the thing charmed the pants off everyone there and they would not trade him for all the gold in Gringotts. Sound familiar?”

Severus watched Prince attack the bowl of fruit on Garrick’s counter. “The birds seem to have a strangely poignant sense of fate, yes.”

Garrick grinned. “Shall I tell him you accept his conditions?”

Severus and Hermione exchanged looks and nodded back to Ollivander. “Excellent. I’ll do that today. Perhaps you two should publish a book about phoenix behavior after this. You know, in between all the other stuff you two are always doing.”

“I fear our Prince is hardly typical,” Severus said dryly as he thought of Prince’s perpetual habit of steaming himself into a fluff ball at any provocation.

“Who knows, my friend,” Garrick chuckled. “Perhaps what Prince does is truly typical phoenix behavior. Even Master Goodfeather says it has only been pure luck that has allowed him to find the eggs he has.”

It was at that moment that Julius bounced back towards the three of them, looking proud of himself.

“Ahh, Julius,” Garrick said. “Did you clean up the workbench?”

“Yes, Master Ollivander,” Julius answered proudly.

“Good, good,” the wandmaker smiled. I will see you bright and early in the morning then, young Julius.”

“Yes, Master,” Julius said, head bobbing in agreement.

“Where is young Miss Rosie?” Garrick asked, noticing her absence.

Hermione smirked. “She’s with Hagrid, window shopping for owls.”

“Last week it was kittens, was it not?” Ollivander recalled.

“Indeed,” Severus said with a lifted brow. “And she was trying to convince Buckbeak to be her familiar the week before that.”

Garrick’s eyebrow twitched. “Somehow I don’t think that would be very practical in a dorm setting,”
he said as he made a face.

“Fortunately she gave that up after a week, but who knows what she’ll try for next week,” Hermione chuckled.

“Spitting cobras,” Julius said dryly, mirroring his father’s deadpan expression.

“Julius!” Hermione chuckled. “That’s enough of that.”

“You know it could happen, mother,” Julius said, chin up.

“Unfortunately,” Hermione agreed and gave her son a hug. “What did you want to eat for dinner tonight, Julius?”

“Can we go for muggle pizza?” Julius’ eyes were wide with excitement.

Hermione and Severus exchanged looks. “Very well, if” Hermione began, “If you can get your sister out of Eeylops Owl Emporium within the next hour.”

Julius beamed brightly, encouraged to both have a goal and the prospect of being rewarded with muggle pizza. He hugged his parent’s legs and dashed out the store towards Eeylops in a blur of motion.

“You do know how to set them against each other, my witch,” Severus said with an arched brow.

“I learned from the best, husband,” Hermione said with an uplifted chin as Prince flew back and landed on her shoulder with a warble.

“Did you wish to join us, Garrick?” Severus asked, his eyes not leaving Hermione’s.

“Actually,” the wandmaker admitted, “I would love to. I haven’t had muggle pizza in a dog’s age.”

Hermione laughed and opened the door for the both of them, curtseying with an amused look upon her face. “Muggle pizza it is then!”

Severus and Garrick bowed out the door with a sweep of motion and Hermione brought up the rear, closing the store door behind them.

Chapter 87: Train In!

“Hermione!” Ginny yelled as she ran up towards her best friend and hugged her mercilessly.

Hermione teetered slightly as Ginny slammed into her, wrapping her arms around her friend in a mutual hug. “Hi, Ginny,” Hermione managed to squeak as Ginny squeezed all the air out of her lungs.

“Sir,” Harry greeted Severus.

“Potter,” Severus said neutrally. In public, they relapsed to their old engrained forms of address. It seemed to help with the awkwardness of realizing that Harry wasn’t his father’s avatar, and Severus wasn’t the Dark Wizard of Evil Incarnate, Murderer, and Heartless Bastard Git of the Dungeon each had believed the other to be.

“You made it!” Ginny squealed as she bounced on her heels. “I was wondering if you were going to let Rose ride the train with James!”
“Well it is a Hogwarts’ tradition, Ginny,” Hermione chuckled. “Even if we had to apparate here just so she could take a train back home.”

“Where is Julius?” Ginny asked, looking over Hermione’s shoulder.

“He’s with Ollivander,” Hermione replied. “Helping with the last minute wand purchases.”

“Ooooo right! Ollivander took a shine to him,” Ginevra grinned. “I bet there are some parents out there that are wondering how an eight year old knows so much about wands.”

“Not if they saw how many parchments we have scattered all over his desk at home, all covered in wand plans,” Hermione giggled. “I think Garrick is happy to have someone as passionate about what he does, to be honest. I never hear him talk about a son, daughter, or anything. I think Julius has wiggled his way into Garrick’s heart and taken up permanent residence.”

Ginevra nodded thoughtfully. “Well if anyone can do him proud, it’s a Snape,” she said with a grin. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

Severus lifted an eyebrow and stared in Ginny’s direction. Ginny automatically flinched and blushed.

“Feels kind of surreal doesn’t it?” Hermione commented. “Watching our own children board the train together?”

“It’s so exciting,” Ginny said excitedly. “And in two years we’ll do it again for Albus and Julius.”

“I’m still mad at you, you know,” Hermione said with a lift of her head.

“Hermione, what did I do now?” Ginny begged her friend.

“Not even telling me you were pregnant until after your wedding,” Hermione scowled at her friend with a combination of her teacher face and disapproving mother face. “Even Astoria owled me the moment she knew she was pregnant. I can’t even count on my best friend to tell me?” Hermione’s voice had gained that dangerous element of softness that reflected Severus Snape.

Ginny waved her hands in appeal. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! It’s just… Harry wanted to be married first before…”

“Before I found out from the Daily Prophet?” Hermione growled.

“Eeeee,” Ginny groveled. “Please don’t make me suffer the rest of my life for that!”

“Hrmph,” Hermione said, turning her head away from the redheaded woman.

“I was a blockhead, I’m sorry, Hermione,” Ginny placated. “I didn’t make the same mistake with Albus Severus!”

Severus’ head immediately turned to glare at Ginny. “You named your second son Albus Severus Potter?” he asked Harry with a dangerously soft voice. He had known his second son was named Albus, but hear his name attached to the old Headmaster’s was a bit shocking.

Harry blushed a little, but looked Severus in the eye. “I named him after two of the bravest men I know.”

Severus stared into Harry’s eyes that looked so much like Lily Potter’s. Harry fidgeted, but attempted to look Severus in the face and stand by his decision. Severus’ mouth curved up slightly from one side as he watched Harry Potter struggle with his deeply ingrained need not to look Severus in the
eyes. “You honor me,” he said so softly and quickly that had Harry not been waiting to be chewed out by his old Potions professor -- he would have thought it an audio hallucination. Severus turned his gaze back to watching the students board the train.

Hermione pulled out a bar of dark chocolate she had purchased from the muggle store she had visited earlier and handed it to Ginny. “You are forgiven, but I swear to Merlin if you ever withhold something like that from me again, I will hex you so fast Molly won’t even remember she has a daughter.”

Ginny snatched up the chocolate and caught up her friend in a merciless hug, enveloping Hermione with a squeal that caused Hermione to cast her eyes to Severus. Severus gave her a lifted eyebrow that roughly translated to, “She’s your friend, wife, what do you expect me to do about it?”

Then, after he watched Hermione start to lose oxygen, Severus snapped, “I would prefer if you did not allow my wife to die of asphyxiation, Mrs. Potter.”

Ginny released Hermione with a blush, immediately chastened into obedience by the familiar and strangely still terrifyingly quiet voice of Severus Snape.

Hermione shot Severus a look of gratitude, feeling the warmth of his regard through his look alone.

James Potter and Rose Snape were approaching with Scorpius Malfoy. James had a few boxes of chocolate frogs. One had escaped and landed on Rose. She squealed and tried to catch it, but it landed on Scorpius’ chest. Rose got a determined look on her face and tackled the frog on top of Scorpius, causing the blond haired boy to sputter in indignation. Rose caught it and handed it to Scorpius with a smile on her face. Scorpius took it, biting into it with a blush.

Rose took another frog from James and grinned at him. They pushed their books and supplies in front of them on their little trolleys.

“Potter,” Draco greeted as he walked up with his wife. Astoria hugged her son with a warm smile.

“Malfoy,” Harry greeted awkwardly. They were technically not enemies anymore, but much like Harry and Severus, public greetings were… still awkward.

“Severus,” Draco nodded to Severus.

“Draco,” Severus said, bowing his head.

Astoria smiled down at her son, encouraging him as he prepared to board the train. He waited quietly, not willing to leave without his friends.

Rose hugged her mother and flung her arms around Severus hips as if she would not see them for an entire year. It was a lie, of course, as she would definitely see her parents again before the day was out. She bounced over to Draco and Astoria and hugged them both together.

“Where does she get all of that outgoing energy?” Hermione asked Severus.

“It wasn’t from me,” Severus replied. “Of that I can guarantee.”

“Well I don’t think it was from me, either,” Hermione retorted.

“Mailman,” Severus replied wryly.

“Severus!” Hermione gasped, blushing a deep shade of Gryffindor.
Severus ran his fingers under her chin and forced her to look up at him. His face was expressionless, but his eyes sparkled with mirth.

Draco’s face softened as Rose pressed herself into his ribs and attempted to squeeze the life out of him. He palmed something and clipped a jeweled hair clip into her hair, pulling back her unruly locks with an often-practiced motion. Rose twirled around trying to look at it until Astoria held out a mirror. Rose beamed as she saw the delicately jeweled emerald snake woven around the silver hair clip. “We expect you to do us proud, young lady,” Draco said in a whisper of his voice from years ago.

“Yes, Uncle Draco,” Rose said with a grin as she grasped her supplies and trunk and scurried over to where Scorpius was waiting.

James stiffened as Ginny took him into a hug and kissed his cheek. “Ugh, mum, not in front of Scorpius.”

Scorpius was looking skyward with a smirking grin on his face as he nudged Rose in the ribs with his elbow. Rose giggled, looking down at her shoes.

As the group of parents watched their children settle onto the train, there was an almost tangible intake of breath as the train pulled away from the station. Parents waved to their waving children as the next generation of Hogwart’s took off from the station.

Hermione hugged Harry as looked like he was going to burst. “It’ll be okay, Harry,” she smiled at him. We survived Hogwart’s. Our children will be fine.”

“Easy for you to say,” Harry snapped. “You get to see your children every day.”

Hermione’s expression softened and she hugged him tighter. “Oh, Harry,” she soothed. She patted him on the back. Harry hugged her back and took in a deep breath. He smiled at Ginny who was giving him a tearful sympathetic look.

“This is our cue, Hermione,” Severus said softly. “We need to prepare our Houses for the incoming influx of squealing, yammering, and incessant chatter.”

Hermione put her hands on her hips. “Severus Snape, your daughter is amongst that incoming influx.” She glared at him.

“She’ll fit right in,” Severus said dryly, lifting his arm to attend.

Hermione stepped into his embrace, “Keep in touch, you guys.” Her face changed from irritated to utterly mischievous. Just as they both stepped backward and Severus’ arm enfolded her, Hermione placed her hand against the back of his neck, running her fingers across his bare skin. Severus stiffened with a hiss, his black eyes going unfocused. Hermione planted a kiss directly on his mouth as the crack of their disapparition signaled their departure.

Draco, Ginny, and Harry stared at the place where the two Potion Masters had disappeared with disbelief. Astoria seemed to be the only one that took the sight in stride.

“That… is never to be anything but disconcerting,” Harry said, pulling at his collar with his fingers.
“For once, I agree with you, Potter,” Draco said as he took his wife’s arm in his.

“I won’t tell Ron if you don’t,” Harry suggested.

“Done,” Draco agreed immediately.

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The silver tabby cat leapt into her favorite lap and purred happily as Julius pet her between the ears. Ever happy to play the cat to her adopted nephew, Minerva knew he would probably need a friend now that his sister was tucked away in the Slytherin dormitories after the monumental hat stall that had occurred over her.

The poor Sorting Hat was sitting the line between Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin for quite some time before it finally announced Slytherin. Minerva had to admit a bit of relief that the hat had at least chosen something instead of mumbling to itself for over a half hour. At least, now that there was a rising peace between the two opposing Houses, save when Quidditch was concerned, nothing would really stop her from keeping her friendship with James Potter, who had unerringly been assimilated into Gryffindor.

The poor girl still did not have her head wrapped around calling her parents “Professor Snape” instead of “mum” and “dad,” gaining a stem dressing down in front of her new friends and the first points of the year taken off Slytherin House. She could wiggle her way out of many things, but that was one thing neither Severus nor Hermione Snape would allow. She still called Filch “Mr. Argus,” which would probably cause a bone of contention between them if she let it slip in public.

Julius patted Minerva on the head, hugging her close. “She’s so annoying, but I miss her, Auntie,” the boy admitted into her fur. “It’s not like she’s run off to France or something, but now she’s got all these new friends.”

Minerva head butted Julius’ hands and he snuggled into her fur in an emotional display he allowed himself while around his Aunt.

“I finished a wand today,” Julius boasted proudly. “Master Ollivander says I have the eye and the hand, whatever that means.”

Minerva meowed her approval.

“Mum was proud of me,” Julius said with a nod of pride. “Dad too, but you know how he is. He says he’s proud of you by saying your work is acceptable and then not telling you that you are a sad excuse for a human being to your face.” Julius giggled.

Minerva gently bit him on the hand.

“Ow! I’m sorry Auntie,” Julius soothed the animagus on the head. “You know I love my father. And you know I know he loves me too.”

Minerva meowed and head bumped his hand again.

“Thanks for listening, Auntie,” Julius said as he put his feet down from the window and hopped down, setting the silver tabby back down on the floor with all four feet. “You’re the best.”

Minerva meowed and waved her tail in the air, padding off down the hall as Julius walked back down towards the dungeons.
Severus Snape yawned fitfully after tucking in his first years into the Slytherin dormitories yet again. This year, despite all the previous years before it, created the clingiest first year Slytherins he had ever experienced. Part of him wished that Mr. Mitchell were still under the roof of Hogwart’s to do what he did best: keep young Slytherins out of his hair. It seemed like only yesterday that the young Slytherin boy was roaming the halls of Hogwart’s, gifting Hermione constructed poppy flowers and potion pins.

As he walked into their residence chamber, Prince warbled from by the fireplace, and he saw the silhouette of a harpy eagle sitting on a nesting box near the fireplace. It was an overly large nesting box, lined both with straw and softer materials. He approached Hermione with a tired smile, extending his hand out to stroke her head and her back. Her honey-amber eyes opened and regarded him sleepily.

Gently he moved his hand under her breast feathers and pulled out the speckled phoenix egg from beneath her. It was starting to shimmer with a fiery iridescence. He tucked it under her once more. “Almost ready to hatch, my witch,” he whispered softly. “Soon your vigil will be replaced with the stuffing of yet another bottomless stomach.”

Hermione yawned beakily and curled her head around his hand.

Severus’ eyes softened. “Move over, my witch,” he whispered.

Hermione shifted over the egg a little, making a little room beside her.

Severus settled in beside her as a male harpy eagle, preening her crest feathers with his beak and yawning fitfully.

Their eyes drifted closed together, taking in each other’s company as sleep claimed them both.

Chapter 88: Secondary Lint Ball

Hermione opened one sleepy eye as the sensation of being kicked woke her up. Groggily she yawned, stretching out her arm out and saw a large black wing flip out instead.

Right. Harpy eagle.

She shifted her weight as she realized there was a squirming sensation underneath her. She moved her head down and tilted it so her eye could focus on what was going on in the nest.

Two dark obsidian eyes stared back at her from a half-damp downy body.

Hermione flipped out one of her wings and whapped her mate upside the head, waking the other Harpy eagle from his sleep. Severus’ black eyes blinked sleepily and he groggily peered down in the nest and nudged the newly arrived lint ball with his beak.

Severus carefully curved his talons inward and adjusted himself on the nest as to not impale the young chick with his talons.

Hermione made a soft call, flapping her wings out and folding them against herself, carefully extending her talons to perch herself on the side of the nesting box.

Prince flew over to the nesting box and perched on the edge, peering down at the new arrival. He
warbled, trilled, and then nudged the chick with his beak.

The chick made a peep and opened her all too large black beak, exposing a bright orange inner mouth. Her baby wings vibrated against her body in protest that her belly was empty.

Hermione, Severus, and Prince plucked a berry from the nearby bowl with their beak and dangled it front of the hungry mouth, stuffing their food offerings into the chick’s gaping beak. The young chick couldn’t seem to decide which berry to take first, but decided taking all of them was a novel idea, gulping each berry down with enthusiasm. The baby phoenix seemed to think that wasn’t enough, and gaped again, vibrating her wings again in the universal bird language of “feed me, I’m starving!”

Again, Hermione, Severus, and Prince each stuffed a berry into the hungry chick’s beak and watched the chick wobble as she crammed the last bit into her tiny and now full stomach. The chick peeped, eyes drifting closed drowsily.

Hermione yawned and curved her talons in, talon walking over the chick and flopping down on top of her. Severus yawned blearily and settled in beside her, preening her head crest. She gentle preened his throat feathers as her eyes drifted closed again, his closing shortly after.

Prince nestled into the box with them with a baby-like peep, closing his eyes.

A few hours later, Hermione woke to her son staring intently at her.

“Mum, may I see her?” Julius looked at her excitedly.

The female harpy eagle groggily yawned.

“Mummm,” Julius extended the m’s in his excitement. “Please?”

Hermione pushed herself off her feet and moved to the edge of the nesting box, exposing the lint ball chick.

“She’s beautiful!” Julius whispered. “May I pick her up?”

Hermione blinked blearily and made a soft chirp.

Carefully, Julius cupped the drowsy chick in his hands and cradled her. “Hello, beautiful,” Julius greeted the chick.

The chick woke as blearily as his adopted parents and peeped curiously. The chick’s dark eyes met Julius’ dark eyes in a moment of connection. The chick opened her beak and flapped her wings hungrily, deciding that hunger was more important than curiosity.

Julius reached for the bowl next to the nesting box and pulled out a peach slice, dangling it out for the hungry chick. The chick gobbled it down in a blink and peeped happily, settling into Julius’ warm hands with a contented baby trill.

Prince peered over Julius’ hands and preened the fluffy chick with his beak gently before stealing a plum from the bowl and busied himself with tearing the sweet flesh off the stone. The chick stirred, peering at Prince’s activity with curiosity.

Prince tore off a piece of the plum and dangled it in front of the chick. The tiny chick, not quite convinced she was entirely full, accepted the gift gratefully with a peep and settled back into Julius’ cupped hands.
“Mum,” Julius addressed his mother. “May we call her Pyre?”

The female harpy eagle launched herself off the nesting box and flew over Julius’ head, reforming into the tired form of Hermione Snape. “That’s a wonderful name, Julius,” she said with a smile.

Severus had launched himself off the nesting box and landed next to Hermione as his grumpier looking human self. He enveloped Hermione like a feeding amoeba, kissing his wife good morning.

“What do you think, father?” Julius asked.

“Hrmph?” Severus managed to articulate.

“What do you think of the name Pyre?” his son repeated the question.

“I recommend you being at least eighteen before deciding to change your name,” Severus replied dryly.

“No, Father!” Julius protested. “Not my name!”

“You are not allowed to change your mother’s name either,” Severus replied. Julius slumped as his father stonewalled him. “Father,” he complained. “I mean for the phoenix.”

“Prince already has a name,” Severus said with a quirk of his mouth.

Julius looked frustrated as he tried to steer the conversation where he wanted it. “The phoenix chick, father! I want to name her Pyre!”

“Well, why didn’t you say so, Julius?” Severus asked, expressionless.

“But I,” Julius slumped his shoulders and head. “You did that on purpose.”

“Hmm,” Severus said neutrally.

Julius blew the hair out from his face and stared at his father’s face.

“It’s a fine name, Julius,” Severus answered with a quirk of his lips.

Julius beamed in triumph. “Your name is Pyre,” Julius told the little chick.

Pyre yawned beakily back up at him.

Julius smiled and scratched her under the chin and behind her neck.

“Time for you to head to breakfast, young man,” Hermione said softly. “You have to be at Master Ollivander’s this morning, yes?”

“Yes, Mother,” Julius nodded, cupping the chick carefully and standing up. He handed the chick to his mother with reverence, a wistful look on his face.

“She’ll be here for you when you get back, Julius,” Hermione assured him. “Off you go.”

Julius hugged his mother and father by the waist and dashed out the portal.

Hermione placed Pyre on her shoulder to nestle in her hair. Prince warbled and landed on Severus’ shoulder, singing a soft chain of notes. Pyre answered with baby peeps, attempted a trill, and managed a baby warble.
“I feel like I’ve done this before, Severus,” Hermione yawned, rubbing her eyes.

Severus placed his forehead against hers. “You are not allowed to succumb to poison and Draught of Living Death like the last time we were in this particular situation.”

“There goes my entertainment,” Hermione said with a grin.

Severus placed a soft kiss upon her lips, his dark eyes meeting hers. She looked into his eyes, losing herself in his gaze.

“Do you think,” Hermione asked as her mind was lost in thought, “That we would be here now if it weren’t for that entire situation with Acacia?”

“I think so,” Severus answered immediately.

Hermione tilted her head in curiosity.

“It would have happened slower, perhaps,” Severus explained his thoughts. “I would have had more denial or more self-doubt, but this bond we share was formed long before Acacia. We would have eventually found each other. Having you almost die did… hustle the process, undoubtedly.”

“You sound so sure, Severus,” Hermione said with a warm smile.

Severus’s mouth turned up slightly. “It is the one thing I have utter faith in, my witch, is you. You chiseled away at every defense I had with sheer Gryffindor determination, never allowing me to push you away. You did it like a true Slytherin. I did not even realize you had until I realized one day that I couldn’t imagine a life without you.”

Hermione caressed his cheek, causing his eyes to lose focus. “I love you, Severus Snape. I will forever be thankful you survived… everything that horrible war did to us.”

Severus looked into her eyes with all the emotion he could not show upon his face. He placed his hands against her temples and placed his forehead to hers. “Through you I have found happiness, Hermione. Something I never believed myself capable or worthy of. We have unleashed two of our children upon the corridors of Hogwarts. Miracles keep happening, and I blame you for all of them.”

Hermione chuckled. “You blame me for miracles?”

“Ardently,” Severus said wryly, placing a kiss upon her forehead. “I know I do not say it enough. Not like a normal person… I love you. With every breath.”

Hermione’s smile was a bright as the noonday sun as she pressed her fingers on the back of his exposed neck, causing him to practically buckle. She kissed him passionately and pulled back slowly. “I know you do, Severus. Every time I look into your eyes. Every touch. Every brush of your mind.” She caressed his cheek. “But, I thank you for indulging me my weak human failing for wishing to hear it out loud.”

Severus’s lips quirked upward slightly. “You are welcome.” He bowed his head, extending his arm out towards the door.

Hermione smiled warmly and lead the way out towards the Great Hall.
The people at the High Table could not help but raise eyebrows as Hermione stormed into the Great Hall like a magical tempest. Her hair was flowing around her head like fire as her black robes billowed behind her like an angry cloud. Prince flapped his wings from one shoulder, flames flickering off his body in a reflection of his Mistress’ wrathful fury. The little phoenix chick nestled in her hair had her own, albeit smaller, wreath of flames wicking off her small downy body. Students scrambled out of her way, casting their heads down in an automatic and visceral reaction to her demeanor. She gave them no notice, looking forward as her lips pressed in a half snarl. Young and old Gryffindors cast their eyes down, despite her not storming down their particular aisle. The Hufflepuffs looked ready to stampede out of the Great Hall with all due haste, and the Ravenclaws avoided eye contact.

Hermione sat down beside Hagrid with a release of breath that surprised most of the High Table that it didn’t expel forth flames of a dragon’s breath.

“Bad class, dear?” Minerva questioned unfazed, handing Hermione a chocolate pastery.

Hermione slowly clutched the pastry in her hands with overly controlled movements. She took a large bite of it, chewing it as though she were punishing the pastry for having the audacity to be a pastry. By the time she had finished absorbing the chocolate from the tortured pastry, the hardened glare on her face relaxed slightly. The two phoenixes on her shoulders had stopped burning, and Prince hopped over to his perch, digging into the bowl of fruit nearby with great enthusiasm.

“My house,” Hermione said through gritted teeth, “Is full of blithering dunderheads, Minerva.”

Eyebrows lifted down the table as curious professors stared at Hermione, unaccustomed to her blatant insult to her own House’s children. Minerva passed Hermione another chocolate pastery, realizing she probably needed more chocolate.

Hermione bit into the offered pastry slightly less punishing as the first time and then sighed. “Mr. Jeffries blew up his cauldron, and it startled Mr. Collins, who accidently threw too many explosive eyelashes into his cauldron, which of course… exploded, but when it exploded it knocked over the cauldron of Miss Silkenhide and Mr. Cravens, who are now in the hospital wing with severe burns and a ghastly case of purple pox. And in the fuss of attempting to scramble to avoid the spilled… everything… Miss Vasper and Miss Teapoy slipped on the spilled exploded goo and sprained an ankle as they knocked over Mr. Nichols, whose wand went flying across the room and landed into Miss Nettles and Miss Waterworth’s cauldron and it exploded. Mr. Nichols probably needs a new wand, again, and Miss Nettles and Waterworth will need physical therapy for week to uncramp their legs that are locked in a sitting position. All of them… were Gryffindor except for Mr. Nichols, who seems to be the Hufflepuff victim of the semester. Of course, they couldn’t just leave it there, they all started a brawl on my laboratory floor, blaming each other for everything and practically had wands pointed at each other, which may or may not have been because of some random side effect from over four cauldrons exploding in the course of thirty seconds.”

Minerva as well as the rest of the head table gaped at her story. Hooch, Minerva, Septima, Aurora, and Flitwick passed down more chocolate pastries to land in front of Hermione in sympathy.

Hermione broke off pieces of pastry and fed Prince and the chick on her shoulder. “I sent an owl to Mr. Nichol’s parents, again, saying that he will probably require a new wand due to the incident. I don’t even want to know what the wand will do coated in whatever that mess was.”

“That’s… like three wands that boy had had to replace in the last month, isn’t it?” Flitwick asked, munching on his sandwich. “I know he fell on his wand falling off a broom in Rolanda’s class and lost his replacement in some incident involving pudding…”
“Don’t forget the crow flying off with the other one, Filius,” Sinistra said.

“Or the one he sat on in your class, Filius,” Brody added, waving his fork.

Hagrid’s eyes widened. “He’s not even out of his first year, yet,” the half-giant said with a gulp, casually feeding Prince a strawberry.

“I’m sure his parents are ecstatic about having to buy so many wands,” Pomona said with a shake of her head. “They aren’t exactly cheap.”

“Not to mention the boy probably hasn’t had a feel for a well bonded wand once in his life at this point,” Flitwick observed.

“It is possible he’s been using second-hand wands or trying to go the cheaper route with wands made by that horrible Shlapki’s Wand Emporium that does its business via owl post.” Septima said with a curl of her lip, disgust written plainly upon her face.

“Never even heard of that place, Septima, whatever are you talking about?” Minerva quipped a response.

“It’s some bloke trying to churn out mass-produced wands,” Aurora added to the conversation. “No one would ever buy them if he had a store near Ollivander’s.”

“Does Mr. Nichols come from a muggle family, by chance?” Hermione asked with a frown.


“It’s a very… muggle thing to accept mass made cheaper products over more expensive hand-crafted ones. It’s more accepted,” Hermione said with a sad smile.

Looks of disbelief and horror washed down the High Table.

Preston Reese shook his head emphatically, “It’s true, I’ll admit. I hate to think if that mentality starts to encroach on the Wizarding world.” The muggle studies professor looked just as appalled at the thought as the rest of them.

It was at this point in the conversation that Severus Snape stormed down the aisles of the Great Hall with a scowl on his face, fury in his step, and his robes flowing behind him like the multiple necks of an angry hydra. Students scattered out of his way much like they had for Hermione, giving the Great Hall the feeling of déjà vu.

Severus fell into his chair with a heavy sigh as Hermione handed him a chocolate pastry, which he tore into without a word said. The phoenix chick on Hermione’s shoulder flapped her wings in appeal to him, and he automatically stuffed the hungry beak with a slice of peach, never losing the scowl on his face.

“Will they survive?” Hermione asked as she downed a glass of juice with a long swig.

“Unfortunately,” Severus grunted, taking a bite out of a peach. Both pairs of phoenix eyes appealed to him shamelessly. He slumped his shoulders, sharing his peach with the two hungry birds.

An owl flew over the Great Hall and landed next to Prince, hooting sociably. Prince bobbed his head and chirped. Pyre cheeped curiously from within Hermione’s hair and she transferred the chick to the table in front of Prince and his socialite. The owl turned his head and hooted. Pyre cheeped. Prince warbled, and it repeated itself. Another owl landed and the process repeated itself. The owls hooted
softly, fluffing feathers. Pyre attempted to imitate, but her down only managed to make her look more adorable instead of dignified. Prince warbled, preening the chick with his beak. One of the owls hopped down on the table and attempted to preen the chick curiously. The chick teetered, eyes closing slightly, after which the owl decided nothing was necessary, and sat on the young chick, brooding over her. The chick peeped and closed her eyes.

“Well at least you have volunteer baby sitters,” Hooch said with a smile.

Hermione and Severus looked down at the owl brooding over the phoenix chick. “Poor girl isn’t going to know what species she really is,” Severus said wryly.

“She’s not complaining though,” Hermione grinned at the drowsy chick being mothered by a random owl.

“Hatched out by a harpy eagle, fed by a mismatch of wizard, witch, and phoenix, and brooded over by owls,” Severus raised a brow. “Not confusing at all.”

Hermione grinned, handing the owl a treat and scratching the chick under the chin.

“Since when has your family life been anything but complicated, Severus,” Rolanda wiggled her eyebrows at the dark wizard.

Severus cleared his throat. “I beg your pardon, Madam. I’ll have you know my family life is perfectly acceptable.”

Pomona reached over and handed Prince a gooseberry. “Acceptable, but hardly uncomplicated.”

Severus scowled at the Herbology professor, undoubtably preparing to spew out a chain of words that would leave the woman blushing under the cover of her floral hat and students staring wide-eyed towards the High Table.

Hermione’s hand surreptitiously touched his under the table, her fingers brushing against his wrist with a gentle touch.

Severus hissed, eyes going unfocused. He turned away from Pomona and went back to eating his lunch.

Hermione picked up a piece of pastry, ripped a piece off it, and very slowly and deliberately placed it front of Severus’ mouth, her eyes half-hooded with a smug smile on her face.

Severus locked eyes with her, and very slowly enveloped the peace offering in his mouth without losing contact with her eyes. He chewed slowly as his dark eyes seemed to gain an even darker appearance.

Hermione grinned and a large smile spread across her face, triumphant and unrepentant.

Rolanda in over the table and poked Hermione. “Flight instruction for the first years after lunch, if the two of you would like to surreptitiously happen to fly over to watch.”

Hermione grinned back at Rolanda with a knowing twinkle in her eyes. “We wouldn’t miss it, Rolanda,” Hermione purred softly at the flying instructor.

Hooch’s smile was unabashed. “Excellent.”
“How is the carving going, young Julius?” Ollivander asked as he peered over the boy’s shoulder.

Julius put down his pen knife and held up the wand he was working on.

Ollivander took the branch in his hands and held it critically, running his hand over the shape of it and the feel of its balance. He placed it up to eye level and stared down the length and width silently. He handed back to Julius with a nod. “Be careful down towards the end. The knot will be hard to remove without risking the integrity of the tip. The base is well balanced with room for embellishment.”

“Yes, Master,” Julius nodded. “An owl came with a letter, a few minutes ago. The letter is at your workbench.”

Garrick smiled. “Thank you, Julius.” The boy was young, but he was undoubtedly gifted. His mind absorbed everything Garrick had to offer him without question, and he knew that sort of faith came with either innocence or a rare trust. Both of those things were precious enough in his mind to nurture while the boy was young, unjaded, and not torn asunder by teenage hormones. “Have you given any thought as to the core for your own wand, young Julius? Has anything called out to you?” Garrick searched his workbench for the letter that was left for him and picked it up.

Julius bit his lip and stared at Garrick. “Possibly.”

Ollivander stared his young apprentice in the eyes. “Possibly?”

Julius pulled out a small wrapped bundle from his apprentice robe and passed it to his Master.

Even more curious, Garrick untied the bundle and slowly unrolled the cloth bundle. Three pristine fluff feathers lay in the bundle. One was the pitch black, the other was a rich brown, and the other was a fiery red and orange color. Garrick’s eyes widened. He knew exactly where the flame colored feather had come from, but the other two… Heavy magic was seeped into each of the feathers he could feel without touching them. The black feather was the definition of control while the rich brown feather was fierce and unrepentant. All of them seemed bound together in a manner that was undeniable. “Where did you get these plumes, young Julius?”

Julius blushed. “I took them from the nesting box my parents were brooding Pyre on.”

Garrick Ollivander took a moment to retrieve his jaw from the ground. “You do not dream small, young Julius.” He rolled the feathers up and handed them back to Julius. “Tell me when you are ready to craft the core, and I will help you set them in alignment.”

Julius beamed, “Yes, Master Ollivander.” He dutifully went back to carving the wand shaft he was working on with his pen knife.

A phoenix feather core was an unspoken testament to great things in the young wizard’s future. Intertwining it with the two sheds off two notorious animagus of Hogwarts’s that were irrevocably bound to the phoenix whose shed made up the third feather was something that would make his wand undeniably his own. There was a good chance that the wand would bow to no one who was not of the Snape bloodline. Garrick smiled. His father once questioned his desire to harness the pieces of magical creatures to make cores for wands, and he would not make the same mistake with Julius.

-MADAM HOOCHE-
were those who undoubtedly had previous lives as something with feet firmly planted on the ground.

Rose Snape, however, was hovering over the other students, quite literally, with a bored expression on her face. She had her legs crossed on the broom as she balanced on the broom’s handle.

Hooch whapped Rose’s legs to get her to put them down into the traditional broom flying position. She shook her head at the girl to remind her that she may be able to fly with barely a leg on the broom, but her peers had not been flying since they were four.

After about a half hour, all of the students had managed to get their brooms in their hand and themselves hovering for a few seconds at a time in the air and successfully touched back down. There were thankfully no run away brooms or students needing to be scraped off the top of Hogwart’s castle.

Breaking the students off into varying levels of accomplishment, she had some students flying to a point and back close to the ground, some navigating banners, and some chasing slower handicapped snitches.

“Eventually, the lot of you should be able to chase one of these and catch them,” Hooch told the group of wide-eyed youngsters. They are not like the ones you see in the Quidditch patch, so you can wipe the horror off your face, young Mr. Roberts.”

The boy looked at her disbelievingly.

However, perhaps a demonstration is in order. Hooch grinned eerily and flung the handicapped snitch in the air.

“Miss Snape, If you would please,” Hooch said with a smirk.

Rose kicked off the ground with a whoop and her hand clutched the vibrating snitch before turning back to the ground with a grin on her face. This was what she had been waiting for all of class.

“Now, that is a slower version of our beloved snitch you see our House seekers chasing during Quidditch. It is also quite easy to see. This is not the case for a real snitch. While not all of you may have lofty aspirations to be seekers, chasing the snitch is probably one of the most successful ways to test your broom skills.” Hooch saw shadows pass over her and the courtyard and pulled out a small box, grinning. “Perhaps you would like to demonstrate for us, Miss Snape?”

Rose beamed and nodded.

Hooch blew her whistle. “Clear the green, children. Gather over here.”

The class gathered over to the side with Madam Hooch with curiosity.

Hooch opened the box and the snitch stirred, zooming out of the box with a blur of golden light.

Rose took off after it with a whoop, no longer carelessly draped on her broom. She tucked her legs in the proper position to keep her streamlined, tearing off after the glinting snitch like a cheetah after a gazelle.

The class oooohed and gasped as she chased the zooming snitch, coming within inches of the walls of Hogwart’s and banking around one of Hogwart’s parapets with an abrupt U-turn. Rose was having problems spotting the snitch in the cast of the sun, and missed it a few times in rapid succession.
Rose’s concentration was so focused on the glint of gold, she didn’t even notice the shadows crossing her path.

Golden talons curved around the fleeing snitch, dark claws closing around the snitch like a prison. The dark-eyed harpy eagle called out in a scolding call, making an abrupt tail bank into a thermal, carrying himself upward and away with the snitch.

Rose came to a halt in mid-air and her face went red. “FATHER!” she yelled. She zoomed after the harpy eagle with fury at having her snitch stolen right from under her.

Hooch tilted her head back to watch the male harpy eagle bank sharply, leaving his frustrated daughter in his tailwind. The eagle made a low call that sounded like laughing and a taunt. Hooch’s face squinted in a smile, knowing her class would be using this show as a lesson and inspiration.

Just as Rose seemed to catch up with her father, he flung his legs outward as he banked, opening his talons, releasing the snitch in the opposite direction. Rose, still caught up with chasing her father, and took a moment to realize the snitch had gone the opposite direction. Just as Rose turned herself around to go the other direction, another harpy eagle snatched the fleeing snitch in her talons and caught a thermal upward, sharply vaulting upwards into the sky, her form hidden by the rays of the sun. The eagle let out a string of calls, sounding very much like jubilant laughter.

Rose shot off after her mother, pinning herself closer to her broom, replacing her boredom with sheer determination. She chased the harpy eagles as they teased her by passing the snitch back and forth in front of her. Finally, as though they had grown tired, the eagles locked their talons together and fell towards the ground from high above. They circled, wings spread, in a strangely slow and dangerous freefall. They released the snitch and banked sharply upwards into the clouds, leaving the courtyard with their combined calls.

Rose snatched the tumbling snitch as her mischievous parents flew off over Black Lake, skidding to a halt in front of Madam Hooch and her classmates with an exhausted oof. She handed the eagle abused snitch to her flying instructor with a tired, lopsided grin.

Madam Hooch took the snitch and stowed it away in the box. “And now, children, back to your groups! Show me what you can do!”

The excited children broke off and flung themselves into their flying with newfound enthusiasm.

-Hermione and Severus landed on the parapets of Hogwart’s and looked down over the courtyard where their daughter was taking class with Madam Hooch. Hermione made a chuckle like cry, tossing her head up and down. Severus answered her with his own call.

Prince warbled a greeting from the sheltered cranny he had wedged himself into. Pyre stuck her head out from under Prince’s body feathers curiously, apparently having slept through the excitement. Hermione and Severus ruffled their feathers at the same time and regained their human appearance.

Hermione cupped the chick in her hands and stratched her affectionately with her fingers. “Have a nice nap, my lovely Pyre? She grinned as the chick yawned beakily in answer. She placed the chick on the junction of her husband’s shoulder and neck and brushed his hair over her.

Prince fluttered up and landed on her shoulder, chirruping sweetly.

“Pomona is right you know,” Hermione chuckled as she smiled at Severus.
Severus leveled a “not on your life” gaze to his wife.

“We do have a bit of a non-conventional family life,” Hermione gave him a smile in return for his scowl.

“Hrmph,” Severus snorted. “Our family life is perfectly natural.”

“For us, perhaps,” Hermione answered him with a smirk.

Severus pulled her to him, wrapping his robe around her and tucking her against his chest so his chin rested on her head. “It is perfection, my witch. Even if we are the only ones who can recognize it.”

As if to agree with Severus, Prince and Pyre warbled together in reply.

Hermione pulled away and placed a soft kiss on her husband’s lips. “I wouldn’t change a thing. It’s Hogsmeade weekend, Severus,” she added the last part smoothly.

Severus arched a brow, “And this concerns me how?”

“We have a daughter wanting her permission slip signed,” Hermione grinned.

“She cannot have everything,” Severus replied flatly, turning his head up to look skyward.

“You’re still angry with her for blowing up her cauldron in class?” Hermione chuckled.

“She knows better than to waste potion ingredients staring off into space during our class,” Severus scowled.

Hermione grinned. “She wasn’t staring off into space. She was trying to get James’ attention.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. “All the more reason to keep her head on straight,” he growled.

Hermione laughed. “My love, she’s eleven. I doubt she’s making google eyes or anything at any boy at this point.”

“She better as bloody hell not,” Severus snapped.

Hermione placed her hands on Severus’ cheeks and stroked his chin with her thumbs. Severus’ eyes went unfocused slightly. Hermione gave him the private look she reserved for him alone.

“Fine,” Severus grumped. “I’ll sign the damn slip.” He turned his head away from her as if to snub her.

Unfazed, Hermione slipped her hand under his collar and stroked the skin of his neck as she turned his chin to her with the other hand. She drew his head down to her level and reminded her husband that love wasn’t necessarily a horrible thing.

As they parted a little breathlessly, Severus had a faraway look on his face. “Your Slytherin side is showing again, wife.”

Hermione beamed at him, linking her arm with his as she guided him back into the castle. “You know…” she said softly. “My parents are taking the Julius to see museums this weekend. We’ll be depressingly alone again.” She gave him a sidelong mischievous look.

Severus slid his eyes to the side to stare at Hermione as they continued to walk together. Two children and phoenixes later, she was still a saucy little minx. He turned his eyes forward. He would
not change a thing, either. He might have to lock his daughter up in a high tower with a chastity belt though. Might have to ask Charlie Weasley for a good dragon to guard it… and train the phoenixes to set potential suitors on fire. Yes, that would make for good entertainment.

“Severus,” Hermione nudged him with her elbow. “Your barbaric thoughts are quite loud.”

“Hrmph,” Severus said dismissively, continuing to walk forward.

“Besides, you should at least put in a decent moat first,” Hermione added.

Severus’s lips turned upward. He loved his wife.

“I love you too, Severus,” Hermione replied to his silent thought.

Chapter 90: Fluffy Alarm Clocks

Peep. Peep peep peep peep peep peep peep peep peep. Peep!

Hermione’s hand came out of the warm comforter and felt around on the bed stand, found the plum she was seeking. She grabbed it, pulled it closer, and bit into it, tearing off chunks and stuffing it into the gaping orange lined beak of hunger. She kept tearing flesh off the plum until Pyre decided her stomach was full. Hermione grunted and retreated under the comforter, seeking the warm and comfortable place that always seemed to occur when you had to get up but rarely when you had time to enjoy it.

A pale arm snaked around her body and pulled her deeper into the warmth of the comforter and she murmured happily as Severus’ scent filled her nostrils. His teeth nibbled gently on her throat and she let herself go limp, rolling into him. Sleepy comfortable silence swirled around her and she felt her eyes drifting closed.

-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-

The bed was a sea leviathan.

Sure, it looked like a bed… maybe it even acted like a bed to the casual glance… but it was actually a great sea beast that curled its limbs around all that attempted to sleep there and drag them under with no chance of escape.

The sea beast growled, arms snaking out from under the comforter, dragging her back within its grasp and devastatingly closer to its hungry mouth.

“Mmmmfph!” Hermione grunted, arms flailing, as the beast latched onto her neck and began to feed. “Gah!” She struggled

Severus pulled her again himself and deep under the covers, making her disappear from sight.

“Se…ver…us,” Hermione mumbled half-coherently.

“Hrmn?” his deep voice rumbled into her ear.

“I’m under attack,” she complained, “By a sea leviathan masquerading as our bed.”

Arms encircled her waist and shoulder blades as his cheek rubbed against hers. “Shall I save you, my witch?” he purred into her ear.
“Please do,” Hermione said against his neck.

“As my Lady commands,” Severus crooned as he proceeded to save his wife from her foe.

Hermione giggled and saved her husband right back.

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“So,” the young woman giving tours of the zoo exhibit chimed, “What is your favorite bird here at the zoo?”

“Lammergeier,” Rose replied excitedly.

Harry and Ginevra shook their head, having had to pry their niece from the Bearded Vulture Exhibit multiple times already.

“Philippine eagle,” James said decisively.

Molly and Mr. and Mrs. Granger chuckled, having had to pry James from the Rare Raptor Exhibit while Harry and Ginny had done the same for Rose.

“Emperor penguin,” Albus contributed. The adults and his peers nodded in agreement.

Eyes were now on Julius. The black-haired boy answered without inflection, “Harpy eagle.”

Rose slumped her shoulders and huffed. “You can’t choose a harpy eagle, Julius. You see them every day.”

“Parents work at a bird sanctuary?” the tour guide asked.

“Something like that,” Harry nodded to the guide, happy that the woman seemed to accept that answer without more curious inquiry.

“Ok, so what is your favorite bird here at the zoo that you don’t see regularly,” the guide asked Julius without losing stride.

Julius made a face, concentrating. “The quetzal,” he decided, recalling the Neotropical iridescent emerald and ruby plumage.

The tour guide smiled. “They are striking birds,” she agreed.

The sound of a lion roaring caught the children’s attention. Hopeful eyes silently begged their chaperons.

The tour guide smiled at the change. “Next up is wild cats from around the world!”

The children cheered as the guide let them out towards the next exhibit area, chattering excitedly amongst each other.

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Severus stood over the bubbling pots, staring down at the contents with an evaluating expression. Each was simmering perfectly.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him from behind and sniffed the air. “Mmm… that smells wonderful.”
“Of course it smells wonderful,” Severus answered her dismissively.

She bounced onto her toes and peered over his shoulder, but he nudged her out of the way.

“Fffft,” he admonished. “It is not done.”

Hermione slumped. “Severus, I don’t care if it’s done, I just want to see what you have.”

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “Find something else to occupy your insatiable curiosity.”

Hermione shook her head and hugged his back. “Fine, I’ll go, you evil man.”

“Don’t forget greasy part,” he said flatly.

Hermione rolled her eyes, giving his back a swat. “You are not greasy, either. We both know you shower.”

“The majority of Hogwarts would still disagree with you, I fear,” Severus said, stirring the pot in front of him.

“Maybe you should let them touch your hair,” Hermione said casually. “They’d stop calling it greasy.”

Severus stiffed as he stirred the second pot he was stirring. “I think not, Madam,” he half hissed. “I do not wish for any hands attempting to touch, prod, poke, pat, or yank upon my hair.”

Hermione frowned. “I like touching your hair.”

Severus leveled her a look as he stirred his pot. “You are the exception, witch.”

Hermione gave him a warm grin. “I’m glad of it.”

Severus cast his eyes upward as if seeking divine advice. “How did we end up here, anyway?”

Hermione grinned even more broadly. “I believe Minerva said ‘You will work with Severus until we get you situated in the fall semester after you graduate. Severus, stop scowling at me. It’s rude, and stop scowling at her, too,’” Hermione quoted humorously, echoing the conversation she had once with Ron over her apprenticeship.

“And why didn’t you just leave me when we took to each other like loggerheads?” Severus asked, his eyebrow arching as he threw a pinch of something into the mix.

“Gryffindor tenacity and partial immunity due to seven years of being treated like an insufferable know-it-all,” Hermione chuckled.

“You are still the know-it-all, wife,” Severus said as he tasted the spoon.

“Insufferable too, I suppose,” Hermione said with a frown.

“Contrary to what you might think,” Severus replied, throwing something else into the pot and stirring, “You are quite sufferable.”

Hermione tilted her head and gave him a lopsided grin.

Severus tasted the spoon, arched a brow, and extended the spoon to her.
Hermione bounced over and gave the spoon a taste. She smiled. “Perfect!”

He gave her a look that translated into something in between “Of course it is” and “Obviously.”

She bounced onto her toes and gave him a swift kiss on the lips. “You are a wonderful cook, my husband.”

Severus smirked. “I am gratified that you approve.”

“Oh I do,” Hermione replied, eyes sparkling. “Shall we send our Prince to fetch Minerva? Or should I be lazy and use the floo?”

“Which is more likely to annoy her the most?” Severus asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Pyre peeped admonishment towards Severus.

“Fine, fine,” Severus waved his hand. “Females win this round. Use the floo, if you must.”

Prince warbled from his perch near the fireplace.

“Traitor,” Severus accused the bird, dumping the pot of pasta into a colander.

Hermione stepped in closer to him and met his eyes, smiling up at him. Pyre cheeped adoringly.

Severus narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “To what… do I owe this… chain of stares?”

Hermione gently touched his hair with her fingers and looked him straight into the eyes. “Do I have to have a reason to enjoy your company?”

Severus’ eyes closed slightly as she touched his hair. He brushed a tangle of her hair from her face with his hand. “I suppose I will indulge you,” he rumbled softly.

Smiling warmly, she took the place settings off the counter and walked off towards the dining table.

Minerva stepped through the floo a few minutes later with a basket full of bread and a bottle of wine. “Goodness, it smells wonderful in here,” she commented as she set the basket and bottle down on the table. Prince flew over to the nearby perch and buttered up his favorite Headmistress for a treat. McGonagall laughed, handing the phoenix a plum.

Hermione smiled at her, gesturing for the Headmistress to take a seat. “Any luck with the botched order?” she asked.

McGonagall sat down on the dining room chair with a sigh. “You would think that after countless years of ordering hawk owl feathers, they would know we wanted hawk owl feathers… not hawk and owl feathers,” she mused, rubbing her temples. “Merlin knows we have enough owl feathers scattered around Hogwart’s without needing to order them.”

“Did Mr. Raffordy get a job with the supplier?” Severus asked as he carried in some serving trays. The memory of the squirrel-like man’s bungles with rodents, eggs, and pretty much every order of importance was not easily forgotten amongst the staff of Hogwart’s.

“That would be our luck, wouldn’t it?” Minerva answered with a shake of her head. “At least he didn’t botch up the shipment of the last egg.”

Hermione rolled her eyes as she extracted the cork from Minerva’s wine bottle and poured her a glass and then one for Severus and herself. “At least Pyre turned out to be a phoenix instead of a
dragon or gryphon hatchling, you mean?”

Minerva shook her head. “Exactly.”

Severus curled his lip as he set down a large bowl of salad. “I’m sure Rose would have been ecstatic to have a gryphon or a dragon hatchling. She’s spent far too long with Hagrid.”

“I’m sure most will agree that both of the Snape children have had an overabundance of excessive educational opportunities the moment they tumbled forth into the world, Severus,” McGonagall teased.

Severus gave the Headmistress a look as he tossed the salad and distributed it amongst the waiting table settings. His fingers splayed outward as he flung a spattering of shredded cheese upon her bowl. “Pepper, Minerva?”

“Please.”

Severus spun the wooden pepper mill with no less grace than he gave his potion work and then proceeded to coat Hermione’s salad with a thick layer of pepper.

Hermione shooed the pepper mill off her salad with a laugh, running her fingers across the back of his hand as she did so. They stared at each other unrelentingly. Pyre broke the moment by opening her beak hungrily and flapping her wings at anyone who would take pity on her empty stomach. Hermione scooped the chick off her shoulder and plopped her down next to Minerva. “Your turn, Auntie Minerva.”

Minerva grinned, plucking a cherry off the table and biting the fruit off the stone. She fed the begging chick until she closed her eyes with a satisfied cheep, snuggling up to her hand. “Now, I’ll have two spoiled phoenixes flying into my window hoping for treats by years end.”

“You love them, Minerva,” Hermione chuckled as she dug into her salad. “They love you too, despite the fact they appear to love your food more.”

The Headmistress chuckled as she soothed the downy fluff of the dozing phoenix chick. “So different from Fawkes,” she said quietly. “He wasn’t ill-tempered, but he was aloof. Your pair are the furthest thing from aloof.”

“Did Fawkes like to steam himself in the shower, by chance?” Hermione asked, chasing a tomato with her fork.

“You know, I have no idea,” Minerva recalled. “Albus never mentioned a proclivity for that sort of thing.”

“Believe me, you’d know if he had,” Severus said dryly. “These two get excited the moment they hear the water running in the bathroom. Prince flies in the moment he thinks you’re going to do do more than wash your face, and Pyre won’t let you go in without her.”

“Learned or natural behavior, do you think?” McGonagall asked.

“Natural for ours, or so it would seem,” Hermione said with a shrug. “It’s not like we force them by wand point to bask in the steam.”

“Not sure what that said for Fawkes,” Minerva chuckled.

Hermione gave a shrug and served up the main entree for everyone, removing the salad plates with
practiced efficiency.

“How do you do it, Severus?” Minerva arched an eyebrow at Severus as he began to eat his pasta.

He arched an answering brow at her. “Do what, Madam?”

“Manage to eat spaghetti and meatballs and look dignified,” she answered.

“The same way you manage to look dignified eating haggis, Minerva,” Severus said with a curl of his lip.

“Mmm… I could do for some nice haggis and scotch, perhaps some finnan haddie,” Minerva grinned.

“Bad enough you corrupted my children and taught Hermione how to make it for them,” Severus grumbled.

Hermione gave her best halo look, looking skyward for effect.

“It’s not my fault your children have good taste in food,” Minerva quipped with a stern shake of her head.

“That is up for debate,” Severus answered with a sniff.

“Alas, Rose cannot cook to save her grade,” Hermione said with a slump of her shoulders. “My mother has been spoiling her on assorted box recipe food, pub grub, and street food. Her latest fascination is with something called Johnny Marzetti that my mother found a recipe for. It involves a whole lot of everything mixed together with pasta and baked. She can’t make it, of course, so she begs my mother to make it. Mum can’t resist making something she likes… and so it goes.”

Minerva smirked as Severus shook his head in disgust. “It’s amazing the girl can recite the ingredients to so many potions, but cannot cook.”

“She knows the methods, but refuses to take the time to do them,” Severus said with a shake of his head. “She has already blown up a few cauldrons due to staring off into space daydreaming instead of watching her potion.”

“She used to be so good at following instructions,” McGonagall recalled. “I wonder what happened.”

“Hard to say,” Hermione said with a shrug. “I could blame it on her having more friends and peers, and I wouldn’t be totally wrong, or I could blame something going on in her head. I could blame it a little on my parents for spoiling her, but I am not sure that is the real reason.”

Minerva tilted her head as she worked on her spaghetti. “Perhaps it is because of you.”

Black eyes and dark brown eyes eyed Minerva with intense curiosity.

Minerva waved her fork as she swallowed her food. “I mean, before you both hex me into next year, that you two have hard shoes to fill. And while, as a young child, she may have had no reason to think she couldn’t aspire to be as good as her parents, perhaps she is now questioning if she should even attempt to.”

“That is ridiculous,” Severus snorted. “Why would she compare herself to us? She’s twelve, not a post-graduate trying to take up her mastership tests.”
McGonagall splayed her fingers out and waved them. “I’m not saying it’s logical, Severus. Since when are matters of the heart logical? I am trying to say… just living up to one of you could be a dauntless task. Living up to both of you could be traumatizing when she hasn’t found a calling like young Julius. She looks around her, and she is surrounded in tales of the Severus Snape and Hermione Granger… heroes and survivors of two great wizarding wars.”

Hermione seemed more thoughtful. She gently placed her hand over Severus’ wrist, brushing her fingers against his skin. “I think I know what Minerva is saying. I grew up oblivious to the magical world, until one day there was a name for the things I could do. Just as suddenly, I had a friend who was the main player in fight against the greatest threat to my life I had ever known. I was being attacked by trolls and playing lethal battles of wizard chess while the biggest thing our daughter has had to deal with in her life is how to sneak books out of the library under Pince’s nose. And we both know you weren’t allowed a carefree childhood either.”

Severus made no comment, but his fingers curled around Hermione’s with a firm grasp.

Minerva tilted her head. “I am trying to imagine your life, Severus, as a person who was care free.”

“I do not think we would be here, having this dinner together, had I been one to indulge in carefree anything, Minerva,” the dark wizard said grimly. “Carefree people do not make very good spies.”

Minerva frowned sadly. “Unfortunately, no. I am still… saddened that it had to be you. I said such horrible things to you, even after Albus told me to trust you. He told me I could trust you, but I still didn’t believe it.”

Severus leveled McGonagall with a gaze. “I will consider that a compliment to my skills as a double-agent, Minerva. There is nothing to forgive, as I have said before. Even if I had not survived… the war was won. The future remained for our younger generation.”

Hermione winced, turning her head away. She pulled her robe closer to her chest and stared intently at a random flaw in the table.

Silently cursing himself, Severus pulled Hermione to him, tucking her against himself. At that given moment, he did not care that he was doing so in front of a spectator. “Forgive me. I did not wish to upset you.”

Hermione shook her head. “It’s not your fault I become an emotional wreck when I think about you having died in the last war, Severus.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Severus replied dryly, “The very thought my doing something that would lead to you being married to Ronald Weasley makes want to cast unforgiveables on myself.”

Minerva chose that time to snort and admire the fine ceiling-work she had done on their dining room.

“Severus!” Hermione coughed into his chest, rolling her forehead against his waistcoat.

The dark wizard smirked, stroking his wife’s hair gently. He lifted the silver lid on the serving tray to expose dessert. Picking up a strawberry in his pale fingers, he dipped it into the molten chocolate, and guided it to Hermione’s mouth.

“Are you placating me, husband?” Hermione asked suspiciously, taking a bite of the chocolate covered strawberry.

“Is it working?” Severus inquired nonchalantly.
“Yes.”

“Then, yes, my witch, I am,” he answered with a quirk of his lips as he devoured the other half of the bitten strawberry.

Hermione pulled away and grabbed a cookie from the tray and dunked it into the chocolate. “You had better dig in, Minerva, before I single-handedly drink the entire vat of molten chocolate.”

The Headmistress laughed and waved her hands, reaching for a strawberry and dunking it into the chocolate as ordered, trying not to laugh as she watched Hermione wave a chocolate covered cookie in front of Severus’ mouth. Finally, unable to contain herself, she laughed anyway, ignoring the pointed look she gained from Severus. She was glad he had survived the war as well. Back when Voldemort rained his hatred down upon the wizarding world, she would never in a million years believed she could see what she was watching take place in front of her at that very moment: one of her Gryffindor lionesses finger feeding Severus Snape a chocolate covered cookie. Not only was he allowing the affront to his person, but he was very slowly plucking the cookie from Hermione’s fingers with his lips. The effect of seeing such a contrast to the memories of the war was entirely cathartic.

If there were any regrets to be had, being there in the Snape family dining room indulging in chocolate fondue was not one of them.

Prince and Pyre chirped at Minerva wistfully, eying her strawberry. Minerva smirked, took a bite for herself, and shared the rest with the two opportunistic phoenixes. McGonagall smiled. No, everything was just fine.

Chapter 91: Heart and Head Do Not Always Agree

“Dad?” Rose asked softly as the last of the students left the classroom.

“Yes?” Severus answered, lifting his head up from grading an increasingly disturbing amount of parchments.

“Do you think I’m going to be a failure?” his daughter asked, plunking herself down at one of the desks up front.

Severus’ eyebrow lifted into his hair as he regarded his daughter. “Rose, you are many things, but you are not a failure, nor should you think yourself predestined for such things.”

“But,” Rose said as she scratched the top of the desk with her fingernail. “I can’t do half the things mum did when she was my age.”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “How is it that you know what you mother could or could not do at your age?”

“Portraits were talking…” Rose said, averting her eyes from her father’s intense gaze.

Severus took in a deep breath. “Do not take everything a portrait says as the end all beat all truth, Rose,” he guided his daughter. “Just as you cannot take everything you read as the only way to do things.”

“But it’s our textbooks, father,” Rose complained. “I’m supposed to follow them.”
“Consider them starting points,” Severus replied. “You must always take what they say as a starting point to make your own opinion. This does not give you permission to challenge I or your mother on what is best in our classroom, however.” He leveled a look at his daughter that spoke of lack of compromise in that regard.

Rose wilted. “I know, but how am I supposed to know when I can?”

“Experience,” Severus answered calmly. “Sometimes it has to feel right to do so.”

“How can I have experience if I haven’t done any of the things you or mum have by now?” Rose complained.

“Rose,” Severus admonished. “You really shouldn’t compare yourself to your mother or me as a great example of normality.”

“Why not? James said that when mum was my age she fought a troll with Uncle Harry and Uncle Ron,” Rose countered.

Severus tilted his head a moment and the corner of lip twitched. “Your mother had the unfortunate circumstance of being pressed into a war at a very young age, Rose. I was no different. That is not something you wish for simply to be better at something.”

“I thought being Slytherin meant you had to be better at everything,” Rose said with a frown.

“Being Slytherin means achieving your goals, which often makes it seem like you are better at things, but that does not mean you have to be better at every single thing,” Severus explained.

“But, Dad,” Rose shifted in her seat, “Scorpius says we are better at everything. We were born better.”

Severus set down his writing quill, closing his eyes as he attempted to squelch his immediate response to his child like another student. Prejudice in his House was not entirely gone. Sometimes it reared its ugly head outside of Quidditch and had to be stamped back into the rock it slithered out from under. While his daughter was not, technically, a pure-blood, she was not immune to his House’s more rare reversion into group-think and almost mob mentality when it came to superiority.

Rose seemed to catch the wave of anger in her father and fidgeted. “You’re angry at me,” she said, slumping her shoulders.

Severus leveled his black eyes to his daughter’s. “I am angry, Rose, but I am not angry at you, specifically.” He stood from his desk and walked over to where Rose was sitting, his dark robe hung about him like the drape of his animagus wings. “As a Slytherin you will often run across those who are less talented than you. They will often be less driven or less cunning. While others are more apt to get their grade and pass, Slytherin are expected to do their best both by their parents and their peers. This does not mean that other Houses do not value many of the same traits under the surface, nor does it mean you not find a Slytherin who is quite mediocre in many things. Just because you are talented in something does not give you permission to walk over another person or tease them because they are different.”

Rose seemed to be chewing on what her father was attempting to get across. Severus did not dumb down his language for his daughter, nor did Hermione. They spoke to their children as they spoke to each other, and sometimes, during times like this, it took their children a little longer to digest the meaning of what their parents were saying.

“Rose,” Severus said neutrally.
“Yes, father?” Rose replied.

“Do you consider your mother an idiot?” Severus looked her straight in the face, no emotion marked his words.

“No!” Rose said adamantly, shaking her head.

“Do you think her less capable than I?”

“No!”

“Less powerful?”

Rose shook her head back and forth, her eyes half-filled with tears. “Never! S…she’s brilliant! I… I want to be like her!”

“And she’s Gryffindor, Rose,” Severus reinforced his point. “She was sorted into Gryffindor during a time when the Houses did not speak to one another. Can you imagine not being friends with Mr. Potter just because you were Slytherin?” Severus relapsed back into the formal address, still unable to address the Potter family with any sort of familiarity without a sheer momentous effort.

“I would never not talk to James!” Rose said, shaking her head. “That would be silly.”

“There is a difference between supporting your House in games such as Quidditch or when competing for points for the House Cup, Rose, and judging people strictly upon their Sorting. If you must judge at all, young lady, it will be upon their merits as a person, not by the name of their House. Am I clear?”

Rose stood up and hugged her father at the waist. “Yes, father.”

Severus stiffened slightly, but allowed himself to relax, placing his hand to his daughter’s bushy black hair. “Be yourself, Rose. Find what calls to you, not what you think you must do to follow in my or your mother’s footsteps. It is important. Your mother will tell you the same.”

Rose looked up to her father with a smile that reminded him of Hermione in so many ways. “I know, Dad. Julius and I have known since we were babies that mum and dad always gave the same answers. Even when we desperately tried to prove otherwise.”

Severus arched a brow at his daughter, gaining a lop-sided grin from his progeny.

Rose played with the buttons on his waistcoat and tugged his outer robe closer to his chest with her hands as she had seen her mother do on many an occasion. “Do you think I’ll ever have what you and mum have?”

Severus tilted his head to the side at the vague question.

Rose seemed to realize she had committed the sin of vagueness with her father, which was about as unforgivable as putting her elbows on the table when she ate. “Someone who understands you,” she clarified. “Even when your face doesn’t show what you mean. Someone who can hug you from across a room without you even moving.”

Severus stared into the face of his wonder-eyed daughter at the outsider description of his esoteric bond with his wife. “What we have is not common, my daughter, and it has special sort of trust that many will never find,” he said softly. He watched his daughter frown slightly. “But, I have no doubt, when the time is right, you will find someone that completes you, honors you, and brings you joy.”
Rose seemed to accept that answer and beamed back up at him.

“It will not be anytime soon, however, Rose Lily Nightingale Snape,” he growled at her. “If I catch you doing anything improper with a male before you are of the proper age and are in a formal courtship, I will see to it that you live out your life in detention at Beauxbaton’s.”

Rose’s eyes went really wide and she shook her head at her father fearfully. “I won’t!” I won’t!”

Severus gave his daughter a hardened glare for effect and then stepped away from her, waving his hand dismissively. “You are going to be late for lunch. Away with you.”

Rose grabbed her book bag and hurried out of the classroom.

Hermione was coming in just as Rose was heading up the aisle.

Rose flung herself around her mother’s waist. “I love you, mum!” she gushed, clinging to her mother’s teaching robes, practically pulling her down to her level.

“I…” Hermione said as she was yanked down. “Love you too?” She placed her hand into her daughter’s hair and patted her lightly.

Prince and Pyre warbled as their perch tilted downward unexpectedly. Rose head scratched both phoenixes and scurried out the classroom door.

Hermione stood back up, shrugging her robe back into place with an odd look on her face. Prince and Pyre seemed to echo her mentality, giving quizzical peeps. She walked over to Severus and placed a bundle of parchments on the desk.

Severus transferred Prince to his shoulder and enveloped his wife in an embrace, covering her with his outer robe like the fold of wings. His one hand gently pressed against the back of her neck, pulling her into him as the cords of their unswerving bond thrummed between them. Hermione sank into him, yielding to his touch with the same unshakable trust he had come to rely on. He closed his eyes, enjoying the hum of her mental touch.

Prince and Pyre made a soft warbling sound that seemed to hang in the air.

“So you had ‘the talk’ with Rose?” Hermione asked as she touched her palm to his cheek.

“One of many, I suppose,” Severus answered, pressing his forehead to hers.

“So you threatened to send her to Beauxbaton’s?” Hermione gave her husband a tolerant look.

Severus rolled his eyes up as to not look his wife in the eyes. “Perhaps.”

Hermione ran her fingers across his jawline. “Oh, Severus,” she smiled at him.

Severus stroked her hair with his fingers. She looked the same as when they first married. Only her eyes seemed to reflect her age. While the war had aged her prematurely, it seemed that life had frozen her in place afterwards, almost as if it was begging for forgiveness for its awful treatment of her as a child.

As if following his train of thought, Hermione gently ran her fingers down his black locks. “You are as handsome as the day we married, my love,” she purred.

Severus gave her a look that translated to “doubtful” and “you’re completely mental.”
“You doubt me?” Hermione grinned at him. “You’d make my father jealous. There isn’t a strand of silver in your hair. He had half a head full at your age. He says our family is doomed to have premature graying. He used to dye his hair, but he’d never admit it to mum or I.” She waved her hand and conjured a floating shimmering mirror next to Severus.

Severus slid his eyes over to look at the mirror with a lifted eyebrow.

“I do not see any signs of premature graying on your head, wife,” Severus said, sliding his eyes back to stare at Hermione.

“Maybe I dodged the genes,” Hermione grinned at him.

“Hrmph,” Severus replied, waving away the mirror with a flick of his wrist. “Perhaps this is life’s way of cursing us with each other’s company for upwards of four hundred and twenty-two years.” He smirked as he remembered Hermione’s random comment to him that old wasn’t until you reached four hundred and twenty-two years.

“Woe,” Hermione said in mock agony, placing her hand to her chest as if in pain. “I’m not sure I could stand it.”

“Me, either,” Severus replied. “Forced to stand your insufferable smiles and affronts to my person.”

“And your snarky attitude and dour faces,” Hermione replied without skipping a beat. “Fate worse than death!”

“Such torture,” Severus growled, lowering his mouth to hers.

Hermione’s arms snaked around his neck. Her hands touching the skin that was unprotected from his collar. “Mmmmhhmmmm,” she murmured into his mouth.

Severus hissed into her mouth and enveloped her like a feeding amoeba.

“Ahhhh!” Rose said as she ran in to grab her forgotten book from the back of the classroom. “I’m not looking! I’m not looking!”

Severus released his wife and scowled at his daughter’s interruption with an intensified glare.

“Eeeiii,” Rose said, clasping her book to her chest and fleeing out the classroom door. “I’m sorry! I know better than not to knock!” Their daughter streaked out the door and pulled the door shut, her muffled run echoed down the corridor.

Severus glided towards the door and opened it, glaring down the hallway. “No running in the hallways, Miss Snape! Five points from Slytherin for your abhorrent heedlessness for school rules and your inability to knock on a door,” he growled.

“Y…yes, Sir!” her mollified voice replied from all the way up the staircase. Her footsteps slowed into a hurried walk.

“Are you certain she’s ours?” Severus growled as he held the door open for Hermione.

“Fairly certain,” Hermione said with a half-concealed smile.

“Perhaps, she is spending too much time with her Aunt Potter and Grandmother Weasley,” Severus said with a curl of his lip, his voice spitting out Potter with the same enthusiasm he used to dismiss Peeves.
Hermione stepped out the door, gliding her fingers down the top of his hand. “Besides, do you really see my husband as the type to share?” Her eyes glistened with mischief.

Severus allowed the door to shut and warded the classroom with a wave of his hand. He held out his arm. “Never,” he said with a scowl.

Hermione wove her arm around his and beamed at him as they walked together towards the Great Hall for lunch.

92: Help From Home

“Mum,” Julius called from the living room. “Look!”

Hermione wandered in from the other room and peered in to see Julius holding up a piece of broccoli over Pyre and having her dance for it. The growing chick had her eyes on the prize as she pirouetted for Julius.

Julius dropped the vegetable down for the hungry chick and laughed as the bird settled in his lap to devour her prize. Julius was surrounded in parchments with wand plans scrawled over many of them. Some of the parchments detailed wood types, grains, strengths, weaknesses, and inherent magical properties. Some of them looked like instructions.

“Mum, would you mind helping me with a project?” Julius picked up a piece of parchment and stood, accidentally squishing the baby phoenix a little against his chest. Pyre squawked in protest and squirmed out of his hands, fluttering into Hermione’s hair with a distressed peep.

Julius looked completely mortified that he’d hurt the chick and looked at his mother with wide eyes.

Hermione scooped the bird out of her hair and soothed her, rubbing under her chin with her knuckles. Hermione ran her fingers over the chick, checking for any residual pain. Pyre seemed oblivious to her ministrations and peeped contentedly. “There now,” Hermione crooned to the chick. “Everything looks ok.”

“I didn’t mean to squish her, mum!” Julius looked at his mother with distress.

“She’s fine, Julius,” Hermione comforted her son with a smile. “I bet if you get her some of her favorite gooseberries, she’ll have forgotten all about it.”

Julius hurried over to Prince’s perch and swiped a gooseberry out of his food bowl, earning a peck from the half asleep phoenix. “Ow! Sorry, Prince!”

Julius bit into the gooseberry and took the half out of his mouth and held it out to the chick hiding out in Hermione’s hair. Sure enough, her beak poked out of Hermione’s hair the moment the gooseberry was offered. Pyre opened her mouth hungrily, showing her bright orange inner beak colors. Julius plunked the piece of gooseberry into her hungry beak and smiled as she gulped it down. He held out the other half of the gooseberry, and Pyre fluttered her wings and hopped onto Julius’ hand, snagging the fruit hungrily from his fingertips. She gave an experimental trill, half a warble, and then went back to her baby peeps.

“There you see?” Hermione said with a smile. “No harm done.”

Julius beamed up to his mother and cradled the bird in his hands, petting her head. “I’m sorry, Pyre. I
didn’t mean to squish you.”

Pyre yawned beakily and rubbed her beak against his nose, causing Julius to wiggle his nose and rub it with his hand. He sniffled once, sneezed, and shook his head. Pyre startled at the sneeze causing her feathers to puff out, giving her the uncanny resemblance to a pompom on a winter hat.

Julius pet the startled phoenix with an apologetic face.

“What is it that you needed help with, Julius?” Hermione chuckled as she watched her son placate the phoenix chick.

Julius turned his eyes to his mother. “Could you make me a potion that would strengthen whatever was soaked into it?”

Hermione lifted an eyebrow. “What exactly would you be soaking in it? Living or dead?”

Julius pulled out a wand blank he was working on and gave it to his mother.

Hermione ran her fingers over the carved wood, eyebrows furrowing slightly. “Do you wish it to remain flexible?”

“Yes, mother,” Julius nodded. “Is that possible?”

Hermione ran her fingers across the wood thoughtfully. She handed it back. “Come with me,” she said, her voice switching tones automatically into that-which-must-be-obeyed.

Hermione waved her hand across a tapestry on the wall, running her fingers in a pattern that only she and Severus knew. The fabric glowed slightly, responding to her touch and silent, wandless incantation. The Snape children knew better than to intrude on the private laboratory of their parents, but neither Severus nor Hermione risked leaving a place as dangerous as the laboratory unguarded.

She stepped through the shimmering tapestry, Julius staying close behind her. She pointed to the settee as she entered, pausing to make sure her son did not attempt to follow her deeper into the lab.

Once she was convinced that Julius and his small fluffy charge were safely seated, Hermione walked deeper into the laboratory, waving her wand to bring light into the room. Hermione heaved two empty cauldrons onto their braziers and held out hand as jars came to her call, flying to her open palm as she willed it. She wafted the jars as her fingers plucked ingredients out of them. She splayed her fingers, casting the ingredients into the cauldrons, staring at the jar to send it back to where it belonged. Within seconds, another jar would alight in her hand, and the process would repeat itself.

She tapped the cauldrons at one point, whispering, filling the cauldrons with water to a point that only she seemed to know was correct. She stirred one, then the other. She tilted her head as she stirred one clockwise, then anti-clockwise. She turned her head as a barely detectable burble came from the opposing cauldron, and she cast her hand over it, flicking her fingers outward. She threw a spattering of an unknown ingredient into the first cauldron, stirring it soon after. Finally, it seemed like the cauldrons were simmering to her expectations, and she stood as still as a statue, barely even moving as her lungs inhaled and exhaled evenly.

Severus entered through the portal tapestry, his dark eyes scanning the room to see his son and Pyre sitting obediently on the settee. He approached his wife without a word, extending his hand to her.

Hermione placed her hand in his and they pressed their foreheads together, eyes closing. Both took in a deep breath and their hands dropped.

They parted silently, not a word being spoken between them. Hermione turned to one cauldron and stirred it. Severus took the other. Ingredient jars swirled around them, coming to their call, then
retreating to whence they came.

Hermione pulled pans out from cabinet and placed them on an empty counter before going back to her cauldron. She peered at it, waiting, then stirred it. She stood still once more, waiting while Severus did the same. She placed something into a mortar and began to pulverize it as she waited. She turned to her cauldron again, tipped off by some subtle sign. Hermione threw in a pinch of what she was grinding, silently passing the mortar over to Severus, who grasped it in his pale hand before taking a pinch of it in his fingers and throwing it into the cauldron until it changed color.

Hermione’s potion changed color once more and she banished the flame under it, heaving the cauldron to the side to sit. She opened a random jar, wafting her hand over the mouth of it, smelling. Tapping the jar to empty part of it into another mortar, she flipped the lid closed and sent it off to it’s designated place. She grabbed a pestle off the counter and crushed the ingredients into powder. She held her hand out for the other mortar Severus was holding, grasping it as he placed it into her palm. With a fluid motion, she placed the second mortar in his hand and turned away, cleaning the original mortar as Severus threw a pinch of the powder she had just made into the cauldron.

Hermione’s open hand was already in place as Severus placed the used mortar into it without a word. She turned to clean it as well.

Severus stirred the cauldron he was on, watching it turn color, then hoisting it off the flame and placing it to the side to cool. He waved his hand over the brazier, extinguishing it.

Hermione was quilling notes into a leather-bound book on the counter as Severus laid out a series of bottles. The moment he had placed down the bottles, labels fluttered in to wrap themselves around the bottles — all neatly written with Hermione’s elegant quill hand. Hermione finished writing in the book and closed it, turning to ladle the contents of her cauldron into the bottles as Severus did the same from his. Within a few minutes, the pair was surrounded in filled potion bottles.

Julius stared wide-eyed as his parents worked in perfectly silent synchronization. He had memories of them working together over many a cauldron in the teaching laboratory, but this was the first time he had seen them work in their own. He had presumed they would work as they taught their classes, speaking softly as they peered over student cauldrons, but it seemed that in the privacy of their own potion laboratory they didn’t speak at all. He pondered to himself if his parents spoke within the laboratory more for his benefit or for Rose’s rather than for each other.

His parents poured the contents of each of their potions into the waiting trays Hermione had set out earlier. Hermione lifted her head to stare at Julius, still too deep in whatever thoughts crossed her mind when she was in Potion Master mode to bother with words.

Pyre pecked Julius with a authoritative cheep, snapping the boy out of his reverie. He approached his mother, handing her the wand blank he had been working on.

Hermione placed the wand blank into the potion she had made, agitating the pan slightly to cover the entire blank. The wood seemed to darken as it soaked up the potion. She stared at it, waiting for some sign she did not bother to disclose. Suddenly, she picked up the soaking wand blank with tongs, allowing the excess potion to drip off its surface. She stood motionless, reminding Julius of one of the long-legged lake birds that would stand waiting for a fish to come close enough to spear.

As the last of the potion dripped off the wand, she passed the tongs to Severus, who placed the wand into his potion, agitating the liquid so it covered the wood once more. Severus, just as Hermione had done, lifted the wand out of the potion at a time that seemed to have no outward indicator of completion. As the last of the potion dripped off the wand’s surface, the wand took on a glistening finish, shimmering with color that seemed as though it were alive and at any moment take in air and
breathe.

Then, as if by the flip of a switch, the thickness in the air of the laboratory dissipated. Hermione’s no-nonsense face softened into a smile as she took the wand blank up in her hand and extended it to Julius. “Will this do, my son?”

Julius transferred Pyre to his shoulder and grasped the wand in his hands, running his fingers across the surface. It felt alive, as though he were running his hand across Pyre’s back. His eyes widened, and he nodded to his mother excitedly. He clutched the wand blank to his chest and pulled his parents into the tightest hug he could manage due to his smaller size, managing to wrap his arms around his parent’s waists. “Thank you, mum. Thank you, father,” he said as he smashed his face into their chests.

Hermione and Severus encircled their son with their outer arms with a soft curl of their robes, echoing the embrace of a harpy eagle’s feathery wings. “You are welcome,” they chimed together, placing their combined hands against his head.

Julius pulled away excitedly. “May I go show Master Ollivander?” He looked at them pleadingly for permission.

Hermione smiled at him as Severus tilted his head at his son. “Of course, Julius. Please give Master Ollivander our regards.”

Julius beamed, clutching his wand blank in both hands. Pyre warbled from his shoulder cheerfully, flapping her baby wings with excitement. Julius made a face, clearly wanting to ask something else, but not wanting to push his luck with his parents.

“You may,” Severus said dismissively as he glided out of the laboratory portal.

Hermione shooed her son out of the laboratory, stepping out herself before sealing and warding the portal. “Go on, now, Julius. Don’t forget to take a basket of fruit with you for Pyre.”

Julius suddenly realized that his parents had answered his question and ferociously glomped his mother’s waist before scurrying off to gather a food basket for his hungry charge.

Hermione chuckled as the green flames of the floo transported her son and the excited phoenix chick to Ollivander’s.

Severus pulled her to him with a gentle tug as he passed by, enveloping her in a hug. “I am glad that our children do not have to be forged in the heart of war,” he said softly.

Hermione snuggled into his chest, burrowing herself into the warmth of his robes and taking in his scent. “Me too.”

Severus placed his hand in Hermione’s hair and closed his eyes.

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**Chapter 93: Application**

Hermione held out her half of the signet as Severus clicked his half into place. Together they smashed it into the cooling wax on the scroll. There was a surge of energy between them as they
pulled their signets away and tucked them back into their robes.

Hermione yawned slightly as she grasped the scroll holder and slipped the sealed scroll inside, setting the cap into place. She dipped her fingers into the half molten wax in the bowl in front of her and ran her fingers around the end cap, sealing the scroll holder from casual curiosity.

Prince bobbed his head and warbled excitedly, looking forward to a flight. She handed him a gooseberry, watching him making it disappear with a smooth gulp. Smiling, she extended the scroll case to the bird and he took hopped into the air, clasping the case in his talons and whooshed off out of the room and down the hall.

“Over one hundred letters of application for one apprenticeship, and most of the people I have never even heard of,” Hermione sighed as she cleared her desk.

“I refuse to tolerate more than one blundering apprentice in our classrooms at a time,” Severus sneered automatically. “I told Stainthorpe he could shove his idea of both of us having one at the same time right up his bloody brazier.”

Hermione coughed into her hand. “Declan was hoping to have two more potion masters coming from us, or perhaps he wanted a potion master and a transfiguration master.” Hermione paused and narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean blundering apprentice?”

“Present company excluded,” Severus said smoothly, his quill working furiously on the parchment in front of him.

“Mmmhmm,” Hermione said with an arched eyebrow.

Severus slowly put down his quill and snaked his arm around his wife, dragging her closer to plant a kiss upon her lips. He slowly and deliberately ran his fingers across the exposed skin of her neck. He pulled away, his black eyes staring into hers with a bemused expression.

“You are forgiven, my husband,” Hermione mumbled softly.

“Mmm,” Severus smirked.

“There are quite a few potion masters out there,” Hermione said with a half yawn. “Is it a blessing or a curse that he wants us to sort through the list first?”

“I suppose we should consider it a blessing that he at least gives us a choice of the pick, now, rather than simply shipping us some random imbecile that we have to send away crying,” Severus commented with a quirk of his lip.

“It was not my fault that the last apprentice had the disposition of a quivering mouse and the resilience to criticism of a fainting goat,” Hermione said with a soft growl.

Severus gave Hermione a very Slytherin smile of pride that could have easily been misconstrued as an evil smirk. “I am gratified that my lessons were never lost upon you, my Apprentice,” he purred as he remembered the flighty young man that had literally paled and fainted after being reprimanded by Hermione’s very “Snape”-like admonishment over an exploded cauldron.

Hermione’s face took on a slightly rosy hue. “He just threw the bloody bat fangs right into the cauldron. He didn’t even bother to use the mortar and pestle. Who does that sort of thing? At N.E.W.T. level? Practically inconceivable. At mastery level? Incomprehensible.” There was a fire behind Hermione’s indignant eyes, changing her brown eyes to an almost baleful firebrick color.
“I’m not sure where you studied potions before you came here, Mr. Loftis, but here in my laboratory, we expect an apprentice to know the difference between baneberries and boomslang skin. Did you graduate with honors by overdosing in Felix Felicis, or did you flush everything you ever learned the moment you graduated out from under whatever rock you crawled out from?” Severus purred her words back to her with a silken voice.

Hermione blushed, her previous indignation lost. “I cannot believe I tore into him like that on his second day. I sounded just like… like…”

“A Snape?” Severus said with an arched eyebrow.

Hermione sagged her shoulders and pressed her head into his chest. “I deserved that,” she murmured.

Severus placed his pale hand against her head and drew her into him with an almost imperceptible rumble of laughter. “I have never been more proud,” Severus admitted to her with a gentle touch to the back of her neck.

Hermione sagged against him instantly.”You have corrupted me, dear husband,” she sighed into his robes.

Severus soothed her hair.”Proudly.” He tilted her chin up so he could look her in the face. “No one with our sigil attached to their neck will ever be laureled as anything but a competent Potion Master. They must demonstrate themselves worthy of our mark or find someone else more suited to their incompetence.”

Hermione turned her chin up to stare her husband in the eyes. “You are ruthless.”

“Snarky,” Severus replied.

“Irascible,” Hermione countered.

“Irritable,” Severus quipped.

“Snide,” Hermione said, staring him in the eyes.

“Caustic,” Severus sneered.

“Intolerant,” Hermione said, pursing her lips together.

“Abrasive,” Severus replied, arching a brow.

“Irresistible,” Hermione countered, pressing her lips to his, cutting off his reply.

Severus’ eyes glazed over as he growled, wrapping her in his outer robe. “You win this round, witch.”

Hermione smiled at him. “I’ll take your patrol tonight, so you can finish this.” She gestured to the pile of parchments threatening to devour his side of the desk.

Severus mumbled something barely audible into her neck.

“You are welcome,” Hermione said as she snuggled into him before she stood up and walked towards the door. “I’ll be at the lake, feeding my students to the squid.”

Severus’ eyebrow lifted into his hair. “I shall deny everything,” he said as he picked up his quill once more.
Hermione beamed at him as she glided out the portal door, leaving Severus to the sound of her laughter.

“Now pull the ends together slowly, young Julius,” Ollivander instructed softly as he sat beside Julius at the workbench. “Put the image in your mind of them wrapping themselves together tightly.

Julius pulled the line of feather fluffs together, and they tightened around each other. The fluffs compressed as they wove around each other.

“Okay, Julius,” Ollivander encouraged. “See how they are starting to glow as they bind together?”

“Yes, Master,” Julius said as he concentrated.

“Pull them slowly outward and then release them,” Ollivander directed. “Not too far out. Just a little and then do it again until the entire line becomes that color.”

Slowly, the line of feathers began to condense into a fine shimmering core.

“Now, seal the ends, Julius,” Ollivander directed, watching his charge carefully.

Julius tugged the ends of the core and spun his fingers, fusing the core together.

Ollivander set the wand blank in the vice and nodded. “Go ahead and set it in place.”

Julius carefully lay the core over the wand blank he had crafted with his parents and set it in line. Ollivander carefully directed his hands when he went over the center so it was perfectly centered. When Ollivander nodded, Julius released the core and the wand blank seemed to suck in the core into itself.

“Now, set the focusing crystal, young Julius,” Ollivander said with a nod.

Julius grasped a shining cut crystal in a pair of tweezers and carefully placed it near the tip of the wand. He looked at Ollivander for guidance, and the master wand-maker nodded with a smile. Julius released the crystal and it was sucked into the wand blank with a flash of magic.

Garrick Ollivander smiled as Julius beamed at him and Pyre cheeped excitedly from his shoulder. “Pick it up, Julius, and tell me what you feel.”

Julius picked up the wand and gasped. It felt like a living thing in his hand, with almost a perceptible intake and release of breath. As his hand tightened around it, he smiled. “It feels like my mum and dad are hugging me.”

“Excellent, Julius,” Ollivander praised his apprentice. “Why don’t you try a lumos spell to initiate the bond?”

Julius held the wand out in the proper position and waved it in the correct motions drilled into him by watching and imitating his parents countless times. “Lumos!”

The wand’s tip glowly brightly, casting a warm glow across the workshop.

“Excellent, Julius,” Garrick praised. “I expect nothing less from a member of the Snape family.”

The boy beamed at his master with genuine pride. “Nox,” he whispered, and the glow from his wand
went out.

“Now remember, no using your wand until you are in classes unless you are with your parents or one of the other professors or myself, okay Julius?”

“Yes, Master Ollivander,” Julius said with a series of nods.

“If you ever need to travel outside the store, be sure to place it in the safe here with me. We don’t want anyone accusing you of anything because they do not understand,” Garrick said with a smile.

“Yes, Master,” Julius said with an emphatic nod.

“Good, Julius,” Ollivander said with a shake of his head. “Now, help me clean up the work area and we can go get pies for dinner.”

The boy beamed happily and placed the wand into Ollivander’s hands to stow for safe-keeping before busying himself with the cleaning of the workbenches.

Garrick placed the new wand into a cushioned box and placed it in the work safe, proud that his apprentice had enough sense to give his wand to him for safe-keeping so soon after creating it. He could probably thank the strong genetics of both of Julius’ parents for imprinting the keen intellect into the boy’s makeup.

In less time than it took Garrick to stow the wand into the safe and lock it, Julius had cleaned all of the work areas with frightening speed and even laid out the tools and work orders for the next day. Eating out was a powerful motivator, and Ollivander knew how to use it to his advantage quite well.

“Let’s go eat, young Julius,” Ollivander said with a smile, shooing his charge out towards the door.

Julius bounced on his heels and headed out, pausing only briefly to stuff a few gooseberries into the hungry gaping beak of his small feathered charge.

Garrick grinned and brought up the rear as the pair left the store in the search for food.

Hermione waited in the greenhouse for Professor Sprout’s class to finish up so she could pick up the latest batch of mandrake root for the potion stores.

She sat in one of the comfier chairs in the waiting area that was set apart from the teaching areas as to not disturb the class. As she sat reading, a fanged geranium leaned over from the nearby shelf, almost as if to size her up. Hermione slid her eyes over from her book to peer at the fanged geranium. The wayward plant unfurled its “mouth” exposing rows of needle sharp fangs.

Hermione attempted to ignore the plant that was attempting to gain her attention.

The fanged geranium rustled its foliage and rattled its mouth.

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed, reaching into her robes for a small green bottle. She opened the bottle, sniffed it, and dipped her fingers in, extending her fingers towards the offending geranium.

The fanged geranium rustled its foliage and closed its “mouth” over her fingers, excitedly absorbing the liquid off her fingers like a small child sucking on a Popsicle. After every drop of the liquid was siphoned off her fingers, the geranium released her fingers and set its head on her shoulder like a dog might lay its head upon a person’s knee. The geranium made a soft rattling sound at her.
Hermione rolled her eyes at the plant begging for attention, remembering how Harry had once been bitten by a fanged geranium during an exam. This particular geranium had a soft spot for Hermione, unbeknown to Pomona Sprout, due to Hermione being the “bringer of fertilizer.”

Hermione dipped her fingers into the fertilizer bottle again and extended her fingers to the geranium, slightly amused as the plant folded its fangs gently around her fingers to absorb the fertilizer potion from her skin.

The appeased plant released her fingers and rattled, rubbing its “head” against her with the same gesture one might expect of a cat or dog. Hermione gently scratched the geranium with her fingers under the “chin.” The plant trembled slightly and lightly shuddered, depositing a few of its fangs into her palm.

Hermione chuckled. “Thank you,” she replied with amusement, stowing the valuable fangs in a small bottle. There were advantages, it seemed, to being kind to plants.

A sound of someone approaching caught her attention. The fanged geranium returned to its still position on the shelf as if it didn’t want to be caught being nice to anyone anymore than Hermione wanted to be caught spoiling one of Pomona’s plants. Hermione stood and awaited whoever was coming, shrugging her shoulders automatically to set her outer robe across her shoulders in the familiar drape that had become synonymous with any professor with the name Snape.

“I’m s…sorry P…professor Snape,” said a male voice. “I was h…helping with the class and forgot about your appointment to p..pick up the mandrake roots.”

Hermione’s eyebrow raised into her hair as the man’s familiar voice amused her. “It’s okay, Neville. I do not have a class to teach this afternoon.”

Neville Longbottom, successful Auror turned Herbologist after being successfully lured by Professor Sprout, set down the crate of mandrake roots on the counter so he could see who he was talking to. “Hermione? Oh.. Thank Merlin,” he said with a long exhale. “I just saw the robes from around the crate and presumed it was Professor Snape.”

“Technically, Neville,” Hermione said with a bemused expression, “I am also Professor Snape. You were at the wedding, after all.”

Neville blushed. “I know… it’s just…”

“He still intimidates the everliving daylights out of you?” Hermione chuckled.

“Yes, so very much,” the older but still frazzled Longbottom admitted. “I’ve faced dangers as an Auror that remind me the things we saw in the war, Hermione, but none of it holds a candle to the glare of Professor Snape to me.”

Hermione grinned. “If you like, I can glare at you as well. I’ve heard I have a very good likeness when properly motivated.”

“Merlin, no,” Neville said, waving his hands in appeasement. “I couldn’t bear to get it from both of you. Every time we sit at the Head Table for meals and Pomona starts digging into him, I feel my stomach turning somersaults as part of my brain contemplates the best escape route.”

“Neville, you’re a professor now and you used to be an Auror. Where is that Gryffindor courage that let you slay Nagini?” Hermione grinned at him.

“Cowering under the desk, I fear,” Neville admitted. “I may be apprenticed to Pomona, but she
doesn’t offer me any help dealing with my ingrained response to seeing Professor Snape.”

Hermione’s lip curved upward. “You can’t call him by his first name, either.”

“Never,” Neville said, eyes wide. “He’ll hex me into next year!”

The fanged geranium apparently took offense to Neville’s proximity and snapped at his arm.

“Ow!” Neville exclaimed, glaring at the fanged geranium. “Stop that you naughty geranium. Why must you be so hateful? I water you, tend you, and you always snap at me, and you never once give me any of your teeth.”

Hermione chose that moment to stare upwards at the greenhouse ceiling.

“This is the only one that seems to be so moody,” Neville said sullenly. “None of the others are so spiteful. They act up from time to time, but not like this guy.”

“Is that why the poor thing is out on the shelf alone?” Hermione asked with a smirk.

“Don’t pity this geranium, Hermione,” Neville said with a shake of his head. “It’s positively mean. It even nips Pomona.”

Hermione pointed to the small crate she had set on the counter. “I brought Pomona’s order of fertilizer for you as well.”

“Wonderful,” Neville sighed with relief. “We’ll be teaching the class how to re-pot the mandrakes soon, so we will need the potions very soon.”

Hermione nodded. “I should probably go and get this mandrake root back to the laboratory. We need to stew and preserve some of it for the stores and make a few more potions for Poppy for her restocks.”

Neville shuddered. “I’ll leave the potion making to the masters.”

“I’ll leave the teaching of herbology and wrangling of plants to your expertise, my friend,” Hermione chuckled.

“Gladly,” Neville agreed.

Hermione hoisted the crate into her arms. “Take care, Neville,” she said as she walked back towards Hogwarts.

“You too, Hermione,” Neville waved at her as she left.

The fanged geranium rattled at Neville.

“I think I’m going to name you Snape,” Neville said, glaring at the impertinent geranium.

The fanged geranium rustled its foliage and snapped at him.

“Yeah,” Neville sighed at the plant. “Definitely a good name for you.”

Chapter 94: Sneaky

Mrs. Norris was not a happy cat. Yowling furiously, she clambered inside the suit of armor she was
trapped in as Peeves cackled maniacally on his own twisted version of patrol. As the chain of mischievous students scampered down the hallway past her undignified prison, Mrs. Norris yowled and scratched from the inside of the armor. Not as young as she once was, she tired somewhat quickly in her anger, and the irritated cat made softer disgruntled noises.

Suddenly, the helm of the armor opened, giving Mrs. Norris both a breath of fresh air and an exit strategy. She gathered her strength and leapt out the opened visor and landed in the arms of Rose Snape.

“Awww, Mrs. Norris, I thought I heard you in there;” Rose cooed, patting the disgruntled feline.

The cat rubbed her head against Rose with acknowledgment and meowed, leaping down to the ground and looking up at her.

“Hrm?” Rose said. “It’s getting late, Mrs. Norris. If I get caught out past curfew by mum or dad, I won’t be able to sit for a week.”

Mrs. Norris meowed plaintively and walked a few steps then waited.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming!” Rose said, following Argus’ familiar much like she used to as a very young child.

The cat led her down the corridors with her tail held high, echoing a certain gray tabby that also patrolled the halls of Hogwart’s. Rose followed her out into the garden where the cat stopped and meowed up to her.

“What is it, Mrs. Norris?” Rose said curiously. “Did someone do something to the rose bushes?”

Mrs. Norris meowed imperiously, rubbing up against the nearest rose bush.

Rose knelt down and peered at the rose bush curiously. Two almond-shaped orange eyes blinked at her from inside the rose bush. “Hello,” Rose said softly.

Mrs. Norris meowed imperiously, and a fluffy orange kitten tumbled out of the rose bush to land on Mrs. Norris’ tail.

Rose melted completely at the sight of the orange fuzzball. She scooped up the kitten and scratched her behind the ears. “Where did you come from, little lady?” she cooed.

The kitten meowed cutely and mouthed Rose’s fingers with her sharp kitten teeth. The kitten’s tail was fluffy on the end, but the rest of it was strangely lion-like.

Rose peered at the kitten with curiosity. “You have a little Kneazle in you, I think. I’m not sure how much though. Are you lost? Are you someone’s familiar? Did you want to come home with me?”

The kitten stared up at Rose with wide eyes. If she had something to say, she wasn’t about to start speaking in the Queen’s English anytime soon.

Rose clutched the kitten to her chest and listened to her purr. “I used to think I wanted a phoenix like mum and dad, but you’re pretty cute. I could make an exception for you.”

The orange kitten mewed softly, her bright orange eyes met Rose’s as a connection formed.

“I could call you Bast,” Rose said with a tilt of her head. “Would you like that?”

The kitten meowed sweetly reaching up to place her paw on Rose’s chin.
“What do you think, Mrs. Norris?” Rose asked Filch’s familiar.

Mrs. Norris meowed her approval, tail swishing back and forth as she looked up at Rose.

Dark robes moved out of the corner of her eye, and Rose winced in automatic reaction to being caught out in the rose bushes close to curfew. One half of the Potion Masters of Hogwarts glided into the courtyard with soundless footsteps. Prince balanced on his shoulder with a calm swishing motion.

Black eyes met hers as Severus Snape regarded his wayward daughter as he approached. His eyes flicked to Mrs. Norris, the kitten, and his daughter’s face with no change in expression. He waited, silently.

“I found her under the rose-bush!” Rose gushed to her father. “I think she’s part Kneazle!”

Mrs. Norris meowed loudly.

“Well, Mrs Norris found her, but she lead me to her!” Rose said, eyes wide with hopefulness.

Severus said nothing. His dark eyes were as unreadable as his face. Prince peered down at the kitten, his own black eyes as unreadable as his master’s.

Rose bounced on the balls of her feet. “If I report her to Aunt Minerva, and she doesn’t have an owner, may I keep her, father, please?”

Severus narrowed his eyes, fully aware of his daughter’s habit of wanting a different sort of familiar for every change of week. “And next week? Will you still want her?” The kitten was looking up wide-eyed at Severus’ face.

Rose’s face flushed into a color that would have done Gryffindor proud. “Yes, father. I swear it. On my wand, I swear it! I’ll take care of her.”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “To swear on your honor as a witch is a serious thing. It is not to be taken lightly.”

Rose nodded emphatically. “I mean it. I do.”

Severus stared into his daughter’s face with an appraising glare, causing his daughter to shift uncomfortably under his gaze. Her immunity to his scrutiny as a younger child seemed to have been replaced by the uncertainty of not knowing what her father was thinking. As if to add more discomfort, Prince peered at Rose with an equal amount of scrutiny.

“Very well,” Severus said in a soft and controlled voice. “You may report her to the Headmistress as befits a possibly lost familiar. If she is unclaimed, you may do so yourself. I do not think I need to remind you of the responsibility that comes with this, nor do I need to remind of you of your mother’s reaction if you should shirk on your duties in this regard.” Severus extended his pale hand to rub the kitten between the ears, causing her to purr loudly. His expression did not change as he locked gazes with his daughter.

“No, father,” Rose replied. “I swear I will take care of her, and I would never want to upset mum.”

Severus sniffed rather loudly. “Go then,” he said with an incline of his head.

Rose beamed and clutched the kitten to her chest with happiness. “Thank you, father,” she gushed and scurried off in a fast walk towards the Headmistress’ Office.
Severus watched his daughter hurry down the hallway towards Minerva’s office as fast as her feet could carry her without running. Prince gave a soft chirp and a yawn.

Mrs. Norris meowed at his feet, staring up at him.

Severus cast his gaze down to the cat. “I suppose you played your part perfectly, cat,” he addressed Filch’s familiar.

Hermione dropped disillusionment on herself and appeared next to Severus. She pressed her head against his shoulder with a knowing smile. Pyre sang sweetly from her shoulder once the disillusionment faded.

Severus, without skipping a beat, wrapped his arm around his wife with a Slytherin smirk of satisfaction. “I told you that you should have been Slytherin, wife.”

Hermione dropped a fish down for Mrs. Norris and smiled as the cat snatched up the prize and practically pranced out of the courtyard and down the corridor to meet back up with Argus Filch.

“I wouldn’t know what you mean, husband,” Hermione said innocently. Pyre warbled softly in reply.

“Liar,” Severus purred as he covered her mouth with his.

Hermione leaned into the High Table and peered at Neville. “Neville, why are you cradling your hand… Is that a bruise on your face?”

Neville Longbottom gave a weary sigh. “My class this morning had an… incident with the bouncing bulbs this morning, Hermione,” he answered with a tired smile. “And Snape bit me again.”

Hermione raised her eyebrow at the last comment.

Neville blushed as he realized what he had said. “I um… named that nippy fanged geranium.”

Rolanda Hooch leaned in for the conversation. “You named a fanged geranium “Snape,” Mr. Longbottom?”

“He’s very ill-tempered, finicky, and… likes to take things out on me by biting me,” Neville said, staring down at his dinner.

“It’s a good thing the other Professor Snape isn’t here to hear you say that, Neville,” Hagrid chuckled as he passed down the rolls.

Hermione’s eyebrow had climbed so far up into her hair that it disappeared altogether.

Rolanda burst into laughter, and Hermione chuckled as well. Hagrid joined in soon after, causing Neville to turn slightly maroon in embarrassment.

“How are your classes going, Neville?” Hermione chuckled her question. She buttered her bread in her amusement.

“How horrible,” Neville admitted. “We had at least four students pass out to baby mandrakes in the first three minutes of class this morning. And then… there was the entire basket of bouncing bulbs set loose in the greenhouse this afternoon. Mr. Holdren got a little too close to the venomous tentacula
on his way to his next class and taught my entire first year class about twenty new curse words I
never want to hear repeated outside the greenhouse. Oh… and Miss Herde managed to piss off the
spikey bush by mistakenly casting a cold spell on it and it flung all of its spikes at her. She’s in the
infirmary getting the spikes plucked out of her. Pomona is there talking with Poppy as we speak.”

Hermione and Rolanda stared at Neville with sympathy. “I think you get the chocolate pastry this
time, Neville,” Hermione said, plunking the chocolate bread down in front of him.

Rolanda nodded in agreement. “Hopefully your Hogsmeade duties this weekend will not go like
your classes, Neville. At least Pomona will be sharing duties with you for that?”

Neville gave a hopeful smile. “I really hope so, Rolanda. I’m starting to believe predicting aberrant
behavior in wizarding criminals is easier than that of wizarding children.”

Hermione grinned. “I should get going. I need to rescue Severus from Minerva’s Headmastership
meeting before something horrible happens.” Hermione stood, nodding to the rest of the seated
professors.

Hooch smirked. “Why aren’t you at that meeting, Hermione? We all know you’re just as much a
Deputy as Severus at this point.”

Hermione grinned. “She already cornered me this morning after my Transfiguration class, Rolanda.
She had to throw the net over Severus when he was on his way to dinner. You can guess how
cranky that will make him.”

Neville shuddered as Rolanda grinned. “Undoubtedly.”

“I blame all of you for all of this dual Head training,” Hermione said with an unheated glare. “All of
you refusing to even entertain the idea of taking the job. You had it all planned out back when I was
still an apprentice.”

Neville looked a little lost at being included in the conversation regarding what happened before his
time.

Filius Flitwick grinned at Hermione. “None of us were going to take the job over Severus,
Hermione, and all of us knew he wouldn’t even entertain the idea if you weren’t right up there
with him.”

“You are all insidious,” Hermione said flatly, tilting her chin up.

Rolanda sipped her drink. “Straightforward, if you ask me,” she said smoothly.

Hermione shook her head at the lot of them. She bowed her head and spun on her heels, gliding out
of the Great Hall with Pyre clinging to her shoulder. Students scrambled out of her way and cast their
gazes down in automatic preconditioned responses.

Rolanda grinned as Neville shivered to himself, taking a bite of his chocolate pastry for comfort. “If
you end up as synchronized with Pomona as Hermione became with Severus, does that mean you’ll
start wearing floral hats?”

“Merlin, I hope not,” Neville gulped, taking a large swig of his juice.

Flitwick laughed heartily, patting Neville on the back. “Don’t worry, young man,” he comforted.
“We wouldn’t hold it against you if you did, but we don’t expect you to be like those two.”
Neville smiled sheepishly back at Flitwick.

Hermione watched as Pyre spread her wings and flapped them furiously, pumping her muscles repeatedly as she attempted to gain loft.

A parliament of owls perched nearby, hooting encouragement. Hermione had long since become used to the owls preferring to gather around both Prince and Pyre, often chattering to each other in a bird version of gossip sessions. Sometimes the owls would prefer to follow Prince or Pyre rather than return to the Owlery, and there had been mornings that Hermione and Severus had awoken in the morning to find a dozen sleeping owls perched around the sleeping phoenixes.

No one had complained that their owls were missing, so it seemed that the owls were not neglecting their duties or their owners, but Hermione couldn’t help but wonder about the entire situation. Even stranger, the extended owl family seemed perfectly happy hanging around or doing tasks for the Snape family as though they had no other allegiance. Quite a few times, when Hermione had finished writing a letter, and owl would land on her teaching desk and extend its foot imperiously for her to attach it to their offered leg, then fly off to deliver it. Harry had even sent her a response letter asking, “How many owls do you have over there anyway, Hermione? Every time you send me a letter, it comes from a different owl!”

What was really unnerving is that she had no idea what to call most of the owls. They did not belong to her, so she had no right to name them, yet she wasn’t getting anywhere just calling them “owl” “spotted owl,” and they actually seemed to prefer being called more affectionate things such as “spots” “cranky” or “wobble.” Hermione placed her hand to the bridge of her nose, unconsciously pulling on her husband’s habitual action.

The owl she had nicknamed “Fuss” was preening “Cranky” and Cranky had a half lidded expression that seemed to project resignation and annoyance. “Mother” was hooting encouragingly to Pyre as she tested out her wing exercises.

Mother, much like her nickname suggested, had always been the first to sit on the phoenix chick during colder temperatures, preen her when her feathers went all cock-eyed, and scold Pyre for lack of manners in her honorary membership in the owl parliament.

Pyre seemed to take it all in stride considering she was hatched out from under a harpy eagle. Being mothered by an owl seemed perfectly normal for her.

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“Bless you,” Hermione said, eying the owl curiously. She had never considered herself a bird person growing up. Sure she fed her share of robins in the garden as a child, but when she had found Crookshanks, a part of her had figured that made her a confirmed cat person. Fate, however, seemed to have different ideas. If her animagus form was any true indicator, apparently a part of her knew something she hadn’t as well.

Pyre flapped her wings excitedly on the ledge of the ramparts and flipped them open wide as a large gust of wind blew through the ramparts and carried Pyre off into the thermal with an excited trill.

Hermione leapt off the ramparts without a second thought, taking the form that had become like her second skin. Her dark wings whipped open to catch the thermal and chase after her feathered phoenix daughter. Flying had, strangely enough, become exciting from the moment Severus had taught her to fly without a broom. She had never, until that point, had a great love for it. Reliance on a broom had made her nervous. Brooms could be snatched away, broken, or manipulated. Now, she
could not imagine life being restricted to the ground. In casting off her pitiful human form, she was the queen of the air, and no one, not even the smaller birds that normally dive-bombed birds of prey would deny her.

Pyre flapped awkwardly with her not quite mature wings, blown slightly off center from Hermione’s graceful glide. The owl parliament followed behind and around them, creating probably the most curious looking flock of birds to grace Hogwart’s skies. If a group of owls was called a parliament, and a group of eagles were called a convocation, what in the name of Merlin did you call a group of owls, eagles, and a phoenix? Conflocparlication? No, that was utterly horrible. Did anyone even know what to call a group of phoenixes? It was a fairly prevalent muggle superstition that there was only one phoenix to be had in the world at a time, but that hypothesis was right out due to evidence right in front of her.

Hermione was of half a mind to call a group of phoenixes a “fruit.” It was, if a bit corny, strangely fitting. At least then she could call this mismatch of birds she was flying with a “fruit salad.” Hermione laughed, her head tilted back sending her eagle call bouncing off the walls of Hogwart’s. She cackled her laughter across the lake and sent out a high rally call for her missing mate, even though part of her knew he was probably buried in parchments or being hounded by Minerva about Deputy Headmaster duties.

Pyre seemed to be getting the hang of her own wings, and she glided across the lake thermals with more ease. Her excitement burbled forth in excited warbles as she attempted to fly circles around her eagle mother. The owls flew lazy circles around the young phoenix, sometimes bumping into her to knock her back into the thermals or knock her wing into a proper position. Hermione knew that most people didn’t give their owls enough credit for their innate intelligence, despite how undoubtedly useful they had become in the wizarding world. Hermione knew better.

Hermione’s eyes focused down by the shore and saw a familiar black-haired child waving a wooden staff in his hands at her. She let out a piercing call and dove down towards the lake, flipping her tail out to help her cut through the air in a fast dive. The owls stayed with Pyre, taking it upon themselves to keep the young phoenix out of trouble.

Julius waved towards his mother as she soared high above the thermals of Black Lake. He clutched his “walking stick” in both hands, signaling to his mother hopefully for the game they had invented together since he was old enough to walk.

The piercing eagle scream resounded across the lake and Julius clutched his walking stick in both hands, bracing for the impact that would undoubtedly come.

Huge talons whooshed by his head and made an audible clacking sound as they grasped the stick on each side as his mother’s huge wings cut the air above his head with a loud beating motion.

And with a jarring yank, Julius was off, being pulled across the lake by his mother’s strong wings. She glided across the lake in lazy circles, pulling her son behind her like a muggle water skier. If her son’s growth taxed her strength, Hermione did not seem to show it. Her flight seemed effortless and unhampered. Julius laughed whole-heartedly as he was carried across the lake by the power of an eagle.

Hermione’s eagle laughter bubbled forth, and she hoisted him up out of the water, beating her wings strongly to gently set him down on the shore before releasing the stick and her son to the ground.

“Thanks, mum!” Julius waved as his mother banked upwards into a thermal, tail spread as she shot upward at top speed.
As he watched, a darker eagle caught her talons and they went spinning across the lake giving loud cries of eagle mischief. Julius watched them spin towards the lakes surface, locked together by their enormous talons. They parted as if by some unspoken signal, gliding back upwards on the thermals to spin lazy circles around the hovering cloud of owls and a brightly colored newly-fledged phoenix chick.

Pyre glided downward towards him, flanked by her entourage of owls. She slammed into his shoulder with a braking of her tail and wings, clinging to his robe in an effort to keep from tumbling off her perch. She trilled happily, warbling in his ear after her exciting first flight. He stroked the phoenix with a broad grin and waved up to his gliding parents with enthusiasm. Both eagles gave echoing cries overhead and dove down towards him.

Julius’ eyes grew wide and he quickly braced himself, holding out his walking stick in both hands.

His parents snatched up both ends of his walking stick and pulled him across the lake together, their wings locked together in an effortless glide. Pyre trilled happily from his shoulder as he held onto his stick, kicking his feet to splash in the water below him, bellowing his laughter to all who would hear it.

Not so many years later, when Julius cast his first Patronus, it would be here his memories would return: to a home he never questioned, to his parents whose love he never doubted, and to safety of wings beating effortlessly across the winds of Black Lake to carry him aloft in shared joy. But now it was enough for young Julius to rejoice in what he believed to be a typical family life — a life where two harpy eagles were his parents, a loving sister, two feathered phoenix siblings, a unconditionally loving aunt who happened to be a cat, a kind and generous Master, and an adopted parliament of owls were the closest things to normal he knew. He wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Chapter 95: First Pick / Epilogue

Master Jarron Goodfeather stood outside the chamber portal of the Snape family and couldn’t help but be a little intimidated by the dungeon decor. The ambiance was hardly what he considered uplifting by any means. A cluster of students shuffled out of a nearby portal that seemed to lead off into a common room of some sort. Green and silver banners hung inside as well as decorating the robes of the passing students.

Each of the students appraised his appearance with practiced speed. “Good evening, Master,” they greeted formally, with a head bow, having already noted his station without being told. They did not attempt to assess his name, but they gave him a respectful berth as they passed.

Goodfeather shook his head and turned back to the portrait before him. Apparently portraits guarding entrance portals were quite commonplace at Hogwart’s. He had never attended Hogwart’s in his youth, but the school’s reputation had spread as far as his Rare Bird Sanctuary, which as quite a feat. Just as he was considering how to knock on a painting, a voice greeted him.

“Master Goodfeather,” a young man’s voice said pleasantly. “I hope your arrival was without incident.”

Jarron turned around to meet the young man who was dressed in long black teaching robes. His waistcoat was a deep emerald green with silver buttons, looking much like the banners in the room nearby. “Ah, you must be Professor Mitchell,” Jarron greeted the young professor. “Yes, my arrival was uneventful, much to my relief. I am relieved that Master and Mistress Snape were kind enough
to arrange for more traditional transportation. Apparation and port-keys have never settled well with my stomach, I fear.”

“Please, do call me Wayne, Master Goodfeather,” the young professor asked. “I get enough of the professor business from the students.”

Goodfeather smiled, “You may call me, Jarron, Wayne.”

Wayne smiled at the Master of Mystical Ornithology before turning to the portrait and spitting out a long potion ingredients that seemed utterly random. The portrait swung aside.

“That was… interesting,” Jarron chuckled as he stepped into the portal.

Mitchell grinned. “They change it to a different potion every week to keep me on my toes.”

“I’d be sleeping on the floor in the hall, if it were me,” Goodfeather admitted.

“The idea of me being locked out of my comfy bed can be very inspirational, I fear,” Wayne said with a grin.

“Mr. Mitchell!” Rose’s voice came chiming from the adjacent room. She slammed into the young Potion’s Apprentice with enthusiasm. “You made it just in time!” Rose’s lapsed back into her old name for the young professor the moment she wasn’t in the classroom.

“I found Master Goodfeather waiting in the hallway, Miss Rosie,” Wayne said, giving the girl a hug. “I couldn’t very well leave him out there alone.”

“No, I suppose not,” Rose said with a nod. She looked up at the Master of Mystical Ornithology with a curious look. She bowed her head respectfully to the wizard. “Good evening, Master Goodfeather,” she greeted formally. “My name is Rose Snape. You may call me Rose, please. There are a lot of Snapes here tonight.” She grinned at him.

“Thank you, Miss Rose,” Jarron said with a smile.

Rose beamed and tugged on Wayne’s sleeve. “Come on, Mr. Mitchell, everyone is waiting.”

Wayne Mitchell gave Jarron Goodfeather an apologetic smile as he was dragged by the sleeve into the other room.

Goodfeather chuckled and followed the pair into the adjoining room.

The next room was larger, but full of more people than Jarron had expected.

There was a large nesting box set near the fireplace, filled with both straw and what seemed like shredded cloth and down. Owls were perched around the room in various places, offering hoots of commentary. Unlike what he would expect in a typical owlery, the room itself was clean of straw, pellets, or debris, yet the owls perched around the room as though it was their typical hangout. It was very curious.

A blur of bright orange and red feathers flew overhead and landed on the nesting box with a warble. The phoenix nosed the larger harpy eagle with her beak and gave a musical string of notes that filled Goodfeather with the sense of appreciation.

The harpy eagle stirred off the nesting box, her talons curved carefully as to not disturb the eggs, as she extended her feet and transferred herself to the outside edge of the nesting box. The female
phoenix hopped into the nesting box, curling her feet inward, and flopped on top of the warm eggs with a chirp. The female phoenix preened the eagle affectionately and the harpy eagle preened the phoenix right back.

Wayne brought in a large bowl of cut fruit and vegetables and set it next to the nesting box, passing a gooseberry to the phoenix on the nest. “Is there anything else I need to bring in, Mistress?”

The eagle launched herself off the nesting box and reformed into Hermione Snape, startling Jarron Goodfeather enough to give the Potions Mistress wide eyes.

“Good evening, Master Goodfeather,” Hermione greeted with a bow of her head. “Apologies for not meeting you at the door. Pyre needed a break from the nest. Thank you, Wayne, I think that is all we need for now. You are welcome to make merry with the rest of the guests.”

Wayne Mitchell grinned. “Thank you, Mistress.”

Hermione gave the young professor a look. “You know you can call me Hermione. Especially when we are within private company.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Wayne replied automatically and blushed.

“You’ve been my apprentice for over a year, Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione said sternly. “Do not make me relapse back to addressing you like you are twelve.”

Wayne grinned broadly. “Would it be horrible of me to say that it is comforting when you do?”

Hermione scoffed. “Away with you, menace, before I make you grade papers.”

Wayne grinned and ducked away with a short bow, walking over to mingle with the crowd gathering around the nesting box.

Jarron shook his head. “The female allows you to brood her clutch?” he asked in wonder.

“How marvelous,” Jarron said in wonder. “I had no idea you had such a tight bond with your birds. To be honest, I had no idea you were an animagus.”

Hermione smiled at Jarron. “We have no idea what is normal or not for a phoenix, Master Goodfeather. We were hoping you could provide us some of that information. As for being an animagus, I had forgotten you did not know. The staff all know, and the students learn soon after their first week here at Hogwart’s.”

“I fear my experience with phoenixes is sadly lacking, save finding a nest here and there,” Jarron admitted.

Severus walked in from the entrance portal and tossed a pile of parchments onto his desk before gliding into the room. Prince trilled a greeting from Severus’ shoulder and flew over to perch next to Pyre. He preened her head feathers and warbled.

Severus approached Hermione and Jarron with a weary look upon his face. “Good evening, Master Goodfeather,” he said with a slight nod. “I trust your arrival was uneventful?”

“Jarron, please,” Goodfeather requested to the both of them. “I had very comfortable trip. Thank
“Looks like you arrived just in time, Jarron,” Severus said, stifling a yawn. “I’m not sure our poor living room has ever had so many guests.”

“This is quite the event, Severus,” Jarron admitted. “It is not every day we get to witness the hatching of an entire clutch of phoenix eggs.”

“I should hope not,” Severus said with a lift of his brow. “There would not be enough food in this castle to feed that many hungry beaks. Our students would starve.”

Goodfeather regarded Severus with a curious glance, pondering if Severus was being humorous or serious. Severus’ face was completely emotionless, giving no visual tell to either course.

Hermione brushed her hand against her husband’s lightly. “Psh,” she said softly. “Take pity on poor Master Goodfeather, he’s had a long trip and does not know you are capable of humor.”

“Am I capable of humor?” Severus asked, capturing Hermione’s hand in his. His face was impassive.

Hermione grinned at him. “Occasionally,” she purred. “When the planets align, and we make gold in our laboratory.” She turned to Jarron with a flush in her cheeks. “Let me introduce you the others here, Jarron.”

Goodfeather allowed himself to be guided around the room to meet the attendees to the hatching. The Snape’s single Apprentice was sitting with the two Snape children. The boy, who was introduced as Julius, was hugging a silver tabby in his lap with draped hug. The cat’s eyes were half closed, and her tail was gently flicking up and side to side. Rose was stroking an orange cat in her lap and telling stories to Wayne Mitchell as though he were last record keeper in the world and she had all latest news. A young blond-haired boy named Scorpius sat with the group of younger children along with two boys named James and Albus. All of them took turns contributing to the gossip when Rose managed to pause long enough to take a breath.

Hermione had introduced him to the Headmistress of the school, inclining her head respectfully in the direction of her children. Goodfeather gave her a puzzled expression. The silver tabby in her son’s lap yawned toothily in his direction, eyes holding a disconcerting twinkle.

The towering wall of a man with a bushy beard was tending the fireplace as he conversed with another man. One, Hermione introduced, was Hagrid, the Professor of Care of Magical Creatures. The second was Neville Longbottom, Professor of Herbology and Apprentice to Pomona Sprout. A group of other professors joined Hagrid and Neville by the fireplace, introducing themselves as Filius, Rolanda, Aurora, and Septima.

Huddled around a round table, Jarron met Aiden Gauge, retired and consulting Auror, who seemed perfectly happy leaving the reins of his past career to the two Aurors beside him: Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. Jarron found himself chatting amiably with the infamous Harry Potter and his compatriots of his age and belated realized that he was surrounded by the heroes of the last Wizarding war. Draco Malfoy and his wife, Astoria, chatted affably with the others at the round table, occasionally throwing glances over to where the children were laughing and carrying on.

As if that realization wasn’t profound enough, the Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, sat at the table, laughing genially in conversation, showing no regard to station or formalities. Beside him was a wizened older wizard he did not recognize until Shacklebolt slapped the man on the back saying, “It took you how many years to find an apprentice, Ollivander? You had us all worried you’d never
find one!”

The old wizard smiled knowingly at the Minister of Magic. “I waited for the best,” he said with a
smug smile.

“T ook you long enough,” an older gentleman commented to Ollivander. “I’ve been crafting more
Apprentice pins for the lot of you lately than in the two decades previous.”

“Don’t be such a sourpuss, Master Stainthorpe,” Kingsley laughed. “You’d been complaining that
not enough Masters were taking Apprentices for years.”

Declan Stainthorpe gave Kingsley a face that could have been his tongue sticking out, had Jarron not
dismiss it as a trick of the lighting. “Took those two long enough to find an Apprentice they didn’t
send crying back to me with horror stories.”

The table burst into laughter in shared amusement.

The phoenix on the nesting box let out a warble, causing the room to quiet and everyone to gather
around. Pyre talon-walked off the nest and perched on the rim of the nesting box, giving a better
view to the cracking eggs. Multiple peeps and chirping came from within the shelled prisons. Black
beaks poked out of the cracking shells, followed by random feet, a wing or two, and the rest of the
body. All of the people gathered around were silent in wonder as damp phoenix chicks burst out of
their confinement with victorious peeping.

Hermione and Severus silently knelt by the box and distributed pieces of vegetables and fruits into
the hungry beaks while passing larger fruits to the elder phoenixes for them to tear into and assist in
the stuffing of hungry chicks. By the time the hungry chicks were appeased, their downy feathers
had already dried into fluff.

“Jarron, I think it’s time for you to make your choice,” Hermione said as she scratched a downy
chick under the chin. “First choice, as promised.”

Goodfeather knelt by the nesting box, eying the female phoenix and her curved beak with respect.
Hermione, as if sensing his wariness, stroked Pyre’s chest feathers and under her chin, causing
the female phoenix to warble happily.

Goodfeather examined the nest full of fluffy chicks with curiosity. All of them yawned beakily at
him, eyes half-closed as their full stomachs attempted to digest their first meal. He slowly waved his
wand over the nest and whispered, sorting the males and females from each other in the nest.

One pair of black eyes met his, and he pet the tuft of distinctive black and dark red feathers on his
head. The chick was male, gazed at him fearlessly, and attempted to pull on the end of Jarron’s wand
with his beak. “Hey now,” he admonished, tucking his wand away.

Goodfeather cradled the chick in his hands, carefully watching Pyre for signs of aggression, which
thankfully never came. He held the chick up to his face and peered into his eyes, looking the chick
over with approval. The chick pecked at his beard curiously and peeped, opening his beak widely
and imperiously.

Severus smirked and handed Jarron a piece of green pepper without a word.

Jarron took the offered food with silent thanks and stuffed it into the chick’s open beak, watching it
disappear in a matter of seconds. The chick peeped and placed his head against his beard and looked
up at him contentedly. “Um…” Goodfeather said softly. “I think I’ve been chosen instead of the
Polite nods of approval spread across the gathered people.

Owls fluttered up to gather around the edge of the nesting box, hooting at the fluffy chicks in their own version of owlish approval.

One of the chicks, who sported a long orange tuft on his head, was attempting to scramble out of the nest and explore. He teetered on the edge of the nesting box and peeped, flapping his tiny wings as if ready to take to the skies without a single primary or secondary feather to his name.

Wayne Mitchell gently scooped up the chick and moved him back into the nest. “Hey now,” he admonished. “It’s a little early for you to be exploring, young man.”

As Wayne scooted him over back into the lined nest, the chick peeped in protest and scrambled more hurriedly to the edge of the nesting box, looking as if he intended to fling himself off the edge. Wayne blocked his way with his arm, attempting to shoo the errant chick back into his nest.

The chick wouldn’t stand for it and hopped onto Wayne’s arm and clung to his teaching robes and his chest, peering up at him with interest. Wayne looked down at the precocious chick and seemed to be lost in the chicks compulsatory gaze.

Pyre and Prince warbled happily from their perches, seemingly happy with the impromptu pairing. Wayne’s eyes grew wide as he realized what was going on. “Oh wait… no I wasn’t supposed to…” he stammered, looking at his two Masters with an apologetic face.

“Nonsense,” Severus sniffed.

“Pyre and Prince approve. Why shouldn’t we?” Hermione chuckled.

The chick opened his beak demandingly at Wayne, and he stuffed a slice of peach into the hungry beak. The chick gulped down the offering hungrily and flopped his head against Wayne’s chest, giving a small contented peep.

There were three remaining chicks left in the nest, and Pyre seemed think show and tell was over. She talon-walked over the nest and flopped down on top of the sleepy chicks and warbled.

The gathering of human onlookers broke apart and socialized amongst themselves again, sharing their approval of the hatching.

“What are you going to call him, Mr. Mitchell?” Rose asked curiously as she pet her familiar. The young professor tilted his head and stared at the fluffy chick. “Keegan,” he said softly. The chick opened his eyes and peeped at him.

Julius peered at the sleepy chick as he hoisted Minerva over his shoulder, still scratching her ears with an automatic movement. “That’s a nice fire name, Sir,” he said with a nod. “I have to finish my homework and the three feet of parchment on the uses of crocodile heart.” Julius scowled at the Potions Apprentice with flattened lips, looking very much like his father.

Wayne’s face softened apologetically, “Do not blame me, young Julius,” he placated. “Blame your four House-mates that blew up their cauldrons and put Miss Brafford in the hospital wing.”

“They may have done it,” Julius admitted with a pout, “But you still punished all of us for it.”
Minerva chose that moment to dig her claws into Julius’ shoulder.

“Ow,” Julius pouted. “I’m sorry, Auntie,” he apologized. “I’ll see you later, Professor,” he said as he carried the silver tabby off into one of the adjoining rooms.

Wayne watched the youngest of the Snape family carry the Headmistress of Hogwart’s like a regular cat. “That… will never cease to amaze me,” he admitted.

Hermione chuckled at him. “Julius has had Minerva wrapped around his little finger since the day he screamed himself into the world. I was sure it was going to be Rose, but I was wrong.”

Wayne smiled at his Mistress with a genuine smile. “I’ve learned never to take anything in the Snape family at face value since I was eleven.”

Hermione grinned. “A wise choice.”

“Are you sure… this is okay?” Wayne asked softly, staring at the sleeping chick on his chest.

“Mr. Mitchell,” Hermione said in her teaching voice. “There is no one else more capable and more deserving of having their own demanding lint ball with a propensity to set itself on fire than you. Do I make myself plain?”

Wayne grinned sheepishly, “Yes, ma’am,” he replied automatically.

“Good,” Severus replied for his wife, smashing his apprentice over the head with a copy of A Treatise on the Chinese Chomping Cabbage. “We have three new lint-balls to feed as it is.”

“What will you do with so many birds, Sir?” Wayne asked.

Severus tilted his head to the side. “We have a few bird sanctuaries that are more than interested in providing a home for those we see fit to allow and quite a few programs that are trying to raise and release the birds into their traditional habitats. There is also the wizarding populous that would simply beat down our doors to have a chance at gaining one as a familiar. Far more interested parties than we have chicks.”

Wayne pet the chick on his chest with his fingers, gaining a series of happy peeps. “You could always be in the first school of witchcraft and wizardry that is also a phoenix sanctuary. You’re kind of already off to a great start. Hagrid would probably help.”

Hermione chuckled. “Can you imagine the grounds being alive with owls and phoenixes? Our chambers is already a testament as to how that would be.”

Severus shook his head. “I will defer to Minerva on the validity of that particular idea, Wayne. She would probably adore having more beaks to spoil.”

“Both Pyre and Prince adore her,” Hermione agreed. “The feeling is obviously mutual.”

“You know, I was listening to Master Stainthorpe talk about apprentices for a while today,” Wayne confessed. “I have a question for you both.”

Dual raised eyebrows raised into opposing hairlines.

“Why did you chose me as an apprentice over what he said was a list hundreds of overly qualified names long?” Wayne asked curiously.

The two Potion Masters tilted their head at Wayne Mitchel with the same steely regard. “You are not
a dunderhead,” they chimed together.

Wayne broke into a grin that echoed the radiant smile of a certain eleven year old boy with an affinity for poppy flower constructs. “I suppose you can blame my school professors for whatever potions knowledge I came packaged with.”

“Oh, we intend to,” Hermione said, gently rubbing her fingers under the chick’s chin.

“Hermione!” Harry called from the round table. “Come tell us the story about when Ginny came to visit you while you were an Apprentice with Severus.”

Ginny blushed at her seat next to Harry as her children scampered up to wait for the story with excited eyes.

“Please, Auntie Hermione!” pleaded Scorpius. “Aunt Ginny won’t tell us!”

James and Albus shook their heads in agreement. “Mum won’t tell us anything!”

“Oh I do want to hear this,” Draco said with a very Slytherin grin on his face. Astoria leaned in too.

Ginny turned a darker shade of red as Hermione approached the round table, pulling Severus in by his sleeve.

“Oh, very well,” Hermione replied. “But as your Uncle Severus would say, ‘do be quiet’ as I tell the tale.” She and Severus sat at the table.

The children at the table clammed up with great effort, eyes wide with excitement, much to Ginevra Potter’s chagrin.

Hermione gave Ginny both an amused and somewhat apologetic grin. “It all started back before your Uncle and I were married. Harry and Ronald had just begin their training under Aiden to be Aurors. I was about two years into my apprenticeship with your Uncle Severus and Master Stainthorpe had no idea what lay ahead for him…”

The storytelling lasted long into the night, switching from Hermione to Harry, to Aiden then Ron, from Ron to Master Stainthorpe, and finally landed into the proverbial lap of Severus Snape. Amazingly enough, the children remained as quiet as possible, hanging on to every world of their parents and friends of the family. As the stories died down, the evening concluded with the children ending up piled up asleep on sleeping bags scattered on the living room floor, and the adults lounging in multiple chairs by the fire as they shared old memories and drinks and food with each other. It had been a few decades in the making, but a pleasant peace had finally come upon these select few of Hogwarts’s Class of 1998 and the survivors of the Second Wizarding War. As if to prove how far they had all come, the gathering was being held in the once private, single, and unshared chambers of the solitary and reclusive Severus Snape.

There was some lighthearted speculation as to whether Albus Dumbledore was looking down upon them from somewhere in the afterlife with a twinkle in his eyes. His portrait certainly wasn’t holding anything back, and Minerva seemed to have her own brand of knowing twinkle that reminded them all of how close they had become against all odds and all history.

As the last of the visiting adults had left for the evening, Master Goodfeather being tucked in to the guest room with his fluffy acquisition, their apprentice retired to his chambers, the increased brood of phoenixes nested down by the fireplace, an assortment of owls perched around the room, and the disturbingly large pile of children curled up asleep on their living room floor, Hermione and Severus looked over the children with a quirk of their lips.
There would always be parents who worried about the future of their children, but Hermione and Severus had no such worries. The future would come as it often did, slowly as if it would never move and then crash down upon them one morning when they realized their children were half grown. They had no doubt, however, that their children would be fine. They would be prepared, and the world of prejudice that had formed the two great wars the adults had survived would be a story with a beginning and end as well as a moral in which to live by.

Their children would grow, graduate, and chase their dreams without the worry of an impending Dark Lord darkening the skies with his Dark Mark. Their children would keep their innocence when it mattered the most.

As they watched their children and their friends’ children snoring together in a multi-House pile-up, they knew the next generation was already better off than they were at the same age. The world was already better. They had won. They had survived. They had grown. They had evolved.

Hermione’s fingers traced Severus’ jawline as she smiled up at him. “I love you, Severus Snape.”

Severus looked down into the eyes of his wife, and his dark eyes seemed to darken even more as he gave a soft hiss of pleasure. He pressed his lips to hers as his fingers pressed against the skin of her neck. When he pulled away, his eyes contained the look he reserved for her alone. “And I love you, Hermione Snape. Always.”

Hermione’s face lit up with the brilliance of the sun as she heard the words she would rarely hear but would always see in the reflection of his eyes and in the countless things he would do.

They pressed their heads together as their palms pressed against each other’s cheeks. Their minds became one in celebration, singing together in a trust they had built upon through countless deeds and cemented with a faith they would never lose every day they walked upon the Earth and beyond.

And hundreds of years later, when the latest Headmaster or Headmistress of Hogwart’s looked upon the wall of portraits that ringed their office, Severus and Hermione Snape sat together on a long couch surrounded the implements of potion making, their dark robes blending together in a soft cascade. Hermione lay against her husband as Severus read an open book to her, much as they had done in life.

Two painted phoenixes perched upon the couch, sometimes singing and warbling commentary as a strangely familiar parliament of owls gathered around them. Beside their portrait was that of Minerva McGonagall, sitting in her portrait with a tea service and extra chairs that sometimes seated guests. There were always two perches that adorned her portrait. Sometimes, there would be a phoenix on one or both, and Minerva’s portrait self would have a knowing smile upon her face. Above both portraits, hung the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, who seemed to have even more of a twinkle in his painted eyes as the years went on.

Beside Severus and Hermione’s portrait stood the distinguished looking older self of Headmaster Wayne Mitchell, whose black robes draped down his shoulder much like his Master’s and Mistress’ before him. His dark green waistcoat and sleeves sported a long chain of silver buttons that had become synonymous with any male that came down the chain of Masters and Apprentices descending from the line of Severus and Hermione Snape. Upon his shoulder was a fiery phoenix with a distinctive bright orange plume on his head.

If one were paying close enough attention to the portrait next to Wayne Mitchell’s, two pins adorned the robes of Hermione and Severus Snape — a small silver pin formed into the shape of a potion that every so often spewed forth a glowing green Slytherin snake. On their side table was a vase filled with poppy flowers. If anyone asked, both portraits would only stare silently at them, faces united in
an impassive expression whose only tell was the slight quirk of their lips. Had the asker turned around to look at the portrait after their question was answered with a silent stare, they would have seen Hermione’s face break into a mischievous smile.

Rumors in Hogwart’s whispered that the old phoenix Headmasters and Headmistress had never died at all. Whispers said their portraits were a formality because the Potion Masters lived on far from Hogwart’s in a place unplottable and unknown, as immortal as their phoenixes. If it were true, the portraits weren’t saying, and no one living or dead wanted to confront Severus Snape’s portrait for the truth. And when it came to asking the portrait of Neville Longbottom anything, his portrait self became a stammering wreck that admitted to nothing and went back to tending his fanged geraniums in his portrait.

One thing, however, despite the rumors and stories, remained constant. When a child entered the office and looked up at the portrait of Hermione and Severus Snape and asked how long they would be together, the answer was infallibly the same.

“Always.”

-o-o-o- Finite Incantatem -o-o-o-o-

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of this story, but not truly the end. It is, perhaps, the end of this part of their story.

This story has been a labor of love. It started out as a challenge from a friend to “well if you didn’t like the ending, write it better” and became a monster that consumed me, my summer, my dreams, and my thoughts for far longer than I have ever believed myself capable of writing. I have never, until this, written something of this magnitude. I have never, until this, written in the Harry Potter universe. I can only thank JKR for the world she has created and characters I have borrowed. While I have had to make up a few characters of my own and completely reverse poor Severus’ canonical death, it is my hope that they have lived up to the spirit of the universe JKR has created and paid them the proper tribute and respect.

I am not normally one to ask for reviews, but please, if you enjoyed my story, let me know.

I thank all of you, my faithful followers, for staying with me on this adventure. I appreciate you all, have found joy in all of your comments, and found a little of my own peace in writing this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!